

Rocky Marciano: As A Fighter He Was Almost Beyond Criticism

Written by Frank Lotierzo

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Forty years ago (August 31, 1969) on the eve of his 46th birthday he was killed in a plane that crashed over a desolate field in Des Moines. He was born Rocco Francis Marchegiano. Due to his mother being dead set against him fighting, he fought under the name Rocky Marciano so she wouldn't know it was her son who was knocking every body out when she read it in the newspaper.

Rocky Marciano retired as heavyweight champ with a final career record of 49-0 (43) shortly after knocking out reigning light heavyweight champ Archie Moore in his last fight on September 21st of 1955. Marciano's undefeated record has only been challenged once legitimately, and that was by former heavyweight champ Larry Holmes. Ironically, Holmes was 48-0 when he lost bout 49 to reigning light heavyweight champ Michael Spinks thirty years to the day after Marciano beat Moore on September 21st, 1985.

Through the years despite going undefeated Marciano's worthiness as one of the all-time great heavyweight champs has been challenged by some respected boxing historians and observers. Their complaint disputing Rocky's place among the greatest of the greats is usually centered around the fact that the four most notable fighters he defeated, Joe Louis (37), Jersey Joe Walcott (38), Ezzard Charles (one month shy of 33) and Archie Moore (38) were older and past their prime when Rocky beat them. Which is not only a fact, it's a fair point. That said, it must be emphatically stated that Marciano fought every top fighter of his era and didn't avoid or duck anyone.

The same boxing aficionados who question Marciano's level of opposition credit Muhammad Ali for fighting and beating the best generation of heavyweights ever during his perceived prime. If Ali's opposition was so terrific, what does it say about Marciano that Muhammad only fought two fighters, Sonny Liston and George Foreman, who would've been a definite favorite to beat Marciano. I'm not counting Larry Holmes since Ali was washed up when they fought. If you chose to count Holmes then Ali only faced three fighters who would've been favored over Marciano at their best. A bout between prime Marciano and Joe Frazier would be a 6-5 pick 'em either way. As great as I think Frazier was, I can't say I believe he'd be a solid favorite to beat Marciano or vice-versa. Other Ali opponents such as Cleveland Williams, Ron Lyle and Earnie Shavers would have had a shot to beat Rocky, but it's not the side of the bet I'd be on.

It can be argued that Rocky Marciano in some ways is the most underrated and overrated heavyweight champ in history, something that won't be debated or settled here. What will be addressed is some of the misconceptions about Rocky Marciano the fighter.

Marciano fought from a low crouch and forced his opponents to reach for him. Some fans and writers speak as if Marciano's defense were on the level of former middleweight champ Vito Antuofermo's, something that couldn't be more wrong. Rocky wasn't an upright walk straight-in can't miss brawler. It's better stated that Rocky was sometimes nailed cleanly by an opponent's lead punch.

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Both Walcott and Moore dropped Marciano early in their fight with a lead punch. Walcott just went to Marciano and followed up a short feint with a lead left-hook and dropped him for the first time in his career. Moore caught Rocky with a counter lead right hand that dropped him as he was following Archie around the ring. However, you won't find much footage of any Marciano opponent getting off on him with combinations or successive punches. A quick handed opponent could get him with their lead shot enough to keep them in the fight for a while. But Marciano had great instincts and either got low and underneath or rolled away from the follow up punches coming behind the lead shot that caught him. And think about some of the sharpshooters he was in with. Louis, Walcott, Charles and Moore may have been past their prime when they fought Marciano, but no other fighters around at that time were handling them the way Rocky did.

Another falsehood that's been reported over the years is how Marciano beat his opponents, mainly Roland LaStarza in their second fight, on the forearms and biceps so much that they couldn't hold their arms up, thus leaving their chin exposed for Marciano's big right hand, known as the "Suzy Q." After watching every piece of Marciano film available, the footage of him continually beating on his opponents arms to the point they couldn't hold them up doesn't exist. Rocky hit his opponents wherever he could because he knew he had fight altering power in both hands. He also carried his power from round one through 15, making him that much more dangerous.

What can't be disputed about Marciano and his record is - he was the best conditioned heavyweight who has yet lived. Marciano trained and prepared for all of his fights as if he had to make weight. He went away to camp for all of his title fights and his mindset was, maybe my opponent is more skilled than I am, but his body can't beat mine and that'll be the difference and turn the fight in my favor. On top of that Marciano had ice water in his veins. He actually fell asleep and had to be woken up while in his dressing room to get ready to go fight. That alone puts him on a short list of fighters.

If you think about all the past great heavyweight champions from John L. Sullivan through Lennox Lewis, it can be pointed out that had they done one or two things a little better they would've been even greater than they were. That cannot be said about Rocky Marciano.

In many ways Marciano was a fighter that was beyond criticism. He was short and had short arms for his height. His reach was only 68 inches, three inches shorter than Mike Tyson's and five inches shorter than Joe Frazier's. Rocky didn't have the fastest hands or feet around, but he seemed to cover a lot of ground quickly while tracking down his opponents. He fought the toughest style that any fighter could have to fight being a swarmer. His trainer Charlie Goldman taught Rocky how to fight out of a crouch and present himself as a small target making it more difficult for his opponent to hit him. Marciano applied constant mental and physical pressure and had the ability to always deliver his power. He never showed up in so-so shape nor did he take any opponent lightly. On top of that, winning was living and losing was dying as far as he was concerned.

Ranking fighters is conjecture. Forget for a moment where you think Rocky Marciano ranks among the pantheon of all-time great heavyweight champs. There's one thing about Marciano

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that can be said with impunity. No, he wasn't a perfect fighter, but looking back there isn't a single thing he could've done that would've made him a better/greater fighter than he was.

How many fighters can that be said about?

Frank Lotierzo can be contacted at GlovedFist@Gmail.com