Written by Frank Lotierzo
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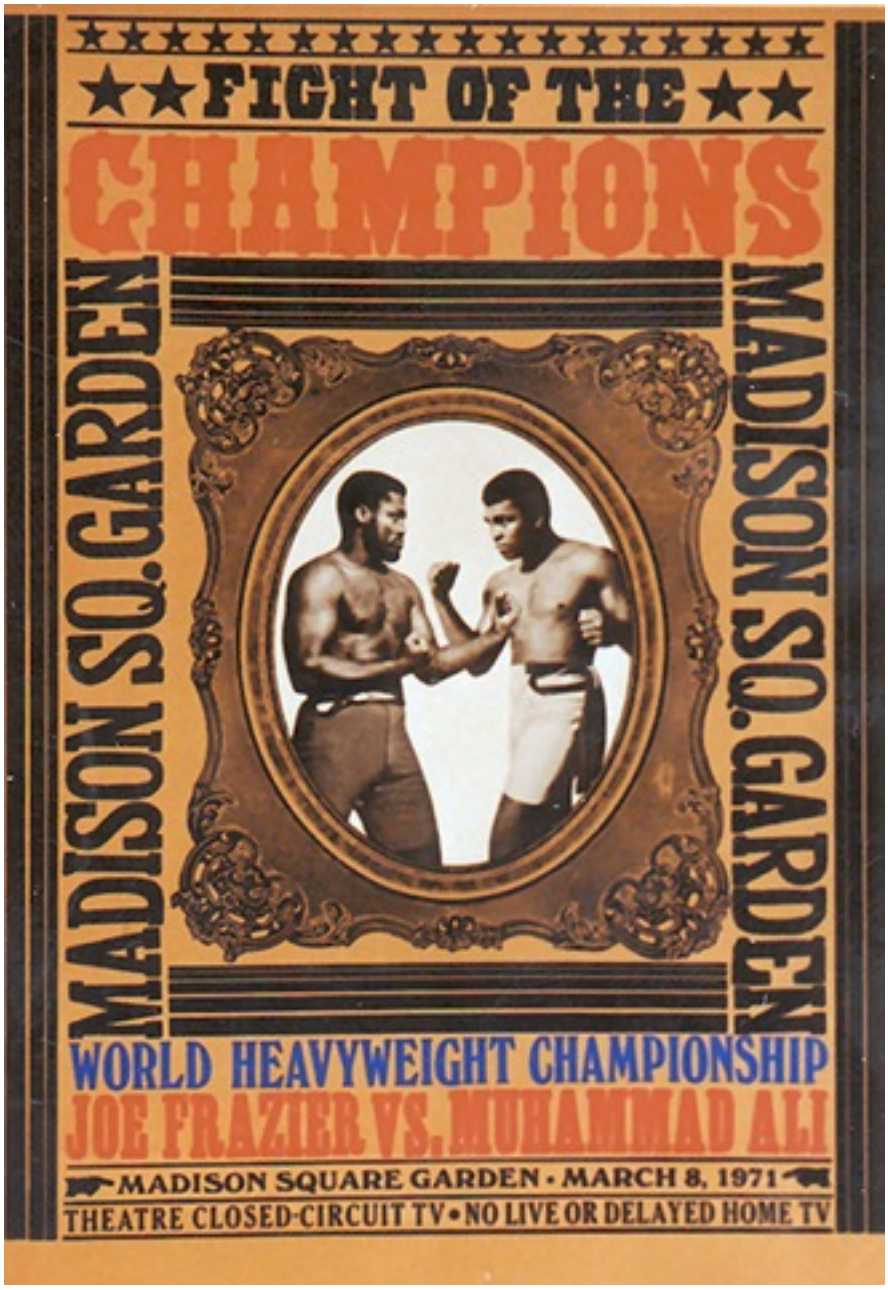

On Monday night March 8th 1971, the best catch-n-kill style attacker, "Smokin" Joe Frazier 26-0 (23), met the fastest, flashiest and best moving and most natural boxer to ever grace the heavyweight division, Muhammad Ali 31-0 (25). The bout was appropriately called the "Fight Of The Century." And for 15 grueling and fast paced rounds the FOTC surely lived up to its billing. As it turned out it was one of those rare super-fights in which the realization exceeded the expectation. And to this day 40 plus years later, Frazier-Ali I is the super-fight by which all super-fights are measured.

