

The Last Great Heavyweight Rivalry, Part III: The Rumble In The Jungle

Written by George Kimball
Tuesday, 16 March 2010 17:00

(Editor's Note: Last month TSS columnist George Kimball was invited to participate, along with two-time heavyweight champion George Foreman and Dr. Robert Rodriguez, in a Boxing Symposium at the University of Kansas. Entitled "The Last Great Heavyweight Rivalry," Kimball's presentation at the KU event anecdotally compared the 1970s heavyweight nexus of Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier, George Foreman, and Ken Norton with that of the middleweight rivalry celebrated in his acclaimed book *FOUR KINGS: Leonard, Hagler, Hearns, Duran and the Last Great Era of Boxing*. That lecture formed the basis for the special TSS series which continues with this installment.)

Although promoter Don King would become the face of the fight that would come to be known as "The Rumble in the Jungle," his initial involvement had been that of a middle-man. In early 1974 he had separately approached both Muhammad Ali and George Foreman, even though the heavyweight champion had yet to defend his title against Ken Norton in Venezuela.

By assuring both Ali and Foreman that the other had already agreed to its terms, King was able to persuade both Foreman and Ali to sign contracts guaranteeing them \$5 million apiece to fight later that year. The fact that he didn't have ten million dollars was a matter of slight consequence to King, who was able to use the contracts as leverage to round up the necessary capital. Hank Schwartz' Video Techniques, in which King already had an interest, was one investor, and a British financier named John Daly, who owned Leisure Technologies, became a major one.

The final piece to the puzzle came when Mobutu Sese Seko, the dictator who had reorganized the former Belgian Congo and renamed it Zaire, agreed to cover the rest of the financing in the hope of boosting the image of his country (to say nothing of his own image) among the nations of the world. The bout would be held that September at the Stade de 20 Mai in the capital city of Kinshasa, formerly known as Leopoldville.

Before he had even left the United States, Ali warned Foreman that "my African brothers are going to cook you in a pot and eat you," and once he reached Kinshasa he continued a relentless campaign calculated to isolate the champion and turn a fight he described as "the Rumble in the Jungle" into a home game for himself. Foreman, newly divorced, had brought along his dog to keep him company, blissfully unaware that the Alsatian -- what we in this country would describe as a German Police Dog -- was the breed the Belgian police had used in crowd-control operations during the colonial era. At every opportunity, Ali referred to Foreman's pet as a "Belgian Shepherd."

Ali and his entourage were quartered in the luxurious presidential villas at N'sele. Foreman, though the champion, was assigned housing at a military complex, surrounded by barbed wire and manned guard towers, and had every appearance of being a prison. Not that Foreman seemed anxious to leave and mingle with the natives, but he did find the atmosphere so stifling that he eventually moved into a Kinshasa hotel. (There, having spurned the military guard

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provided by the government, he was obliged to reach into his own pocket to pay for round-the-clock security.)

Ali, on the other hand, made it a point to court the favor of the locals. He made frequent forays into the cities and towns, and even to small villages. Even in places that had never known electricity he was instantly recognized and embraced by the natives. The chant "Ali Bomaye!" -- a phrase in the Ngala tongue meaning, literally, "Ali, kill him!" -- became his clarion call. The sum effect was to create the widespread impression that the Congolese people considered Ali one of their own, and Foreman a hostile invader.

That Ali seemed to spend much of his daily training laying against the ropes while his sparring partners flailed away was considered unremarkable; he often conserved his energy the same way back at Deer Lake. Foreman, on the other hand, seemed to regard his training sessions as an opportunity to vent his rage, which he took out on his sparring partners. Eight days before the bout, he was sparring with Bill McMurry, who, trapped against the ropes, saw Foreman coming at him and threw up his arms to protect himself. One of his elbows caught the champion above his eye, just below the headgear, and blood immediately spurted forth from the cut.

Word of the injury to the champion spread like wildfire. It was shortly confirmed that the fight would be postponed for a month. Trainer Dick Sadler had immediately patched the wound with a butterfly, but Foreman voiced hope of flying to Europe to have the injury treated by a specialist in France or Belgium. Mobutu, fearing that if Foreman were allowed to leave Zaire he might never return ("and he was right about that," Foreman says today), refused permission for either fighter to leave the country during the delay.

Foreman viewed this restraint as one more indication that the field had been tilted in Ali's favor, but the truth of the matter is that Ali was almost as anxious to get away from monkey meat as Foreman was. Once it became clear that he wasn't going anywhere, Ali continued to train, and the extra month gave him time to achieve a level of fitness he hadn't approached since before his exile.

Foreman told himself he was doing it to guard against re-opening the cut, but between the date of the injury and the night of the fight, he didn't spar a single round.

