

In Part One the three signature achievements of George Foreman's career here examined. In Part 2, a case is made that had Foreman won the biggest fight of his career, he possibly could've reigned as heavyweight champion for 10-15 years and gone down in history as the greatest heavyweight champ of all-time. It's conjecture but entirely plausible.

Could've Been The Greatest?

In what was the highest-profile and signature fight of his career, George Foreman defended his undisputed heavyweight title against Muhammad Ali in "The Rumble in The Jungle." This time instead of being a 3-1 underdog as he was when he took the title from Joe Frazier as the challenger, he was a 3-1 favorite as the defending champion. In the almost 35 years since "The Rumble In The Jungle," many things about the fight have been overlooked and misstated, starting with the ring size. The Foreman-Ali bout was contested in an 18 foot ring, not the 20 foot one that's been reported. When Foreman was cut over his right eye by sparring partner Bill McMurray, eight days before the fight date of September 25th 1974, the prevailing thought was the delay would be a major blow to the 32 year-old Ali. Since mid June of 1974 everything Ali did was centered on him peaking September 25th. The cut pushed the fight back to October 30th and was thought to be beneficial to the champion.

Foreman's power more than compensated for his lack of boxing basics. His success hid the fact that his trainer, Dick Saddler, was really just a regional trainer based in Oakland, California. The only other world class fighters Saddler worked with other than Foreman were the declining Sonny Liston during the last couple years of his career, and 1960s welterweight contender Charlie Shipes. Foreman may have bonded with his trainer but, Saddler wasn't Whitey Bimstein or Ray Arcel like some painted him as being at the time.

Saddler dehydrated Foreman before fights and cut many corners as he brought him along. Saddler was convinced no fighter could stand up to George's punch and often said so. His philosophy training Foreman was rudimentary, consisting of running and chopping wood in the morning and beating on the heavy bag and his sparring partners in the afternoon. No doubt this appeased Foreman and made him feel indestructible. Foreman was intoxicated by his power and after he destroyed Frazier he abandoned his job and looked exclusively for the early knockout as champion.

In defense of Dick Saddler, he understood how important it was for George to take away Ali's room to move and box by cutting off the ring against him like Joe Frazier did in their previous two bouts. Foreman cut off the ring brilliantly the night he fought Ali. Which brings up another fallacy pertaining to Ali surrounding this bout, the "Rope-A-Dope." This strategy saw Ali rest against the ropes allowing Foreman to work his body, with the intent of Foreman tiring and punching himself out. Later in the bout Ali came on to seize the fight versus Foreman who was spent physically. The fact is, Ali's "Rope-A-Dope" tactic was forced on him out of necessity. He had no other choice. It wasn't a Plan-B strategy that he carried to the ring with him in the back

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of his mind or thought about while his hands were being wrapped before the fight.

From the second round on, Ali didn't use his legs to move away and circle Foreman. The fact is Foreman took two/three steps to the right or left and blocked Ali's escape route and prevented him from boxing. Foreman was too strong and punched too hard for Ali to engage with. There were a few things that saved Ali in that fight. His quick hands and his capacity to take a punch to the head and body were as good or better than any heavyweight champ in history. Also, Ali may have taken some hellacious shots to the body, but Foreman didn't connect to his head or chin repeatedly. Muhammad Ali may have out-boxed Sonny Liston, but he didn't George Foreman. He out-toughed him.

What if Ali's durability and ruggedness were slightly less than what it turned out to be? Had that been the case Foreman would've made his third successful title defense and would've left the city of Zaire the same way he arrived, as the undefeated and undisputed heavyweight champion of the world. The reality is Foreman was just too strong to box. The fighter who stopped Foreman in the eighth round to take his title had size and speed, along with being a physical specimen with great stamina and strength capped with a granite chin and a will to win that bordered on being unhealthy.

After losing his title to Muhammad Ali, Foreman didn't fight for 15 months and was never the same fighter. When he came back he met Ron Lyle in his first bout and had replaced Dick Saddler with Gil Clancy as his trainer. Clancy changed his style with the result being a more measured Foreman in the ring, something that made Foreman less effective and just reinforced the seed of doubt planted in his mind by Ali in Zaire regarding his stamina.

Foreman scored five straight knockouts with Clancy in his corner. In his sixth bout he traveled to Puerto Rico as the number one challenger to fight third-ranked Jimmy Young. Young benefited greatly by getting to Puerto Rico 10 days before the fight and gave his body time to get acclimated to the mid March climate. Foreman showed up the day before the fight and his body had no time to adjust to the hot temperature and climate.

With the Young bout being his first in an outdoor stadium since losing to Ali, Foreman was over-cautious and sleep-walked for the first six rounds. In the seventh he caught Young with a massive left hook that knocked him across the ring and out of range preventing Foreman to follow up with a finishing punch. Young showed tremendous heart and reserve surviving the round. Foreman started to tire in the eighth as Young picked his spots and scored. In the 12th round Foreman was spent and went down to a knee from a few Young taps and exhaustion. Young won a unanimous decision and Foreman retired and didn't fight for 10 years.

