

Forty Year Forgotten Classic: Frazier vs. Quarry I

Written by Frank Lotierzo
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It truly was a classic and deservedly won Ring Magazine "Fight Of The Year" in 1969. Today the fight is often referred to as Frazier-Quarry I, and probably marks the official arrival of "Smokin" Joe Frazier being widely accepted as Muhammad Ali's successor since the ex-champ was exiled two years earlier. Joe's opponent that night, Jerry Quarry, probably would've whipped any other heavyweight in the world the night they fought with the only exception being the one he had in front of him.

On Monday night June 23, 1969 Joe Frazier was the man in the Heavyweight division. Other than Quarry, only WBA champ Jimmy Ellis and former undisputed champ Sonny Liston, who was at least in his late 30s at the time, were considered a threat to derail Frazier. In fact Liston compared fighting Frazier to shooting fish in a barrel, saying, "he is made for me, he walks right in."

For Frazier, Quarry would be the fourth contender he would defend his six state (New York, Pennsylvania, Maine, Illinois, Texas and Massachusetts) heavyweight title against since knocking out undefeated Buster Mathis to win it a little over a year earlier. Quarry was 15 months removed from losing a majority decision to Jimmy Ellis in the final of the WBA heavyweight elimination tournament. In his last fight three months before meeting Frazier, Quarry won a unanimous decision over Buster Mathis who'd only been bested by Frazier up to that point in his career. Before the fight boxing pundits and experts were evenly split on who would win, although Frazier was a 9-5 betting favorite in Las Vegas. The only real consensus between them was that Quarry probably had the slightly better chin. Which is debatable even to this day 40 years later.

At the bell for round one, Quarry, who was known for being a counter puncher, stormed out of his corner and met Frazier at ring center and started trading with him. The strategy caught Frazier by surprise. During the round Frazier and Quarry had some massive exchanges and it was Quarry who got the better of them. It appeared that Quarry's quick hands and counter rights were the difference. The second round was almost a repeat of the first, with Quarry again holding the edge if only by a slight margin. After two rounds Quarry's strategy looked like it might pay off, despite Frazier being known for making his living by trading and forcing the fight. The only question was could Jerry keep it up?

Midway through round three Quarry slowed a little and Joe started to smoke. This is when the fight started to turn in Frazier's favor due to his unrelenting pace and making Jerry fight from bell-to-bell. Quarry fought back by launching hard three and four punch counter attacks, but he was doing so more in an attempt to hold Frazier off and occupy him than to hurt him. Which didn't deter Frazier even a little as he continued working Quarry over to the body and head. From rounds four through seven Frazier had the better of it, with Quarry fighting to buy time trying to figure out what he could do to slow Frazier down. The more Quarry slowed and tried to catch a breather, Frazier fed off of it and applied more pressure and never let up.

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The seventh round ended with Quarry bleeding from a cut over his right eye that was swelling up and starting to impede his vision. At the end of the round ringside physician Dr. Harry Klieman climbed into the ring and went to Quarry's corner to examine his eye. Over Quarry's gallant protest he stopped the fight before the bell rang to start the eighth round. Thus being recorded as a 7th round TKO victory for Frazier, setting up his February 16th 1970 showdown with WBA Heavyweight Champ Jimmy Ellis.

Frazier-Quarry I was an outstanding action packed fight. The first round is one of the most fierce rounds you'll ever see between two heavyweights. For the first three rounds while Quarry was fresh, he hung right in there with Frazier. The difference being Frazier was a little stronger than Quarry and was more loose and relaxed when he threw his punches. In the early going Quarry proved he could stay with Frazier, he just couldn't stay with him the whole fight and was worn down by ultimately being forced to fight Frazier's fight. Couple that with Quarry's fair skin that tended to cut, he could never beat Joe. However, it was one of Quarry's better fights even though he lost. After losing to Joe Frazier in June of 1969, Jerry Quarry never again challenged for a piece of the heavyweight title. On the other hand this was a year into Frazier's prime circa 1968-71. During that three year span Joe Frazier cleaned out the division and sealed his legacy beating then undefeated former champ Muhammad Ali in the biggest and most anticipated fight in boxing history.

Foreman Makes Pro Debut

There was another significant event that happened on June 23rd 1969. That being on the undercard of Frazier-Quarry, 1968 Olympic heavyweight gold medalist George Foreman made his pro debut. In his first fight as a pro Foreman KO'd Don Waldheim in the third round an hour before Frazier and Quarry fought. Who could've imagined back then that the young Foreman, not Ali, would be the fighter to take Frazier's undisputed title three and a half years later.

Another sidebar to June 23rd 1969 brings Jerry Quarry and George Foreman together. I was told, and later confirmed the story passed along to me by a well known CBS broadcaster of the 70's, Tom Brookshier, of a ring meeting between Quarry and Foreman in May of 1969. The story goes that one day in a California gym both Quarry and Foreman were training for their upcoming fights. Quarry was preparing for Frazier and Foreman was getting ready for his pro debut. On this particular day, Quarry and Foreman sparred each other.

I was told by Brookshier who did blow by blow commentary with both Jerry and George for CBS boxing broadcast during the mid seventies that Quarry hurt Foreman badly and almost knocked him out the one known time they worked with each other. The version conveyed by Tom is Quarry caught Foreman with a big right hand near the end of the second round and staggered him, thus Foreman's trainer Dick Saddler immediately called time ending the session.

Four years later after Foreman dethroned Frazier it was rumored and reported that George's first title defense was going to be against Quarry. This escalated after Quarry beat Ron Lyle less than a month after Foreman won the title from Frazier. The fight never happened. However, it was widely speculated in boxing circles and in the media that Foreman was a little reluctant about meeting Quarry back then, something Foreman has never denied, but that's George.

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Depending on what day you ask him the answer probably changes more then the weather.