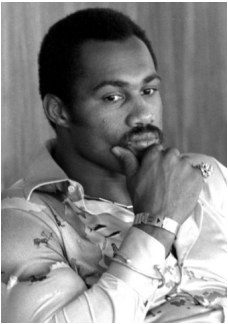


## Ken Norton: Two Rounds Short of the Title

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Thursday, 19 September 2013 20:19

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The decade of the 1970's was dominated by the heavyweight division due to the fact that three certified all-time greats, Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier and George Foreman held the title between 1970-78. Think about it; no other fighter not named Frazier, Foreman or Ali really sniffed the title during that period. Frazier handed Ali his first loss in 1971 when he was 31-0 (25) and retained the undisputed title. A little over 22 months later Foreman dealt Frazier his first defeat when he was 29-0 (25) to capture the title, then roughly 20 months later Ali beat Foreman who was 40-0 (37) to become the second fighter in history to regain the undisputed title.

During the years 1970-78, fighters named Jimmy Ellis, Bob Foster, Ken Norton, Ron Lyle, Joe Bugner, Jimmy Young and Earnie Shavers were some of the upper-tier fighters who challenged Frazier, Foreman or Ali for the unified title and lost. However, one of those men did fight for the title three times circa 1974-78, and that was Ken Norton. Sadly, Norton passed away on Sept. 18 at the age of 70 due to congestive heart-failure and has joined two of his recently-deceased former peers, Jimmy Young and Ron Lyle, at their final resting place.

Back in 2000 I interviewed Ken Norton twice on ESPN radio while he was doing a book tour promoting his autobiography "Going The Distance." I found him to be a very cordial and gracious man and extremely candid and honest regarding the ups and downs of his spectacular career as a heavyweight contender. Yes, between the years 1973, when he first fought and conclusively defeated Muhammad Ali, breaking his jaw in the process, and 1978, Norton was a perennial contender and failed in title bids against Foreman in 1974, Ali in 1976 and Holmes in 1978. Norton's introduction to the big time in boxing was when he fought and defeated Muhammad Ali. After Norton upset Ali in March of 1973, he lost a controversial decision to Ali in their rematch in September of 1973. Based on Norton's two good showings versus Ali, and Ali's upcoming rematch with Joe Frazier in January of 1974, Norton challenged undisputed heavyweight champion George Foreman for the title in March of 1974.

After fighting Foreman on even terms in the first round, Norton was dropped three times in the second and the referee stopped the fight. After losing to Foreman, Norton won seven bouts in a row and challenged Ali for the undisputed heavyweight title on September 28th 1976. Like their

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previous two fights, Ali had a hard time contending with Ken's awkward style, jab and long reach. It took Ali until late in the fight to figure out that Norton was one of the few fighters he faced that it was to his benefit to bring the fight as the aggressor instead of moving away. Ali found Norton with straight one-twos and backed him up and even shook him a few times while nullifying Norton's attack. The fight was dead even after 14 rounds with one round to go.

If you remember, their rematch three years earlier came down to the last round in which Ali clearly won and left the ring with a unanimous decision victory to even them at one win apiece. Norton claimed he was robbed out of the decision and thought he lost it because Ali was the biggest name in boxing at the time. Well, in their only title meeting with one round left in the fight, Norton thought he was well ahead and could coast to Ali's title. In the other corner, Muhammad knew it was close and came out fighting and relying on a style that if he needed one round to win and wasn't out of gas, it never betrayed him and always delivered when the chips were down. In round 15 Ali came out dancing and jabbing and circling to the left. For the first two and a half minutes he totally outscored Norton and was ahead in the round. Then with about 20 seconds left Norton explodes with wild hooks and right hands and forces Ali to the ropes.

In the end it was too little too late, all three officials scored the round for Ali. Norton again claimed he was robbed. The amazing thing about that is after losing the last round to Ali in their rematch when Ali wasn't the champ, how could he think he didn't need a big finish to beat him for the title in an extremely close fight?