Most of the traveling media contingent had already arrived on-site when the injury occurred. Foreman and Ali were under orders to remain in Zaire; the press corps became a hostage to simple economics. The sweetheart arrangement under which most of them had flown to Africa on Air Zaire did not cover the postponement, and most newspapers discovered it was a lot cheaper simply keep their representative in Kinshasa for a month than to fly him home and back again.

Bob Waters, Newsday's boxing writer, wound up authoring what proved to be an award-winning series on famine in Africa during this interlude. Budd Schulberg, who filed dispatches from Zaire for the same newspaper, flew back to the United States at his own expense. The night before his departure from Kinshasa, Ali invited Schulberg to dine with him at

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N'Sele. Although he didn't consider it particularly noteworthy at the time, Schulberg later recalled that after dinner he and Ali watched some videotape of Foreman's fights, including those against Gregorio Peralta. Ali sat fixated upon the screen, where the Argentinian seemed to have contracted into a little ball, his back to the ropes, while Foreman flailed away with both fists.

Foreman, Ali pointed out to Schulberg that night, "thinks he's killin' him -- but all he's doin' is getting arm-weary."

As the anecdote related by Schulberg makes clear, Ali was obviously aware of the possibility that should all else fail Foreman might be lured into expending his energy in a similar manner, but the notion that either he or trainer Angelo Dundee had plotted the strategy that became known as the "Rope-a-Dope" beforehand is misplaced. This myth has survived in part because Norman Mailer, one of many literary luminaries in Africa to cover the Ali-Foreman bout, included in his narrative a purported eyewitness account in which he claimed to have witnessed Dundee marching from corner to corner and using a wrench to deliberately loosen the ring ropes just before the fight, and with Ali already in the ring. In point of fact, Mailer could not have seen this, because it never happened.

Mailer's account in *The Flight* also included an evocative scene in the challenger's dressing room just before the fight, in which he inserted his own name, along with that of fellow author George Plimpton's, into a list of those present: "Dundee, Pacheco, Plimpton, Mailer, Walter Youngblood, Pat Patterson..." But it seems extremely doubtful that Mailer could have been there at all, particularly at the critical juncture he described in his book.

"Mailer was in the dressing room? He was never in the dressing room," said Dr. Ferdie Pacheco. "I was the one who kept him out."

In Bobby Goodman's recollection, "I was assigned to stay with Ali, while my Dad (publicist Murray Goodman) was going to bring out Foreman. I recall seeing Norman stick his head in for a second, but he didn't remain with us."

The bout was scheduled for 4 am, Zaire time, on October 31, which would coincide with a 10 pm closed-circuit showing back in the state. The previous afternoon, in daylight, Dundee and Goodman drove out to the stadium to inspect the venue. Both men had repeatedly implored the locals who would be setting up the ring to wait until the last possible moment, but when they got there the ring was already in place and the ropes were already sagging nearly to the floor after exposure to the heat and humidity. Worse, the turnbuckles had been fully tightened, and couldn't be readjusted. The two men spent the better part of the afternoon cutting the ropes with razor blades, re-clamping them, and then hand-tightening the turnbuckles to allow for further adjustment in the wee hours of the following morning.

All of this, it should be noted, was done to tighten, not loosen, the ring ropes.

Ali and Foreman entered the ring at the conclusion of the undercard, and, recalls Goodman, "after the prelims, the ropes had stretched out. All along the strategy had been for Ali to dance.

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He was supposed to stay off the ropes, but once he got in the ring he realized that the Ensaflor padding had become soft and spongy in the heat and that he wouldn't be able to dance -- but when he went to test the ropes they went back so far that he could lean with his head more than a foot outside the ring.

"Just before the fight Angelo and Youngblood and Bundini and I were going to tighten the ropes with a screwdriver or a wrench or just our hands, but Ali told us to leave them alone," said Goodman.

When the two men removed their robes in their respective corners just before they were summoned to the center of the ring, a wide-eyed Ali poked Dundee and pointed to Foreman's biceps as he mouthed the word "Big!" He was doing his best to sound overawed, and he made sure Foreman took notice.

Once the bell rang, Foreman approached his task with the same disdain he had had for Frazier and Norton, and there is every indication that he expected to finish off Ali as easily as he had those two. In a startling display of impudence, Ali ducked inside a Foreman charge and landed a right-hand lead. Though not hurt, Foreman had been served notice that he was in a fight against an opponent who would not go quietly.

In the second round Ali unveiled his backup strategy when he retreated to the ropes and, seemingly offering but token resistance, allowed Foreman to flail away. Taking advantage of the loose ropes, he was able to keep his head out of the optimal range of Foreman's most dangerous blows, and while some of Foreman's punches missed and others were blocked, the champion was able to subject Ali's body and arms to some of his heaviest artillery.

