“Monk’’ Foreman certainly recognized the guy standing in the ring across from him that first day of sparring in Houston so many months ago but he didn’t really know him. Not that guy he didn’t.

The 26-year-old son of two-time heavyweight champion George Foreman knew his father as well as anyone. He had been his business manager for several years since graduating from Rice University and had traveled the road with him in his second reincarnation as heavyweight champion and later during his years as an HBO boxing analyst.

But who was this guy glowering over at him from across the room? He looked like his father but something was different. Dangerously different.

“Normally he walks into the gym, wraps my hands, talks to me,’’ young George Edward Foreman III said as he rode in the back of a camper this week heading from Houston to Kinder, La., where he will make his pro debut at 26, today, in a four-round heavyweight fight at Coushatta Casino Resort.

“This day he comes in and he wouldn’t even look at me. No smile. No tips. No greeting. He just walked over and started to put on his headgear and wrap his hands. He kept glowering at me. That intimidated me.

“We got in to spar and the first thing my Dad did was throw a lead right hand over my jab. Hit me right in the head. I felt his power. He just pulverized me. He can still punch like a mule. He made me pay for every mistake I made so I started to use my legs.’’

All his life George Foreman took punches so his kids wouldn’t have to. He won the heavyweight title as a young man before losing it to Muhammad Ali in an African jungle in the middle of the night and then came back after a 10-year layoff and won it a second time, becoming at 45 the oldest man to ever win the heavyweight crown.

He never wanted any of his 10 children to box but when his second oldest boy (one of five named George) told him just over a year ago that he had been secretly training for months and harbored a long-hidden desire to box, the father understood what he had to do. He had to let him, but not without first making painfully clear to him the choice he was making.

“I never wanted my kids to do this,’’ Foreman said from the front of the motor home taking him and his son to Louisiana. “No way. I would never have gone for that because I know how rough it can be for a human being in boxing.

“But I told them all once they got their college degrees they could do what they wanted. I just never thought it would be this.

“At first I didn’t really get it. I didn’t take him seriously but my wife said I better get down to the gym and watch him. I took him to the ranch out in Marshall (well west of Houston) and made him go through the same grueling workouts I did. Chopping wood, digging ditches, pulling a jeep up the hill with it strapped to you.

“When he pulled that Jeep for a few weeks in Marshall I knew he wanted this. There was no one to help him. He had to get down sometimes and crawl to pull it. He did it.’’

Yet even after his son had proven his desire there was still the matter of what happens when you are in the ring with, as Foreman used to call himself during his days as heavyweight champion, “a predator.’’ Nothing can really prepare you for that. Nothing but the real thing, which was Big George himself.

“When you get in the ring with the ex-heavyweight champion of the world if that don’t frighten you nothing will,’’ Foreman said. “Before my first professional fight I got in with Sonny Liston. I took one look at him and I knew I didn’t want to make the guy angry.

“He tried to get me. He tried to take my head off with his jab. I did the same think with Monk. He got the true atmosphere.’’

He also got the Foreman seal of approval. Father admits he has no idea yet how his son will fare in the most difficult and dangerous sporting endeavor on Earth but he has agreed to train him and the two have been working at the George Foreman Youth Center around the corner from Foreman’s church and ministry offices daily to be ready for the moment that will come against Clyde Weaver Saturday night.

Unlike his father, who had 25 amateur fights before winning the Olympic gold medal in 1968, the son has no amateur fights. He tried to get some over the last year but it turned out no one wanted to fight a 6-5, 240-pound guy named George Foreman III.

He was bigger than his Dad had been when he first won the title in 1973 (217 ½ pounds) by knocking Joe Frazier down six times before referee Arthur Mercante stopped the fight, rawer than his dad because this is the first time he will be in the ring with the lights on bright and far removed from the harsh upbringing that spawned his Dad.

George Foreman was a legend around the Fifth Ward in Houston, a hard piece of ghetto real estate he ruled with treachery and fear. Foreman was the kind of kid who hurt people. His son, by all accounts, is as sweet tempered as his father was angry.