It's plausible that if George Foreman stopped Muhammad Ali in the eighth round instead of the reverse, he would be considered the greatest heavyweight champion of all-time and may have produced the longest title reign in boxing history. Having stoppage wins over Frazier when he was undefeated, along with Ali at a point in his career where he'd never met a fighter he couldn't beat nor was he ever stopped before, would out-rank any two wins posted by any other all-time great heavyweight champ or legend. Johnson, Dempsey, Louis, Marciano, Liston, Ali, Frazier, Holmes, Holyfield, Tyson nor Lewis have two wins, let alone stoppage wins versus two

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opponents close to Ali and Frazier on their record.

Having dispatched Frazier, Norton and Ali by the end of 1974, who was around or on the horizon to dethrone Foreman? Ron Lyle earned a shot at the title versus Ali in 1975 and was stopped by Foreman in January 1976, so forget him ending it for Foreman. In fact the Foreman who fought Lyle may have been the least prepared version of George we ever saw both mentally and physically. He was coming off his first defeat and a 15-month layoff and it was his first fight under new trainer Gil Clancy who completely changed his style. By the end of 1975 Larry Holmes was best known for working as a sparring partner for both Ali and Frazier. During that time Don King was being careful bringing him along. He was confident Holmes could beat all the heavyweights circa 1975-76 that nobody cared about, but the fighters that could bring attention to him were too risky to fight. In 1976 Larry Holmes (19-0) was ranked among Ring Magazine's top-10 ranked heavyweights for the first time at number six.

If Foreman hadn't lost to Ali, he wouldn't have lost to Jimmy Young. I can't envision Young beating Foreman who hadn't tasted defeat or didn't harbor any self doubt. In 1976, the two most likely opponents who would be in line to fight Foreman for the title were fourth ranked Duane Bobick (38-0) and sixth ranked Larry Holmes (19-0). Foreman would've been a huge favorite to knock out Bobick. Meaning, he would've then faced Holmes who wasn't close to the fighter he became two years later when he beat Ken Norton for the title. Now, the other side of the coin--Foreman easily may have been even better than he was in 1974.

Translation, Foreman knocks out Holmes early in a devastating fashion, maybe even preventing the Holmes era from ever being realized. Who knows, maybe even the Tyson and Holyfield title reigns never get started either. Holyfield had his hands full with Foreman coming off a ten year retirement. Mike Tyson had more than a few chances to fight Foreman circa 1990-91 and looked the other way. Again, how long Foreman could've held the title had he defeated Muhammad Ali in Zaire is speculation. What's not speculation is Foreman lost the title in 1974 and won it back 20 years later in 1994 after a 10-year retirement. It's not a reach envisioning Foreman holding the title from 1973-94 had he never left the ring. His biggest challenge would've been boredom and overconfidence, more so than any heavyweight fighter that came along between 1976 and 1994.

In the ring George Foreman had one weapon as a fighter, an overload of strength and punching power. In just his 14th month fighting as a pro, he stopped George Chuvalo who'd only been stopped twice in 93 fights. He was the first fighter to defeat Joe Frazier (29-0) and did it twice. He's also responsible for putting Frazier down 8 of the 11 times Joe was down in his career. Before fighting Foreman, Ron Lyle had only been dropped by Earnie Shavers, thought by some to be the hardest puncher in heavyweight history; Foreman did it twice and knocked him out. Scott LeDoux's only stoppage defeat before taking on Foreman was due to a badly cut eye. George was the first to really stop him and half killed him in the process. Dino Dennis (28-0-1) was undefeated until he was stopped by Foreman. In his title winning effort at 45, Michael Moorner was undefeated (35-0) until Foreman knocked him out with one short right hand to the chin.

Prior to fighting Ali, former greats Joe Louis, Jack Dempsey and Archie Moore emphatically

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stated in boxing publications and during interviews that George Foreman was the hardest hitting fighter in boxing history. None of the old great fighters or writers gave Ali a chance to beat Foreman, who was viewed as being a genuine life-taker going into their fight. They were confident Foreman would do what Sonny Liston was too old to do and Joe Frazier was too short and small to do, that was squash the Butterfly. Foreman at 25 had youth, size, strength and a punch that they couldn't envision Ali being able to take or survive, at least for more than a round or two. After the fight they were boxed into a corner by their statements.

Had Foreman destroyed Ali like they predicted, they would've been more than happy heaping Foreman with all due praise while admonishing Ali as nothing more than being self hype. The thought that Ali could win just didn't exist. The reason Ali is accepted as the greatest or at least one of them today by old school boxing observers is because he convincingly beat George Foreman. After professing that Foreman was the hardest hitting heavyweight of all time, they couldn't say he wasn't all that after the fight. So instead of coming off like a bunch of hypocrites, they took the high road and accepted that Ali proved he really was a great fighter and had won them over.

In the aftermath of "The Rumble In The Jungle," it's been often said that Foreman was vulnerable to a good boxer, citing his bouts versus Ali and Jimmy Young. What's missed is, Ali didn't out-box Foreman and Young didn't fight the real Foreman. Just because Ali pulled a rabbit out of his hat against Foreman, I wouldn't bet or say with impunity that Jack Johnson, Gene Tunney, Ezzard Charles or Larry Holmes could've done the same.

Muhammad Ali is a legend today because he beat George Foreman, which has wrongly led many boxing observers and aficionados to dismiss and overlook Foreman's herculean career accomplishments and trifecta. No, Foreman didn't match up with Ali, but if Ali is the greatest due to his upset of Foreman, George can't rank too far behind the GOAT.

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