

The Night We Started To Take Foreman's Comeback Seriously

Written by Frank Lotierzo

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On the night of January 15th 1990, 41 year old former heavyweight champion George Foreman was in the middle of the third year of his return to the ring. As most remember Foreman retired in his dressing room the night he lost a 12-round unanimous decision to Jimmy Young in San Juan, Puerto Rico in mid March of 1977.

At the time of the Foreman-Young bout, George was Ring Magazine's top contender and Jimmy Young was its third ranked contender. Foreman was on a five bout win streak in which he stopped everyone of his opponents inside the distance since losing his undisputed heavyweight title to Muhammad Ali in October of 1974. Two of Foreman's stoppage victims were former champ "Smokin" Joe Frazier and perennial top five contender Ron Lyle. Everything was in place for George in order for him to get a rematch with Ali. The only thing that remained left was for him to blow out the slick counter-punching Jimmy Young.

Young smartly arrived in Puerto Rico eight days before the fight and got acclimated to the hot climate being the fight was outside. On the other hand the over-confident Foreman didn't land in San Juan until the day before the fight with his new trainer Gil Clancy. Clancy took over training George shortly after Foreman fired his original trainer Dick Saddler after he lost for the first time in his career against Ali.

Under Clancy's guidance Foreman fought in a more measured and less aggressive manner, which allowed Young the time and distance he needed as he proceeded to pick Foreman apart for the better part of 12-rounds to secure a unanimous decision verdict. After losing the fight to Young George retired from boxing in his dressing room afterward with a 45-2 (42) career record.

On March 9th 1987 after not fighting in ten years Foreman returned to the ring and stopped journeyman Steve Zouski in the fourth round. George said he came back in 1987 to raise money for the George Foreman Youth Center in Houston and also to whip undisputed heavyweight champ Mike Tyson's butt. However, after going 19-0 (18) Foreman was laughed at and mocked for fighting old has-beens and over weight and out of shape former champs who were in the midst of losing streaks.

Then Foreman agreed to meet the hard-punching former top contender Gerry Cooney who was making a comeback inspired by Foreman's. The 6'6" Cooney was seven years Foreman's junior and his only setbacks in the ring were to all-time great WBC heavyweight champ Larry Holmes who fought the fight of his life the night he stopped Gerry in June of 1982. Five years later former light heavyweight and future heavyweight champ Michael Spinks stopped Cooney in five rounds.

Cooney viewed Foreman as his ticket and stepping stone to immediate credibility and perhaps another title shot. On Monday night January 15th 1990, "The Preacher and The Puncher" met at the Conventional Hall in Atlantic City New Jersey.

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Cooney came out fast and used his jab and then hooked off of it to Foreman's big body in the early going of the first round. During the round Cooney's quicker hands aided him as he got off first and led most of the exchanges. With about 40 seconds left in the round Foreman backed Cooney against the ropes and blasted him with a big left-hook followed by a right to the body. The hard combination froze Cooney briefly and as George was going in for the kill the best exchange of the round ensued and Cooney got the better of it when he caught Foreman with a beautiful left-hook to the chin that shook him momentarily.

Foreman came out more deliberately in the second round and tried to close the distance, but was met with a barrage and came up short when they traded hooks during the initial exchange of the round. But it seemed that after losing that exchange Foreman escalated his physical and mental pressure on Cooney and began walking Gerry down as the round progressed. A minute into the round Foreman landed a beautiful left uppercut followed by a right uppercut to the chin which forced Cooney to retreat. The next time they clinched Foreman landed a bone-jarring left-uppercut inside that froze Cooney for a second.

When Cooney tried to get away, Foreman missed with an overhand right and then followed it with another massive left-upper cut to Cooney's chin - to which Foreman followed that up with a straight left-hand and a perfectly placed right cross to the chin. Cooney started to sink as he was going down and Foreman landed an over-hand right to the chin followed by an inside left-hook to the chin with his back against the ropes and another overhand right and a straight left to the face and Cooney went down. Cooney was badly hurt but was up at the count of seven. When referee Joe Cortez waved them to resume fighting Foreman walked across the ring and blasted Cooney with another massive left-uppercut to the chin followed by another right to Cooney's exposed left jaw and he went down as if he were dropped from a helicopter from the roof of the Convention Center.

Before administering a count Cortez waved the fight over giving Foreman the most impressive win of his comeback. From that moment on George Foreman was viewed as a serious contender and threat to Mike Tyson's title. Foreman was on ESPN SportsCenter the following morning issuing an open challenge to Tyson saying Mike wouldn't be as tough for him as the Joe Frazier he won the title from 17 years earlier.

Three weeks later in the biggest upset in heavyweight history, Tyson was knocked out in the tenth round by James "Buster" Douglas. Immediately afterward Don King tried to talk Tyson into fighting Foreman in his first fight back after he couldn't convince Douglas to give Tyson a rematch. However, after sitting next to Cus D'Amato and watching films of Foreman-Frazier I as a sixteen and seventeen year-old Tyson had other thoughts. Having heard Cus tell Mike how it was suicide for any fighter to bring the fight to Foreman; and the only way to beat George was to move and box him like Ali did, something Mike could never do against even a 41 year old Foreman, Tyson agreed to fight on the same card as Foreman, but against Henry Tillman.

Four bouts after stopping Cooney, Foreman fought Buster Douglas conquerer Evander Holyfield for the undisputed heavyweight title of the world. The 42 year old Foreman did better than most thought he would and managed to hurt Holyfield once or twice during the fight. But the quicker Holyfield figured out early that it was best to use his speed and box George from outside. And

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for eight of the 12 rounds the fight went, Holyfield managed to stay a step ahead of Foreman and scored more frequently on his way to a well deserved unanimous decision victory.

Three years later at age 45 Foreman knocked out undefeated Michael Moorer in the 10th round to become the oldest fighter in history to win the heavyweight title. But that seemed like nothing more than a pipe-dream until the night Foreman knocked out Gerry Cooney in the second round twenty years ago tonight.

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