From the corner Dundee was shouting "Get off the ropes!", and when Ali returned to his stool at the end of the round the trainer admonished him, "What are you doing?"

But even as he plunged ahead with what seemed a suicidal strategy, Ali was able to periodically emerge from his cocoon against the ropes to land sneaky punches of his own. Even though he spent most of each round pounding away without meeting much resistance, this happened often enough that the champion's face grew increasingly puffy as the night wore on.

On several occasions Foreman was able to land punches that seemed as solid as the ones that had put Frazier and Norton on the floor. Ali not only took them but sneered back with "Is that all you got, George?" and "They told me you could punch."

Even as it unfolded, nobody described the tactic as the Rope-a-Dope that night. In fact, when he saw Ali do it for the first time, Plimpton turned to Mailer and said "Christ, it's a fix!"

The descriptive phrase would shortly become so identified with the fight that spawned it that even Foreman employs it today in recalling the events of that evening.

"Yeah," he says. "And I was the dope."

Another myth that has grown up around this fight over the intervening 36 years is that Foreman

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was on his way to a rout until he tired. In fact, on the scorecards of the three officials after seven completed rounds, Foreman had taken two rounds on referee Zack Clayton's tally. One of the judges, James Taylor, had Foreman winning one round, the other, Nourridine Adalla, none. (Clayton, Taylor and Adalla had between them scored seven rounds even.)

Ali's inspired tactic was soundly-rooted for yet another reason: Foreman was so accustomed to putting opponents away early that he rarely had a Plan B. Only the two Peralta fights had lasted as long as ten rounds. Since the second of those, three and a half years earlier, the champion had fought a dozen times, and only one of those -- a fifth-round TKO of the Brazilian Luis Faustino Pires-- had gotten past the second round.

In the champion's corner Dick Sadler was telling him to keep pressing the attack on Ali. Archie Moore was also in the corner, and could sense that a failure to adjust might further sap Foreman's waning stamina, but since he was not the chief second felt it imprudent to countermand the instructions.

By the fifth it was apparent that Foreman's punches were losing their steam. He continued to pound away, but Ali seemed unaffected, and before the seventh ended the fight had taken yet a new turn. Ali had become the aggressor.

Even so, Foreman continued to regard the man across the ring with disdain, and vowed to knock him out the next round. When Foreman missed with a sweeping punch, Ali countered with a jarring left hook that snapped Foreman's head into position to receive the right hand that came whistling after it. Foreman went lurching across the ring, seeming to spin in a futile effort to keep himself erect, and eventually crashed down.

Foreman initially seemed alert as he took Clayton's count, even looking toward his corner for instructions on when to get up. The signal was a bit late in coming, considering how much trouble the weary champion had making it to his feet, but he still seemed to have beaten the count and was surprised to see Clayton waving his arms to signal the most improbable upset in boxing history.

What closed-circuit viewers around the world heard was the breathless announcement of David Frost, who was shouting "Ali wins by a knockdown! Ali wins by a knockdown!"

Eight and a half years after his title had been taken away from him, Muhammad Ali had become just the second heavyweight champion in history to regain it.

It was the rainy season in Central Africa, and the predicted rainstorm had held off just long enough for the miracle to take place. (The anticipated downpour would not have postponed the bout, since the ring was covered, but it might have seriously tested the resolve of the nearly 60,000 who packed the Stade to watch it.)

Dawn was already breaking when Ali finally emerged from his dressing room and commenced the drive back to N'Sele. Every step of the way the road were lined with happy Congolese. Ngala is but one of six or seven Congolese languages, and no more prevalent than the others,

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but on this morning regardless of tribal affiliation every man, woman, and child seemed to be chanting "Ali Bomaye!"

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Sleight of Hand

Can't tell you how many times I'd be walking through a crowded corridor at Caesars ice clinking in glasses rattling dice and the bells of slot machines or maybe just standing in the buffet line at the Elvis Hilton when I'd hear a bug buzz past my ear just before it landed in my hair He got me every time I'd instinctively stop to slap it away smack myself in the head then turn around and there he'd be laughing his ass off By an 8-0 vote the Supreme Court

agreed he was a Minister of Islam but how many Holy Men you know walk around with a deck of cards in their pockets? Back then when his hands still listened he could make the Jack of Diamonds jump out of the pack

and spit in your eye He specialized in making silver dollars disappear but those who know could tell you that his greatest magic trick of all came in Zaire No not the Rope-a-Dope: Before the fight when he turned George Foreman

into a white man

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