Never have two more skilled heavyweights faced each other in the ring for the title while both were at or near their physical prime as was the case for the FOTC. That statement may tweak

some fans of Muhammad Ali because he was only five months into his comeback after his forced three and a half year exile due to his refusal to be inducted into the Unites States Army because he was a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War. But I defy anyone to find a single bout of Ali's pre or post exile where he punched with more combined speed and power, especially during the first five rounds, than he did during the FOTC. Ali was cat-quick and hit with real authority because he had no choice since he had a wrecking machine in front of him by the name of Joe Frazier. Joe forced Ali to fight at a pace and tempo that he hadn't before ever had to, and Muhammad answered the call.

Since Frazier's passing last week it's been often repeated that Joe took part in the greatest heavyweight title bout in history, the "Thrilla In Manila" which was the third and final meeting between he and Ali. And if you conducted a poll among boxing purist as to what was the greatest fight in heavyweight title history, it's pretty safe to say that Ali-Frazier III (The Thrilla In Manila) would finish at the top of the list. And that's not easily refuted. That being said, the FOTC was the better fight and is the one you'd show a new boxing fan if you wanted them to fully appreciate what professional boxing looks like at the highest level.

When heavyweight champ Muhammad Ali, 33, defended his undisputed title against Joe Frazier, 31, back in the fall of 1975, both greats were on the decline. They were both 10 pounds heavier than they were four years early when they clashed for the first time in New York's Madison Square Garden. No doubt the "Thrilla In Manila" was a brutal fight that lasted 14 rounds and saw both fighters beat each other to near death. However, in reality it was three fights in one. For the first four or five rounds Ali was in complete control and really shook Joe good, almost putting him down. Then starting around the end of the fifth round and clearly by the beginning of the sixth, Frazier started working Ali over to the head and body with massive lefts hooks and right hands. Joe continued cleaning up on Muhammad until the early part of the 12th round when Ali got what seemed to be his third or fourth second wind.

In rounds 13 and 14 Ali hit Frazier at will and it looked almost like target practice. At the end of the 14th round Joe could barely make it back to his corner. When Joe told trainer Eddie Futch that he couldn't see Ali's right hands because of the swelling around his eyes and face, Futch stopped the fight and concluded the greatest rivalry in sports history with the record books documenting Ali as the winner and holding a 2-1 nod over his bitter rival and career nemesis.

As great of a fight as the "Thrilla In Manila" was for its sheer brutality, the fact of the matter is, neither Ali or Frazier had any defensive skills left and couldn't miss each other. When Muhammad managed to keep Joe on the outside, he was defenseless and was picked apart. Yet once Frazier got inside he punished Ali and was in command. When Ali went on the attack,

Frazier clearly got the worst of it, and once Ali needed a breather, Joe took over the fight. During the bout neither fighter was terribly accurate at a time when they both lacked head and upper body movement. And as the bout progressed it looked as though making the opponent miss was something unheard of to them. Both fighters had slowed down significantly since their first fight, but yet still couldn't get out of the way from the Sunday punches they launched at each other.

Contrast that to the "Fight Of The Century" which was fought at warp speed with both fighters showing brilliant offensive and defensive skills throughout the bout. There were times during FOTC that Ali actually won the inside exchanges just as there were patches of the fight that saw Frazier better Ali from the outside. Also, the punching power and accuracy exhibited by both fighters during the FOTC was superior to that to which was on display in "Manila."

