

## A George Foreman Christmas Past

Written by Pat Putnam

Tuesday, 21 December 2004 18:00

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*'Twas a week until Christmas,  
So Santa went to Reno,  
To see Foreman fight,  
And play a little keno.  
But when he saw the fight poster,  
He knew something was not right,  
He roared: "Oh, my God,  
This Jimmy Ellis is White."  
~ Pat Putnam, December 2004*

**Reno, Nevada. December 1991.** Old George Foreman, the Pied Piper of Boxing, spent the last two weeks in Reno, much to the relief of the people who run the gambling halls, which were expected to stand empty while customers stayed home to prepare for the holidays. The long Christmas season is for tinsel and toys, turkey and togetherness, not for the turn of a card or the roll of dice. "Our great adage is that you don't fight Santa Claus," says Gary Carano, general manager of the Eldorado Hotel and Casino.

Ho, ho, help! Against the jolly 257-pound ex-heavyweight champion with the charismatic personality, Santa, weight unannounced, never had a chance. Foreman came to town for his first fight after a 12-round loss to heavyweight champion Evander Holyfield last April 19, and not even the anemic credentials of his novice opponent, a 27-year-old Caucasoid ex-linebacker out of Boise State named Jimmy Ellis, could diminish his magnetic appeal. People poured in to see Foreman's wholesome lounge act.

"Well, it's not really a fight, but an event," said Mark Neebling of Harrah's Reno, which ordered \$30,000 worth of tickets, called for more, and finally wound up doubling its original allotment. Another 200 Harrah's guests were on standby. "We are damned pleased. This is an invitee event, with tickets going to our premium guests. Our list was expanded well beyond our normal boxing fans. They want to see George more than they want to see a fight."

That was fortunate for the high rollers, because Santa would have stood a better chance against Foreman. With no amateur experience, Ellis came in with 16 knockouts and a draw, all against people who should be driving a cab for a living. His last 10 opponents, average age 31, had lost a combined 128 fights, 64 of them by knockouts. One of them, Darrell Young, had a pro career that lasted less than one round. Another, 278-pound Jerry Duke, had three fights, was knocked out three times, and then quit. Ellis would have had a harder time if all his opponents had been found in a Brooklyn saloon.

"I think I am definitely qualified to fight George Foreman," said a confident Ellis, whose entire pro career spanned less than 35 rounds. In contrast to Ellis's round count, Foreman had more than twice as many fights. Only two of Ellis's fights lasted more than two rounds, and only one,

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a draw with 33-year-old club fighter Greg Gorrell, went as long as eight. His biggest purse was \$4,000, which he made in his last outing, a two-round knockout of 38-year-old Dwain Bonds, a professional sparring partner who had not won a fight in four years.

"I just want to get lucky," said Dan Goossen, Ellis's promoter who somehow persuaded the HBO suits to pay \$325,000 for his 228-pound toothless tiger. "I have had skilled fighters and they haven't worked out." Goossen could sell sand to a Bedouin.

The afternoon of the fight, one HBO executive was overheard talking to a friend by telephone from his suite. "No, not that Jimmy Ellis. Can he fight? Jesus Christ, he's white." After watching Ellis workout for about five minutes, the embarrassed HBO suits went to a non-denominational chapel and prayed that Foreman would knock out his inept opponent in the first round.

For Foreman, paid \$5 million by the cable network for his 73rd professional fight, it was less a fight and more of a test of his right knee, which had undergone arthroscopy surgery twice since his loss to Holyfield. One operation should have corrected the problem. Foreman re-injured the knee while on assignment as a boxing color commentator for HBO last August. During a basketball game in Palm Springs, he twisted the knee while falling on Akbar Muhammad, one of promoter Bob Arum's boxing people. Foreman was not happy. Akbar was not too pleased, either.

The injury changed Foreman's training regime, which is considerably less demanding than workouts at a fat farm for senior citizens. Rather than doing roadwork while training for Ellis, he rode a stationary bike in his suite. A bottle of painkillers was kept handy just in case. In "secret" morning sessions at the Eldorado, which purchased \$100,000 worth of tickets for the privilege of hosting the former heavyweight champion, he pounded the heavy bag slowly, far beyond the normal three-minute time periods. It works for him.

Foreman's two-hour afternoon sessions, where he walked through sparring sessions between self-deprecating jokes, belonged to the public that began lining up two hours before the doors opened. The room held 1200 people, and as quickly as one body left another filled the vacated space.

"One day we had 1500 in there. I was worried until I saw that it was the fire marshal letting them in," said Carano. "That day we had to turn away another 500."

Many in the crowds were woman queuing up to have their photos taken with Foreman. Some just wanted to touch him. "He's not just another superstar," said Kate Warner of Caesar's Tahoe, which wound up nearly doubling its original order of 98 tickets. "He is very real to the people. The public looks at him like just another one of the guys. He never keeps them at a distance and he talks to them for hours on end."

Foreman gave the courageous Ellis just seven minutes and 36 seconds, which is about twice as long as the fight should have lasted. With a nose that has been badly broken and an unshaven jutting jaw bristling black, Ellis at least looks like a fighter. It is only at the opening bell that the image quickly fades. Behind a punishing jab and ponderous one-at-a-time sledge-hammering

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punches, Foreman pounded him almost disdainfully.

Early in the second round, a short, cruel hook turned Ellis's legs to rubber and he reeled drunkenly about the ring. Still, Ellis refused to quit. He has the heart of a lion; he just cannot fight like one. After a searching glance at referee Richard Steele, Foreman continued his heavy-handed assault. At the end of the round, as Ellis lurched about looking for his corner, his handlers hurried out and got him.

Shockingly, the same corner men sent him out for the third round. Ellis should have called a cop; instead, he tried to fight. A minute and thirty six seconds into the round, after an apparently annoyed Foreman had hammered home 40 of 49 punches, Steele had seen enough. Ignoring Ellis' protests, the referee waved a ceasefire.

The nearly capacity crowd of 6,284 filed out happy. "He could have shadow boxed and they would have come," said Greg Fine of the Sparks Reno Convention Center.

Said Bally's spokesman Brian Lawson: "After his fight with Holyfield, everybody just fell in love with the old guy. It's the damndest thing I have ever seen. We committed to buy \$50,000 worth of tickets and wound up buying \$65,000 worth. When Larry Holmes defended his heavyweight title against Carl Williams here the fight didn't do this well."

"You've got to love him," said Chuck Miller of the Peppermill Hotel, which bought \$50,000 worth of tickets for its A-list customers, the ones with six-figure credit lines. "The only attraction equal to him is New Year's Eve, our biggest night of the year."

OK, Santa, you can come out now. The Big Guy has gone home to Texas.