

Interview with Ken Norton: Norton Speaks On Fights With Ali

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Tuesday, 24 September 2002 18:00

Recently, I had the pleasure of speaking with former Heavyweight Champion Ken Norton on my radio show "Toe-to-Toe" heard on ESPN Radio 1490. Ken was in town with his newly published book titled Going the Distance. I must tell you that I have read many books written by fighters and this is one of the best. It is insightful, informative and a definite must-read. Ken gave me almost an hour of his time. We cannot provide you with the entire interview due to time and space restrictions.

Ken Norton is best known for breaking Muhammad Ali's jaw as a 7-1 underdog in a stunning upset on March 31, 1973. Ali and Norton would meet two more times with Ali winning each time by a controversial decision. Here are Ken Norton's thoughts on all three historic bouts.

Frank: Kenny, Muhammad Ali is held in such high esteem today because of all the great fighters he fought. You and Joe Frazier are the only two fighters he fought three times. Can you tell us why you were chosen to fight Ali the first time?

Norton: I fought on the Ali-Bob Foster under card against Henry Clark. After the fights he was down in the bar or lounge area with a bunch of ladies. I came down and kinda stole part of his thunder. He jumped up and said I'm gonna box you and started yelling I'm gonna kick your butt. So that was the beginning of the end for Ali.

Frank: What were you ranked at that time?

Norton: Seventh by Ring Magazine.

Frank: You were a 7 to 1 underdog going into that first fight with Ali. You fought as if you were the favorite. What was it about him that made you so confident you could beat him?

Norton: Bob Foster told me after his fight with Ali, he came up and said you can take him. I knew I would beat him because mentally I felt that way and my whole camp felt that way. I felt at that time I could've beat Godzilla.

Frank: Of all the fighters Ali has beaten, you are the only one he never beat convincingly.

Norton: A lot of it was the mental part of it. Ali defeated everyone mentally first. With Frazier, Ali had him so mad Joe was trying to kill him with every shot. With Foreman, he tried to kill him with every shot. Mentally, Ali could not defeat me and physically I felt I was as much a physical power as Ali was. He couldn't upset me in any way and plus, I had Eddie Futch. Eddie knew how to fight Ali. You can't go to the head with him. You have to go to the body first and then eventually he will bring his hands down and lower his head.

Frank: Over the years there has been much speculation as to the round you broke his jaw. Ferdi Pacheco who was Ali's doctor at that time said it broke during the 2nd Round.

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What round do you believe it was?

Norton: Round 12. Ali had a break that was an inch and a half long and you keep getting hit as hard and as much as I hit Ali, the pain would take over and you would pass out.

Frank: Which one of your three fights with Ali do you think you fought your best?

Norton: I would say that the one I fought the best was the last one at Yankee Stadium. After 15 rounds I was not tired and felt I could've fought 15 more.

Frank: Which fight did Ali fight the best of the three?

Norton: Ali, I would say the second fight for him.

Frank: Which of the three fights do you think was the closest?

Norton: I would say the second.

Frank: Do you think Ali stole the second fight by winning the 12th Round with his two big flurries in that round?

Norton: Yes. Ali was bigger than boxing at that time.

Frank: Is it fair to say that Ali won the second fight by winning the last round, and that's why he won the decision?

Norton: Yes, I can see why they gave him the decision.

Frank: In your third fight, which was for Ali's title, it came down to the 15th Round on the judges' scorecards. All three scored the round for Ali. What was your thinking at that time going into that 15th Round?

Norton: I was told by my trainer, at the time which was Bill Slayton, that I was ahead on points. He said don't go out and get cut, don't go out and get hurt, just go out and control the round and watch yourself and be careful. I went out and thought I did enough to have a draw in that round.

Frank: If you could fight that round again, how would you fight it?

Norton: I would fight it like I fought the other 14. I would just go out and win it. Like I said, I could've fought 15 more rounds.

Frank: In your book you say, after the third fight with Ali went against you, you lost your heart for boxing, but you continued boxing. Why?

Norton: I lost my edge for boxing, I didn't put as much into it as I did before. I didn't run as far. I didn't train as hard. I didn't eat correctly. I started drinking a little bit every now and then. Of

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1-10 I put in about a 5. I felt that no matter what I did that they would do what they want anyway.

Frank: In other words, unless you scored a knockout you weren't going to get the decision.

Norton: Right. This is not to take away anything from Larry Holmes who I fought after that, but if I trained for Larry the same way I trained for Ali, I felt I could've done quite a bit better.

Frank: Who was stronger, Muhammad Ali or Larry Holmes?

Norton: Oh Ali definitely, Ali was very strong but because he wasn't a one punch KO artist it is overlooked. Hitting Ali in the body or on the arms was like hitting a piece of cement.

Frank: In your book you say Ali is the best ever. Do you believe that?

Norton: As far as I've been around, yes.

Frank: Is Ali the best fighter you ever fought?

Norton: Yes.

Frank: You also say in your book that you and Ali are good friends today. Is it true that he was one of the first to come and see you in the hospital after your terrible car accident in 1986?

Norton: That's very true.