During the FOTC Ali looked at times as though he was on the verge of taking complete control of the fight, at least during rounds one through 10, only to find himself with his back pinned against the ropes and looking as if he was at the end of the road in the subsequent round. Also during their first fight, Joe made Ali look like an amateur at times due to his bobbing and weaving as he constantly made Ali's punch down as his left jabs and follow up right hands sailed above or past Joe's head.

For 10 rounds the fight was contested pretty much evenly. Then with a minute left in the 11th round Frazier nailed Ali with a double left hook to the body and then to the head. The punch hurt Ali so badly that he was falling all over the ring for the rest of the round and appeared to be within a punch or two from Joe finishing him.

Joe's aggression and determination that night was a thing to behold. He physically forced Ali to raise his game to a level he'd hadn't ever dreamed of before. And because of the great athlete and super competitor Ali was, he managed to stay in the fight until 24 seconds into the 15th and final round when a desperate Ali was set to throw a right uppercut at the incoming Frazier, only to be beaten to the punch by Frazier's big left hook that caught him on the point of his chin and dropped him as if he were shot. Ali was up at the count of four, but other than a brief flurry with a minute left in the round, Frazier won the round and sealed the fight in his favor via a unanimous decision.

As for sheer brutality, I suppose the Manila fight gets the nod, but that's the only advantage you could give it. The "Fight Of The Century" was damn near as brutal, it was fought at a faster pace

and also saw each fighter land some of the hardest and most accurate single shots and combinations either ever threw on any night of their career. It also had more drama and suspense and both fighters were great that night. In Manila they exhibited toughness and determination more than anything else.

If you put both fights on a split screen and watched each round together, your eyes would be drawn to the side of the screen that was showing the "FOTC." And that's because it was everything the "Thrilla" was and then some. Yes, Joe Frazier did partake in the greatest heavyweight title bout in history, and it's correctly known as the "Fight Of The Century," and he won it.

I can't help but think the reason why the "Thrilla In Manila" is thought of as being a greater fight than the "Fight of The Century" by many fans is because Muhammad Ali won in "Manila" and lost the "Fight Of The Century." In addition to that, the "Thrilla In Manila" has been shown much more often on TV because ESPN owns the rights to it. Jerry Perenchio owns the rights to the "Fight Of The Century" and it hasn't been on TV since the summer of 1990.

The "Fight Of The Century" had everything you could ever ask for in a great title bout. The "Thrilla In Manila" was maybe the most brutal and physically taxing heavyweight title fight ever, but for the reasons stated above, it ranks right behind the "Fight Of The Century" on the list of the greatest heavyweight championship bouts of all time.

Comment on this article

Radam G says:

From my view of actually witnessing heavyweight matches in the late, late 20 Century, and seeing films of about the first 73 years of that century, I will easily conclude that FOTC in New York was the heavyweight-skilled thrilling bout of the century. Holla!

Coxs Corner says:

Great job Frank comparing the two fights. Nice read.

mortcola says:

Nailed it.

the Roast says:

I was four in '71 so I say.... Bowe-Holyfield 1.

Radam G says:

WTF! OMG! The Roast, I was neither a seed nor a thought. Just a little none "Rapido" in whatever da fudge dat is before I started to get on my peepee. I musta' fo'got! Hehehehehe!

the Roast says:

I have seen the fight Radam but not for a loooong time. My Dad used to have a 8mm copy. We used to watch it on the living room wall. It's one thing to watch a fight on tape already knowing the outcome and quite different to watch it live with your heart pounding, your eyes popping out, sitting on the edge of your seat.

brownsugar says:

I was listening on the radio,... by myself,.. being torn between agony and exaltation after every round. My heart sank after Ali was decked. The fight was so close everyone knew that single left hook sealed the deal. But Ali rose above the moment,... he was still jovial and warm hearted,.. Ali gave Joe his congratulations and respect, Then he told his fans,.. "I'll all right and I will be back". The way he said it I knew it would be a long time before he tasted defeat again.

