Written by Frank Lotierzo
Wednesday, 09 November 2011 16:36

"What it look like?" That was his way of saying hello, how are you. Yep, when former heavyweight champion "Smokin" Joe Frazier entered his gym on North Broad St. in Philadelphia circa 1977-82, that's how he greeted you. As the world now knows Joe passed away this week at the age of 67 from liver cancer. It's a sad day for the boxing community. Joe Frazier was a real fighter and represented everything that made boxing at one time a great and first tier sport, which everyone reading this knows is not the case today.

Joe Frazier is without a doubt one of the top-10 greatest heavyweight champions in boxing history, and probably falls somewhere in between six and 10. As a fighter, Joe certainly left his mark in the annals of heavyweight history. He had the best left-hook in the history of the division, he was also one of the best body punchers, with both hands, that the division has ever seen. Frazier was also the most unrelenting and tireless swarmer, regardless of weight, that you could ever hope to see and he carried his power late into the fight and got stronger as the bout progressed.

When you hear about a fighter cutting off the ring, the conversation begins and ends with

Frazier, just ask Muhammad Ali. Joe was hard to hit and was very underrated when the art of making an opponent miss and then making them pay is discussed. Frazier was at the head of the class when it came to slipping the jab while bobbing and weaving coming underneath his opponents' punches with heavy handed hooks and body shots.

Over the next few weeks there will be countless eulogies written on Joe Frazier, however, there will be some incorrect assumptions made that must be refuted and addressed. And the one that will be mentioned most often is that Joe took a lot of physical punishment and abuse during his career. In fact, I've already read where one Philadelphia writer wrote that "as much punishment as Frazier dished out, he absorbed twice as much." Are you kidding me! How could such a supposedly informed and respected writer state something so blatantly wrong?

The fact of the matter is, Joe Frazier endured significant punishment in perhaps only four or five of his 37 professional bouts, that's it. Don't take my word, go back and watch the fight films of his career. The reality is, Joe's face was only marked up after his three fights against Muhammad Ali and two fights versus George Foreman. Think about it, how many fighters lasted that long with Frazier and were competitive with him?

How many fighters can say they fought Frazier on even terms for what would be considered a long or damaging fight? The answer is two, Oscar Bonavena and Muhammad Ali. Joe was virtually unmarked at the end of both fights with Bonavena, and after having a little trouble with him in his 11th pro bout, Joe handled Oscar in their rematch two years later winning no less than 11 of the 15 rounds the fight went. Oscar was a very strong and physical fighter, but he was no life taker and certainly didn't beat Joe up or work him over. Sure, he got through cleanly on occasion, but not to the degree where anyone with clear vision would consider it sustained punishment, not at all.

Then there are the three fights with Muhammad Ali. The first and third were grueling and both fighters endured monumental punishment. But in reality, Muhammad probably endured more punishment than Joe did. As much as Ali hit Joe, Frazier was more slowed by the swelling around his eyes than the actual beating he sustained. In fact after Manila, Frazier managed to dance and party some at the post fight celebration while Ali sat there and then retired to his suite shortly afterward. And then there's George Foreman, who was too big and had the perfect style and artillery to beat Joe. But, the first fight only lasted five minutes and Joe was down six times and didn't suffer sustained punishment. In the rematch three years later, Joe stayed away from George for the first four rounds, then Foreman caught him in the fifth and the fight ended shortly thereafter.

The reality is Joe Frazier had four tough fights, Bonavena I & II and Ali I & III. The Foreman fights didn't last long enough to be that damaging. Hearing Bob Arum say on ESPN SportsCenter that Joe came forward and took a lot of punishment before he unleashed his left hook is a joke. No greater authority than Muhammad Ali refutes Arum's misstatement. It was after the third round of the "Fight Of The Century" that Ali went back to his corner and said to his trainer Angelo Dundee, "I thought this guy was supposed to be easy to hit, I can't find the SOB." Over the years Ali has often said that Joe Frazier was extremely hard to hit and no fighter made him miss more punches and combination's than he did.

Hopefully, those who dispute this will go back and watch Joe's bouts against Eddie Machen, Doug Jones, George "Scrap Iron" Johnson, George Chuvalo, Buster Mathis, Manuel Ramos, Jerry Quarry, Jimmy Ellis, Bob Foster, Ron Stander and Joe Bugner. Go back and watch those fights and see what Joe's face looked like during the post fight interview. He's virtually unmarked and not even breathing heavy.

