Written by Ron Borges
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The Smoke faded away Monday night but Joe Frazier never will.

For as long as there are fighters and people who respect them there will be the memory of Smokin' Joe, adorned in baggy green shorts, launching a left hook thrown with as many bad intentions as any man ever had.

On the receiving end of it was Muhammad Ali, knocked on his back when that hook landed and taking much of the dreams of America's youthful revolutionaries with him back in 1971. Ali was, as he remains today, a myth as well as a legend but he would have been less of both had there never been Smokin' Joe to battle with.

Frazier went to his grave resenting Ali, who he befriended when Ali was in exile only to see him make a fool of him with insults, crude denigrations of who he was as a man and an accusation most foul that he was an Uncle Tom. Nothing could have been farther from the truth and Ali knew it but he was a salesman first, sometimes a cruel one. That was something Frazier never understood.

Frazier passed away Monday night at 67, losing the final fight of his life as we all do. The final years were not kind, Frazier battling financial ruin, loss and family feuds as well as the long shadow of Ali. What he never seemed to grasp was that while he was never Ali that didn't really matter because he was his own legend.

If you went to north Philadelphia to visit Joe Frazier late in his life above the gym he owned one thing struck you immediately. Looming everywhere in his living quarters was a massive blown up photograph of Ali going down, his eyes glassy and his face looking befuddled as he crashed to the canvas at Madison Square Garden that cold March night.

It loomed not only over that room but also over Joe Frazier all his life. It was sad that it did but it was also his moment: 15th round, Ali falling, Frazier's hand being raised.

It was the only night Frazier beat Ali, something he could not do in their next two meetings. What he could do though was give Ali hell every time, especially in that vicious third confrontation in Manila when both of them took away from the other pieces of them that would never be replaced.

"Closest thing to dying that I know of,'' Ali would later say of that night and who would argue with him? Not even Frazier.

When that night ended Ali was barely able to move as he lay on a rubbing table, blood in his urine for weeks after from the force of that Frazier hook to the body striking him time and again. Nearly by lay Frazier, nearly blind, his eyes punched shut by Ali's jab.

Eddie Futch had stopped the fight after 14 rounds despite Frazier's protests saying, "Son, they'll never forget what you did here tonight.'' Eddie Futch was a wise man because they have not.

Long after the smoke has faded Smokin' Joe's memory will remain. Frazier had always been an undersized heavyweight with a concussive left hook and an iron resolve. He was a fighter who

knew only one direction – forward – wading through hell and high water to get to you. When he arrived you remembered it.

Born in Beaufort, S.C. into a sharecropper's family, Frazier was the furthest thing on earth from an Uncle Tom. He lived what would later be called "the Black Experience'' from the cellar up, a victim of racism in the South and then poverty in the north.

The way he got out of all that was the way he lived his life. He fought his way out, winning a gold medal at the 1964 Olympics and six years later knocking out Jimmy Ellis to become heavyweight champion.

No one, not even Ali, could take any of those things away from him. He was a hard man who didn't know what it meant to take a backward step and so when it went bad with Ali he refused to forget.

Although from time to time he would seem to soften publicly there would always come a moment when the bile returned to the surface, as it did memorably at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta. Ali, stricken with Parkinson's Syndrome and a shaky shadow of all he once had been, stood with trembling hand as he tried to light the Olympic torch.

Later Frazier would say, "They should have thrown him in,'' meaning the glowing cauldron of fire beneath the flame. He never took it back.

He took no pleasure in Ali's illness, which has reduced him to silence in recent years, but he also felt no shame in saying, as he once did at an Olympic autograph session, "I'm the reason he is the way he is today.''

That is part of the compact men sign when they agree to become a prize fighter. They accept pain and inflict pain. It is their job. They are practitioners of the hurt business and no one ever delivered the hurt more enthusiastically than Smokin' Joe Frazier.

He's gone now, a cruel irony because who would have thought 10 or 15 years ago when the effects of Ali's Parkinson's first became evident that Smokin' Joe would disappear before Ali?

It doesn't matter though, because Muhammad Ali will never forget Joe Frazier and neither will anyone who ever saw him walking forward with those menacing eyes, a left hook cocked and waiting to let some smoke get in your eyes.

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ultimoshogun says:

[video]http://youtu.be/9z-3Teq9jT0[/video] A pretty cool tribute I found on youtube.

Radam G says:

Thanks for the tip, ultimoshogun. That was indeed a very cool tribute. Holla!