Yes Joe was magnificent that nignt,... but what is more miraculous is that Ali was able to perform on that level after 3 and a half years off..... I was a championship wrestler in high school, and after dicking around after graduation for a year I went to the gym help my old coach High School Coach train some of the newbies on day..... on a request and to work up a good sweat. Those kids nearly handed me my arse. Layoffs are so very hard to overcome..any athlete who has ever performed at the top level will tell you.....it was miraculous that Ali was able to perform so well after his lengthy ban from boxing....I was impressed when Mayweather did it... but Ali was out of the ring nearly twice as long.

sometimes I watch old vids of Holmes, Ali,.. etc.....
it's amazing to see these guys go toe to toe for 9 or 10 hard rounds and then start dancing from rounds 10-15 to change up the strategy,.. today guys barely even plod effectively for that long. I didn't say that to start a debate, or to bash todays fighters...just making an observation about the lost athleticism from the heavyweight division. (check out Holmes vs Shavers #1 as an example)

Radam G says:

Danggit! Show you what I know. Nowhere close to everything, as some TSS readers vent. I didn't know that live boksing bouts or any sports where still broadcasted on the radio in the 1970s. I thought that that was some real 1930-to-about-1955 puglistic spittin!' Wow! Services me right for not studying about the evolution of radio. Wow! B-Sug was literally an earwitness of

the original FOTC. Holla!

Condor says:

On top of that Brownsugar, only 90 days earlier (approximately), Ali had just beaten Oscar Bonevena in a tough, tough, TOUGH 15 round fight (by TKO). In Hauser's biography of Ali, Pacheco is quoted as saying that Ali was BIG-TIME beaten up in that fight (despite dominating), but had no choice but to forge ahead (his court case still pending). In today's era, a guy would be off a year to 15 months after that. Maybe more. Maybe 2 years. But Ali jumped right back in against Frazier in the Spring. RIP Joe Frazier. Man, those were the days. Today is so different it might as well be a different language.

Condor says:

Correction: Ali by KO in 15.

Pacheco said: "Ali absorbed more punishment against Bonavena than he had in any previous fight; much more than people realized. Now, to try to put things in perspective. He hadn't fought in 3 and a half years. In October, he fought Quarry, which was a relatively easy fight. Then, in December with no rest in between, he fought Bonavena and took something of a beating even though he was clearly the better fighter. Now he'd fought himself back into shape, and what he should have done was let his body recuperate. Train for 4 or 5 months, then go after Joe Frazier. Given time to get himself right, he would have beaten Frazier in their first fight. But the money was there; the opportunity was there. And Ali didn't know if he'd be fighting or in jail in 4 or 5 months, so he went after it."

Thomas Hauser - Ali, His Life and Times (page 216)

FighterforJC says:

What's the big deal about Ali's exile? Vitali Klitschko was gone for just as long and came back just as strong and dominated. Genetically superior, baby!

brownsugar says:

@ Radam the fight was being shown on closed circut tv,.. I know you heard of it,.. they projected the fight in Movie theatre's all around town on the big screen. But the cost was a bit prohibitive for me,.. a kid who was making an income shoveling snow, cutting grass, and doing odd jobs at the barbershop. But it was just like being there.... Cosell and the boxing personalities he always brings with him to help him lend authenticiy while calling the big fights was phenomenal, It was just like being there. BETTER THAN IMAX LOL!!

brownsugar says:

@Condor, that's a fantastic perpective... and one that's been lost thru the ages.. Bonavena was tough as nails,.. I heard he could drive nails thru wood with his bare hands... Sounds like you

were around during the Golden Era,... great insight!

Radam G says:

I knew about the closed circuit television and movie theatres, B-Sug. But not the radio. The CCTV and MT were still around when I was a kid in the middle to late 70s and 80s. Wow! But radio sound so ancient to me for the early 70s. I'll never heard a radio except for while in a car. Dude, I'm visual and da sound like a muthaseers-with-sound. Holla!

brownsugar says:

LOL.... I know.... it almost sounds like the 1940's lol.