It’s not that they enjoyed losing fights to Muhammad Ali but at times it almost sounds like it.

Of all the things that come through clearly in “Facing Ali,’’ the 2009 documentary film that first appeared in theatres last year and began a run on Spike TV Monday after recently being named one of 15 documentary film finalists in the 82nd Academy Awards, it is that the great fighters Ali once beat on now look back at those nights from the perspective of middle age men and count them as among their greatest evenings.

Ron Lyle, a convicted murderer with a thunderous punch who turned his life around by becoming a prize fighter at the age of 30, perhaps put it best when he said, “If it don’t be for Ali you think you’d be talking to Ron Lyle? About what?’’

Lyle, like the nine other fighters in the film, had a point. Sentenced to life in the Colorado State penitentiary for second degree murder as a young man Lyle said, “I knew where I belonged.’’

He stayed there until he was 28, often in solitary confinement where he would get a bowl of spinach to eat and a full meal every three days. Six years later he was in the ring with Muhammad Ali.

“The rest is history,’’ Lyle said and that’s what “Facing Ali’’ is. It’s a slice of history, a story of not only Ali but also men who made their bones and measured themselves by challenging him.

George Foreman, Joe Frazier, Ken Norton, Ernie Terrell, Earnie Shavers, Sir Henry Cooper, sad and broken down Leon Spinks, Larry Holmes and erudite George Chuvalo, a man who refused to be broken by Ali or by the terrible tragedies he has known in his personal life since his boxing days ended, all seem to say some form of the same.

To a man they know they fought Ali well. They were not just guys who shared a ring with him. Frazier, Holmes, Spinks and Norton beat him. Foreman didn’t, but says “I don’t think he ever beat Ken Norton to be honest with you.’’

The rest had their moments, if not quite their way, with Ali. As Chuvalo put it when talking about the 15 rounds they went in 1966 in his native Toronto, “It was far from an easy fight (for Ali). He went to the hospital with bleeding kidneys. And me? I went dancing with my wife.’’

His wife is gone now, a victim of suicide after they lost three sons to early death, two to drugs and the third to a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Sadness is written all over his face yet when he speaks there is wisdom there; wisdom gained the hard way.

He speaks of being raised by a mother who had to pluck 200 chickens to earn $1 and a father who peeled the skin off cows for a living. To him boxing was a step up. It is only from such places, as the British hero Cooper points out, that fighters are spawned.

"No good fighter comes from a middle class family,'' said Cooper. "You got to want to get out of the environment you're in. That's what motivates a fighter.''

What motivated all these guys was a shot at Ali. Some, like Frazier and Foreman, had their boxing lives entwined with him for all their days. Others, like Terrell, Lyle, Spinks and Shavers, were footnotes in Ali's career, yet they are all men who look back now and realize what he gave them. One way or another, he gave them life.

"A fight with Ali gave me a chance at life, period,'' said Norton, who tells how he was unable to feed his son before he faced Ali, so little money was coming in. He broke Ali's jaw that night in San Diego, upsetting him and launching himself into boxing's bright lights, from where he would become a world champion. What he would not become is a guy who ever beat Ali again, even though they fought two close rematches.

The story of the epic fights with Frazier has been often told but every time the now aging man who was the first to beat Ali in what many regard as the greatest heavyweight fight in history speaks of his old nemesis it sounds like they'll be fighting again in a week. The same is true this time, at least until the end when even Smokin' Joe loses some steam.

As the film takes each man through his moment with Ali it also weaves its way toward the sad way things ended for arguably the most famous athlete in the history of the world. Leave it to Chuvalo to put it best when he describes the empty shell Ali had become by the time he faced Holmes in 1980.

"You could see when Ali fought Holmes he was shot,'' Chuvalo said. "He was not the same fighter in any way, shape or form. The run was over. Time to quit. Time to go. Time to call it a day…but they all knew at one time he was The Greatest.''

Now 68 and ravaged by Parkinson's disease, Muhammad Ali is many things, including an icon and an example of someone who stayed too long in the most dangerous landscape in sports – a boxing ring.

He has paid dearly for that in a way that even seemed to have finally softened the heart of Frazier, himself now an old man down on his luck.

"It's just sad because, you know…he's a great guy and I'm hoping that maybe he can live the kind of life we live because he earned that,'' Frazier says.

Only men like these know who Muhammad Ali really was, for only they stepped in and did battle with him. Some did so when he was at his peak. Others when he was a legend. A few when his time had already passed. Yet each seemed to feel the same way about him in the end. The way Ron Lyle, long freed from prison by boxing, does.

"He put it on the line, brother,'' Lyle said. "The representation that he gave the black community will never be forgotten. No matter what…When I see him, I see love. He can't speak for himself but we can speak for him.''

And so they do from many different perspectives and many different angles. What they have to say, about themselves and their lives as well as about Ali, is well worth investing two hours watching.