One year after after losing to Ali, Norton fought Jimmy Young in a WBC title elimination bout. At that time Norton was the number one contender and Young was number two. Ali said he was too old, almost 36, to fight them both again, but said if they fought he'd meet the winner. At that time there was much more of a demand for Ali-Norton IV than there was Ali-Young II. So with Ali sitting ringside jumping up and down every time Norton threw a punch, Norton won a controversial split decision to become Ali's mandatory challenger. Only Ali had another plan. He signed to defend the title against the 7-0 Olympic champ Leon Spinks. Before Ali-Spinks, both Muhammad and Leon signed an agreement that the winner would meet Norton in their next fight. After Spinks upset Ali, he turned down half a million dollars to face Norton and went ahead and signed to defend the title against Ali for three million. That triggered the WBC to strip Spinks of their version of the title and award it to Norton based on him beating Young.

Three months before Ali and Spinks met for a second time, Norton defended his WBC title against their top ranked undefeated challenger, Larry Holmes. When Holmes and Norton met, Holmes got off to a fast start in what was the most action packed heavyweight title fight since

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the "Thrilla In Manila." Norton began to come on in the fight starting around the seventh or eighth round. After 14 rounds the fight was 7-7 on all three officials cards. Round 15 turned out to be one for the ages with unbelievable back and forth action. When it was over, two judges favored Holmes and one saw it for Norton. Therefore, Norton lost his third title bout via a one-point split decision. Nine months later Norton was stopped by Earnie Shavers in another WBC title elimination bout and that was pretty much it for the vintage Ken Norton that most remember.

I know this is not politically correct, but I just can't regard Ken Norton as a former heavyweight champion. No more than anyone can refer to former stellar Mexican light heavyweight contender Yaqui Lopez a former champ, as he was 0-4 in light heavyweight title bouts. What I can say is Ken Norton was an outstanding heavyweight fighter who would've been a top contender during any era and maybe even a champion in other eras. Like former number one contender Jerry Quarry, Norton was cursed by something he had no control of, his birth certificate. It was his misfortune to have to challenge three of the five or six greatest heavyweight champs in history, Ali, Foreman and Holmes, during their tenure as champion. And in two of those title bouts it came down to the last round.

Let's not forget that Ken Norton, who was probably influenced by his friend and stablemate Joe Frazier, wasn't the least bit in awe or intimidated by Muhammad Ali. Ali tried hard to unravel Norton during the years 1973-76 but to no avail.

Also, it says a lot about what a great athlete and fast learner Norton was being that he started boxing late and didn't turn pro until he was 24 years old, yet he was a factor and top contender during one of the deepest eras in heavyweight history. He also kept himself in great shape and never disrespected the sport of boxing or any of his opponents.

No, Ken Norton wasn't without flaws as a fighter. He tended to be a frontrunner and had his trouble with the bigger punchers of the era, not counting Cooney since he was well past his prime in 1981. His unorthodox style served him well against the better boxers of his era (Ali, Young and Holmes) and stamina was never an issue for him. Aside from beating Ali, his biggest win was over the undefeated Duane Bobick, who he stopped in the first round. And he did it at a time when Bobick was being groomed as Ali's next "white hope" challenger. As a fighter Norton was terrific.

And though he never was a champion or won a title fight, he was a champion in the way he

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went about his life and how he treated others. He also won the biggest fight of his life out of the ring when he survived a car accident when he went over a cliff and almost died. He had to learn to walk and talk all over again. And that's bigger than any heavyweight title fight. Norton retired with a career record of 42-7-1 (33).

Rest in peace Ken Norton, and thanks for the chapters and memories you helped author during the greatest era in professional heavyweight boxing!

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### **Radam G says:**

Great piece! But we cannot undo history. The late, near-great Ken Norton is in the annals of history as the WBC Heavyweight Champion of the World. It came not by fighting -- but by corruption of an alphabet sanctioning organization. But that is how the cookie crumbles. And we have to deal with it just like any bad decision.

Officially Kenny Norton held a legit world title, just as much as Gerald Ford held the U.S. Presidency, but never won a U.S. presidential election. KN followed the rules. He did not make 'em. We cannot water him down now. Or we will have to go after a whole of labeled champions. Holla!

### **The Shadow says:**

Nice piece. No fluff, no revisionist butt-kissing history, just keepin' it real. And that's how I think the man would've liked it. BIG UP!