

Three Who Were Ready And Refused To Be Denied

Written by Frank Lotierzo

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During the modern era of professional boxing 1890 through the present there have been a few fighters who were so prepared for their opponent physically and stylistically that there's no way they were gonna lose. In some cases they fought as if winning meant living and losing was equivalent to dying. Below are three examples in which the winner fought a perfect fight strategically, and refused to be denied physically. In hindsight there's no way that they could've lost on this night to that particular opponent.

3) Roberto Duran vs. Sugar Ray Leonard I, June 20, 1980

Before their first fight Duran mocked and insulted Leonard in every way imaginable and then some. That messed with Leonard in a big way emotionally. By the night of the fight Ray wanted to destroy Roberto physically and knock him out. Duran who was the more established fighter at the time and fighting as a welterweight after reigning as the lightweight champ for seven years, was incensed by the way Leonard was treated in the media not to mention how much more money Leonard was making for the fight.

Duran weighed in at 145 and may have never been in greater shape for a fight physically. Roberto came out even more aggressively than normal in the first round and didn't allow Leonard to breathe, and made Leonard fight on the inside and with his back to the ropes for almost the entire fight. He cut the ring off and worked Leonard's body and arms unrelentingly during the bout, while also making good use of his arms, shoulders and elbows from close quarters. It was obvious to see how intent Duran was on not letting Ray have the luxury of using the ring and boxing him.

From rounds three through 15, Leonard and Duran fought on the inside, with Duran getting the better of it slightly in most of the rounds. There was plenty of holding; however, there was also plenty of fighting seeing both fighters getting off with their Sunday best. The difference was Duran was at home fighting in front of his opponent with their back against the ropes. He could sense when Leonard was about to launch a counter and made him miss more than he ever had in any fight of his career. At the same time Duran knew when Ray wanted to rest and not work, allowing him to work both hands to his head and body. Duran physically imposed himself on Leonard and his swarming attack totally disrupted him and forced Ray to fight for his life and thus earned him the decision verdict. Duran's intensity and aggression was something Sugar Ray Leonard never experienced before in a professional fight. Ultimately Duran made Leonard fight his fight and as a result won the second of the four titles he would go onto win in four different weight divisions.

2) Joe Louis vs. Max Schmeling II, June 22, 1938

Two years earlier in June of 1936 Louis and Schmeling met for the first time. Louis took Schmeling lightly and did his hardest training for the fight on the golf course. When Schmeling arrived in America before the fight he said he detected a flaw in Louis's style but wouldn't reveal

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it until the fight. Schmeling went on to stop Louis in the 12th round of their heavyweight title elimination bout. After the fight Schmeling said Louis had a bad habit of bringing his left hand back low after he jabbed with it, which left him wide open for his hard right hand counter over the top. For 12 rounds Max smashed Louis with right hand counters to the face and jaw which he eventually crumbled under.

Forget the world politics between the United States and Germany for the rematch at the time, Louis said after he beat Jim Braddock for the title a year earlier that he wouldn't feel like the champion until he beat Schmeling in a rematch. Along with having the want to beat Schmeling, Louis had master strategist Jack Blackburn as his trainer and cornerman. Blackburn instructed Louis that bringing the left hand back low wasn't what he had to worry about most, and that his real mistake was being too far away thus enabling Schmeling to get full extension on his right hand. Max's bread and butter punch was his right and no fighter could expect to survive being caught at the end of it repeatedly.

In the rematch Louis came right out and took the fight to Schmeling in the first round. Joe was on top of Max and took away his space as he inched forward behind his hard jab looking to shoot his explosive short right to Schmeling's jaw. A minute into the round Louis nailed Schmeling with a right hand from mid-range that badly hurt Max and froze him just long enough for Joe to unload with follow up hooks and right hands. The game Schmeling went down but got up and beat the ten count. Louis knew Schmeling was going to try and bail himself out with his right hand, only he never had the chance to get it off. Louis crowded him and unloaded inside with some of the most powerful short hooks and right hands any heavyweight ever threw. Max went down again and barely beat the count. Once again Louis was on top of him, taking away the space Schmeling needed to fight him off. Without having the space he needed to fight back effectively, Louis tore Schmeling apart with more powerful hooks to the body and short rights to the chin. Max went down a third time but couldn't beat the count this time and was counted out at 2:04 of the first round.

Louis's minor adjustment, by just smothering Schmeling's right hand, is one of the best fight-to-fight adjustments in boxing history. By virtually taking away Schmeling's space to launch his, Louis opened the path for his and won one of the biggest fights in history.

1) Joe Frazier vs. Muhammad Ali I, March 8, 1971

The "Fight Of The Century" was five years in the making. During Ali's forced exile circa 1967-70, Frazier had succeeded him as heavyweight champion and was also undefeated by the time they finally met in 1971. Before the fight Frazier's trainer Yank Durham said, "we developed a style a long time ago to beat Clay, and Joe has it down pat now."

Frazier knew he could move forward faster than Ali could go backward. He also understood that it was a lot different for Ali being forced to move back because he had no choice than it was for him to do so of his own volition. For fifteen rounds Frazier cut the ring off on Ali, slipped and got underneath his best punch, his left jab. Joe continually made Muhammad pay when he missed by coming over his low right hand with his left hook and by getting real low as he came in, forcing Ali to punch down, which greatly reduced his accuracy.

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Frazier also forced Ali to fight on the inside and in doing so Ali had no choice but to try and fight Joe off by trading hooks and uppercuts, and that was Joe's fight. Frazier's unrelenting pressure didn't allow Ali to freelance and pick his shots, and made him rush his punches with the purpose of occupying Frazier and keep him off more so than trying to score or do damage. From a style vantage-point Frazier had an answer for any and everything Ali attempted to do during the bout, including not paying attention to whatever Ali said to him while they were fighting.

Heading in to their first bout Joe Frazier was prepared for Muhammad Ali physically, mentally and emotionally along with stylistically better than any fighter ever has been for one particular opponent or fight. Joe made Ali fight inside when he wanted to fight outside, forced him to fight every minute of every round, or take a body beating on the ropes when he was too tired to get away. After fourteen rounds of a brutal fight Frazier dropped Ali with a massive left hook 24 seconds into the fifteenth and final round. Ali showed monumental heart and courage by getting up at the count of four and finished the bout on his feet. However, the knockdown was the highlight of the bout and erased any doubt, not that there was much, that Frazier was the better fighter that night and was truly the undisputed heavyweight champion of the world.

Joe Frazier was on a mission and knew he'd never get his due as the great fighter and champion he was had he not defeated Ali in "The Fight Of The Century." On Monday night March 8, 1971, "Smokin" Joe fought with the will and zeal of a fighter who refused to be denied, and he wasn't.

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