

Foreman--What Was, What Could've Been: Nothing Short Of Mind Boggling

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Wednesday, 19 August 2009 19:00

With George Foreman III, better known as "Monk," about to fight for the third time as a pro in a few weeks, it's hard not to think about what a wrecking machine his father was.

When considering some of the most amazing feats in heavyweight history there are two that must rank at or near the top of everybody's list. Maybe the most impressive feat in boxing history is Joe Louis's almost 12 year reign as heavyweight champ in which he made 25 consecutive title defenses before retiring in 1949. As most are aware Louis didn't fight for over a two year span during his reign because of World War II, but even if you exclude that he held the title for nearly 10 years.

Rocky Marciano retiring undefeated in 1955 at 49-0 is probably boxing's most known record and number. Since then only two former champs have reached 40 wins before suffering their first setback. In this context only legitimate or lineal champs are considered, not the Brian Nielsens of the boxing world. In 1974 George Foreman (40-0) was upset in his third title defense by Muhammad Ali, and Larry Holmes (48-0) was on the verge of equaling Marciano's record in 1985 when he was upset by reigning light heavyweight champ Michael Spinks in bout 49.

Obviously Mike Tyson being the youngest to ever win the heavyweight title at 20 and George Foreman the oldest at 45 are extraordinary feats. That said, there's one monumental feat accomplished by a former heavyweight great that ranks pretty high as well and is routinely overlooked. The fighter I'm talking about can actually lay claim to three stellar achievements during his boxing career that no other heavyweight great can come close to surpassing. Some greats have done one or two things that separate them from other fighters, but not three on the magnitude of this fighter. Had he won the signature fight of his 81-bout career a strong case can be made supporting him as the greatest heavyweight champ of all time.

The fighter I'm speaking about is former two time heavyweight champion George Foreman. Foreman was not an outstanding boxer nor was he very fast of hand or foot. Most of his punches tended to be arm punches and he seldom got full leverage behind them. However, he had such an overload of strength and natural punching power that his flawed fundamentals and technique rarely kept him from having his hands raised after his fights. In fact, had George Foreman ever been taught the correct way to punch like a Joe Louis, it may have been illegal allowing him to fight! Imagine--his career 89.4 % knockout ratio could have been higher!

Consider What Was:

In **January of 1967** Foreman fought as an amateur for the first time and lost. In October of the following year he stopped three of the four opponents he faced at the 1968 Olympic Games to win a gold medal in the heavyweight division representing the United States. All of the fighters he faced during the Olympics had much more experience than Foreman and were closer to being pros than they were amateurs. Having less than two years boxing experience and winning the world championship as an amateur is nothing short of amazing.

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In his gold medal winning bout, only his 26th fighting as an amateur, Foreman, 18, stopped 29 year old Russian Ionas Chapulis in the second round. The Russian fighter had over eight years experience fighting Internationally. For anyone who doesn't fully understand what an advantage that is, check the international records of the top U.S. amateur fighters before they ever qualified for the Olympic Trials, let alone before winning them. Mike Tyson had over five years fighting experience as an amateur, not to mention more supervision and training than most ranked pros and didn't even make the U.S. Olympic team in 1984. Imagine introducing a big 16 year old kid to boxing today, and him winning a gold medal at the Olympics 20 months later. Foreman winning a gold medal at the Olympics with slightly over a year and half experience and only 26 fights is off the chart.

On **January 22nd 1973**, six years after he had his hands wrapped for the first time, Foreman won the undisputed heavyweight championship of the world. In the process he put on one of the most awesome displays of punching power in the history of the division. Foreman's opponent was undefeated champ "Smokin" Joe Frazier 29-0 (25). In four and a half minutes of ring combat, Foreman put Frazier down six times before stopping him in the second round. Frazier, 29, was just two fights removed from handing Muhammad Ali his first career loss in "The Fight of The Century." In Frazier, Foreman may have defeated the most formidable defending champ in heavyweight history and in the most spectacular fashion.