He is a son of privilege, a young man who went to a private military prep school and then one of the elite colleges of the south, Rice University. These are not addresses that produce prizefighters and his father acknowledges that.

But then he quickly dismisses the thought that growing up the son of a wealthy man will decide anything about what kind of fighter he becomes.

“It’s all about do you want to fight,’’ the elder Foreman said. “Coming up rough is not a passport to a title. I fought a lot of guys who came up rough but they didn’t want to fight.

“He had a privileged life. To him the world is a nice place. I had a lot of anger. He doesn’t have that but he doesn’t have a lot of the baggage that comes with that either.

“I wanted to knock people out and get a lot of money and fame. He’s not thinking about that. This is a sport to him. He wants to be the best he can be at it. He wants to be a BOXER. All I did was swing. He wants to be a gigantic Sugar Ray Robinson.’’

The younger Foreman’s style is far different from his father. He moves, jabs, uses his legs and his mind more than his power. His father had the thunder, boxing’s great equalizer. The son is lightning.

Or so he hopes to be.

“At home I was always the quiet guy,’’ the younger Foreman said, “so my family was surprised when I said I wanted to be a boxer. But it’s always been in my mind.

“My Mom doesn’t like it one bit but boxing has brought a lot of opportunity to our family. When I finally told my Dad I wanted to step into the ring I knew what it was about. I saw all he went through. Denying yourself all your pleasures. Rubbing Ben-Gay all over your body. He knew I knew how hard a business it was.

“Once he said he’d train me I thought ‘Here we go!’ He’s never made anything easy for us even though we had a life of privilege.

“I first started training a little bit in California. No one knew who I was. I just told them my name was Monk. I think I used my mother’s maiden name. I just paid the membership and started to train.

“In Houston, I knew he’d find out. I was boxing at his gym, one block from the church. It wasn’t that smart but this is the natural sport for me. I played football, basketball, lacrosse. I liked those sports but this is one man versus one man. To me, boxing is a sport of self-defense. I’m pretty elusive.’’

Tonight will be the first real test of that elusiveness. Weaver (0-1) will be in the ring looking for him for four rounds or less. He will be there to punish the son of a champion and maybe make a little name for himself around the Louisiana backwoods.

That name will cause many to smirk and many more to constantly compare the raw tools of the son with the razor sharp ones they remember of his father. The name he carries will be a burden as well as a key that unlocks doors others had to fight harder to open.

Yet George Edward Foreman III is philosophical about that as he seems to be about most things. Boxing is what he wants and having his father in his corner and sharing his name on his

robe can't hurt. At least not if he can fight.

"I could have been Jeffrey Dahmer III,'' the young Foreman says with the same sense of humor his father used to make himself millions when he came back to boxing at 38 in 1987. "This is better.''

Looking across the ring tonight at Clyde Weaver will be better too. Better than looking across at his father that first sparring session in Houston, a father with a look on his face he'd never seen before.

"He's starting from the bottom but he's really good,'' his father said. "He's got a tough road to climb. Some people won't understand. All they know is me knocking out Joe Frazier. He's got to fight that. He's not that George Foreman. He's got to establish his own identity.

"This is a journey. We'll take it one step at a time. It's like walking through a new back door for me in boxing. It's kind of exciting. If he was 18, 19 I think this would bother me. I couldn't take him getting hurt.

"But he's 26. This is a man thing now so I think I can deal with it. To train him you have to divorce yourself from that 'This is my son' stuff. I have to back off and let him be the fighter and respect him as an athlete. I'm totally in the blind on this.

"I know he works hard. He has the drive inside to fight. He will fight. But we'll have to see how he responds. This is like baking a German chocolate cake. It's one of the most difficult to make. You mix the ingredients, put it in the oven and hope for the best but you don't know until it comes out what you got.

"He already drives a Bentley, so I don't know what his goals are.''

George Foreman III, known in the gym as Monk, knows. They are the same ones his father had 41 years ago after he left the Olympics in Mexico City to turn pro. He wants to win.