Joe Frazier didn't take punches like Arturo Gatti or Chuck Wepner when he fought like it has been said over the years. It's a complete myth that he endured brutal punishment throughout his career. Joe was only out-gunned by Foreman, who is probably the strongest and most powerful heavyweight champ in history. Who wouldn't be out-gunned by Foreman circa 1973-76? The only time Frazier left the ring and looked like the loser were after his bouts with Muhammad Ali and George Foreman. This is not a matter of opinion, it's fact, the films don't lie.

Everything about Joe Frazier was understated except his left-hook. And let us never forget that Frazier won the biggest, most anticipated and comprehensively covered sporting event in history. Frazier-Ali I is no doubt the biggest sporting event of all time, and Frazier won it conclusively and refused to be denied. And if there was never a Joe Frazier, the legend of Muhammad Ali wouldn't be as iconic and deep as it is today. Joe forced Ali to be great and dig down deeper and go to the well more so than any other fighter he faced, and Ali's legend grew as a result of that.

Only one fighter can lay claim to winning the biggest fight of all time and take that to his grave forever, his name is "Smokin" Joe Frazier.

Comment on this article

Coxs Corner says:

All true. Smokin Joe was a bobbing, weaving machine that slipped inside, went relentless to the body and gave 3 minutes of work every round. His left hook was powerful and his victory over Ali in the Fight of the Century is something none of the other great swarmers (Dempsey, Marciano and Tyson) can claim to have anything on their record close to that level of achievement. Against Frazier you had to either, grab and hold or fight him off, he was a past master at cutting the ring and virtually impossible to box at range because he forced you to fight.

Radam G says:

Nice! Nice copy! No doubt that Smokin' Joe's defense was underrated. He was one hard sucka to hit. That great bobbing and weaving and head moving of his gave opponents fits. One after another opponent voiced how hard Smokin' Joe was to hit. But because of perceptions of him being a slugger -- and sluggers are allegedly easily to hit -- his great defense slipped off the radar screen. [No doubt it was above the talking heads' heads.]

Only [Rev.] "Big' George Foreman was able to hit da Smoke at will. And GOAT Ali was able to hit him a bit, but not without Smokin' Joe's left hook upside "Da Butterfly's torso and jaws being able to put one after another vicious kill. OH, YUP! For defense and offense, as a pugilist, Smokin Joe belongs on the mountain top, not just a hill.

OH! And did da Smoke bring the fans thrill after thrill. YES! INDEEDY! Not only has his adopted city of Philly been slow to acknowledge him completely and fully, the whole boxing community of experts and so-call experts are straight-up tardy. Wow! And it has always been said that more people don't get the rewards, awards, appreciations and thanks that should have gotten until they die. I guess that "The City Of Brotherly Love" will eventually put up that status of Smokin' Joe, and the boksing community and talking heads, experts and so-called ones will call him -- what he was -- one of the best offensive/defensive pugilist who ever step foot into that squared jungle.

I hear it now, even the late, great Howard Cosell has already started announcing from behind those Pearly Gates: "When I was in that temp life, I said 'Down goes Frazier!' But what I forgot to say is; 'Up rises, FRAZIER! Up rises, FRAZIER! Up rises, FRAZIER!'" [One could knock him down, but nobody could keep him down.]

I can now see Smokin' Joe ascending to the Eternal Kingdom, and Uncle Howie screaming out. "Up comes FRAZZZIIIEEERRR! Welcome Joe!" Holla!

Robert Curtis says:

Frank speaks truth! Got to cop to a mistake in my "Quote of Note". I'm flattered EM, but I forgot that the 2nd fight was a 12 rounder, not 15. It went the distance, if 12 was really distance back then. Why 12? What's the story behind that? I'd love to get an understanding of that transition from 15 to 12, or even the move from all those endless rounds they boxed in the past.

dino da vinci says:

@ Robert Curtis. It was a scheduled 12 rounder because it was for the NABF (North American Boxing Federation) title. A regional title akin to the USBA. It was prestigious back then because you only had two sanctioning bodies. Hence, it wasn't for a world title. ALSO: great job, Frank.***CC as well. ***And, good people, let us not forget that TSS is home to the Radam G Factor. Or simply "The R Factor" as it's known throughout the fight game. Ah well, either way, he's on the short list vying to stake claim to "greatest living poster". Always a great read!

Robert Curtis says:

Thanks, Dino Da Vinci. The Radam Factor has always given me endless and immense pleasure here on TSS. I know he annoys some folks(or maybe that was his clone in the old days). I'm just happy I can make R-factor laugh once in a while.