Some may view Jack Dempsey's destruction of old and out of shape Jess Willard to win the title as impressive as Foreman's title winning effort, but it's not, regardless of how one may try and spin it. Willard was certainly no Joe Frazier nor is he ranked among the top-20 heavyweight greats in boxing history by any boxing historian, whereas Frazier is without question among the all-time top ten heavyweight greats. Willard didn't turn pro until he was 29, he quit in one bout early in his career because he wasn't in shape, hadn't fought in three plus years and only once in the last four prior to defending his title against Dempsey. That takes nothing away from Dempsey's signature performance, but Willard didn't offer nearly the level of opposition that Foreman was confronted with in Frazier.

Rocky Marciano's one punch knockout of Jersey Joe Walcott was impressive, but Walcott was 38 and Marciano was trailing in the bout when he ended it with one right to Walcott's jaw in the 13th round. Sonny Liston's first round knockout over heavyweight champ Floyd Patterson was nothing short of frightening. The reason it doesn't equal Foreman's effort is two fold. One, Patterson was previously stopped by Ingemar Johansson and was down more times than any other heavyweight champ in history. Two, Liston outweighed Patterson by 24 pounds, while Foreman only outweighed Frazier by three.

The only other destruction close to Foreman's, is Mike Tyson's one round knockout over Michael Spinks. Spinks at 31 was no Joe Frazier and made his mark fighting as a light heavyweight in 28 of his 32 career bouts. If there's another example of the title changing hands since Corbett beat Sullivan where the defending champion was as highly thought of as Frazier and lost so convincingly, I don't know of it.

An overwhelming case can be made that Foreman beat the most formidable defending champ ever, in Frazier, to win the heavyweight title. Jack Johnson beat Tommy Burns to capture it, we

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know about the Willard who Dempsey beat. Tunney beat a past his peak Dempsey. Louis beat a 10-1 underdog in James Braddock. Marciano beat an old Walcott to claim the title. Sonny Liston beat Floyd Patterson who was too small for him and had been down many times before they fought. Cassius Clay beat an old Liston. Joe Frazier beat Ali after a 43 month long layoff. Larry Holmes beat Ken Norton who was 34 and pulverized by Foreman four years earlier. As far as Tyson, Holyfield, Bowe, Lewis and either one of the Klitschko brothers, not one of them has ever fought a title challenger on the level of the undefeated Frazier that Foreman won the title from, or the Foreman that Muhammad Ali beat to regain it. The common theme here is George Foreman is part of the mix on both accounts.

On **November 5th 1994** at age 45, Foreman won the heavyweight title for the second time, becoming the oldest fighter in history to ever claim a world title. This occurred 17 years after Foreman retired in March of 1977, with a career record of (45-2) after he lost a decision to Jimmy Young as the top ranked heavyweight in the world.

Exactly 10 years after retiring Foreman fought for the first time in March of 1987 to begin his comeback. Four years later he challenged undisputed champion Evander Holyfield (25-0) at age 42 hoping to reclaim the title he lost to Muhammad Ali in 1974. Holyfield won a 12-round unanimous to retain the title and handed George the first loss of his comeback. Foreman refused to look at the loss to Holyfield as anything more than a minor setback and continued to fight.

Three and a half years later he challenged Michael Moorer (35-0) who decisioned Holyfield in his last fight to win the title. For nine rounds Moorer had his way with the 45 year-old Foreman, and was leading on all three of the judges' scorecards. Then at 2:03 of the tenth round, Foreman caught Moorer with a short right on the chin and knocked him out to make history. Moorer admitted after the fight he never even saw the punch that knocked him out.

Over the next three years Foreman made three defenses of the lineal heavyweight title. In what turned out to be his last career bout and fourth defense of the title, he lost a highly controversial majority decision to Shannon Briggs (29-1) along with the title. Even at age 48 in a fight he'd lost, Foreman's awesome strength and toughness were on display. In Briggs' next fight four months later, he was stopped by Lennox Lewis in the fifth round. Yet Briggs hurt Lewis badly in the first round, something he hadn't done to Foreman once in 12 rounds. Foreman never fought again after fighting Briggs and his career record stands at 76-5 (68).

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In part two -- Foreman's career will be further examined as to how his career may have unfolded had he won the "Rumble In The Jungle." Reverse the outcome and it would be hard to deny Foreman rightfully going down as the greatest heavyweight champion in boxing history.