Written by Frank Lotierzo
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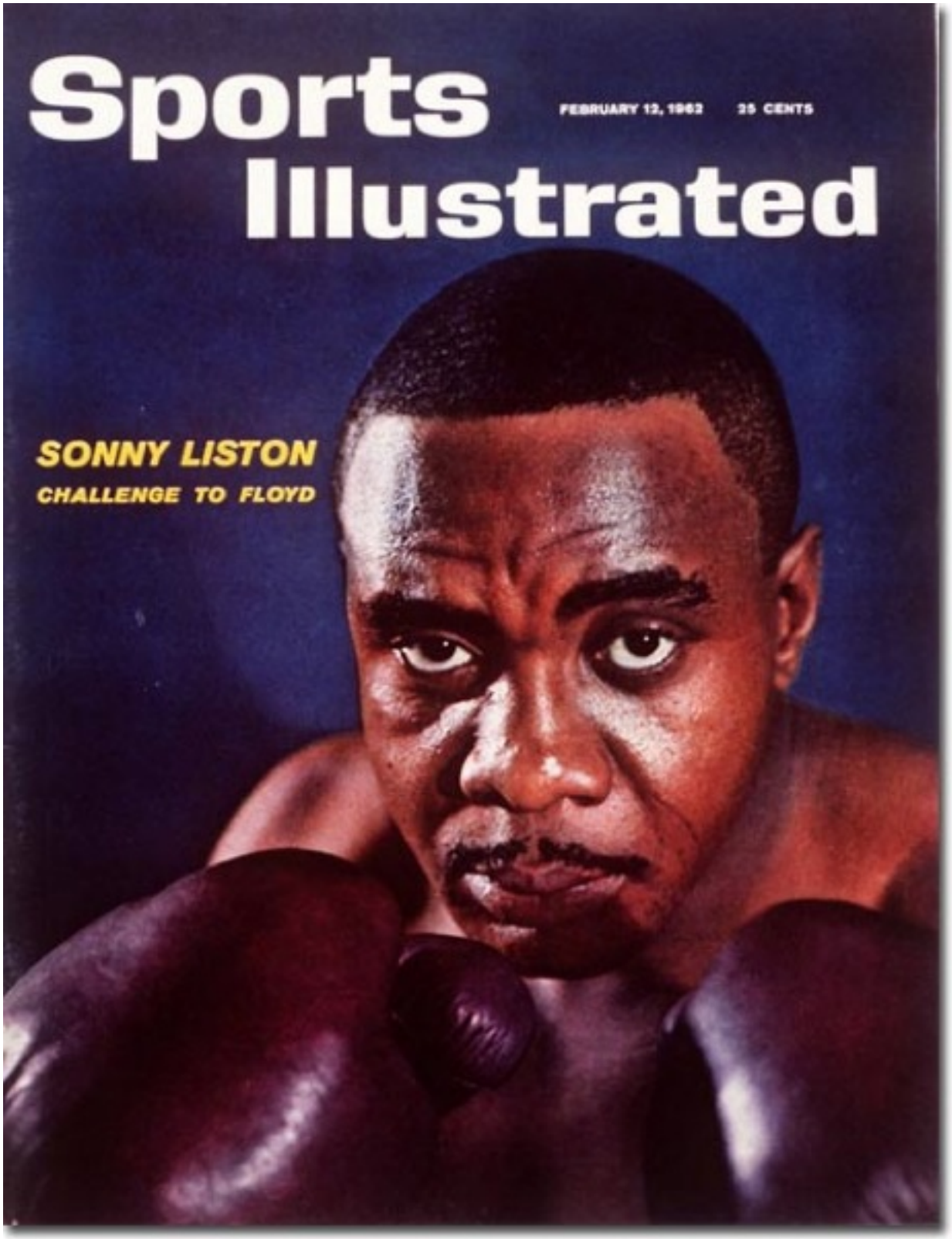

For a couple years before he fought Cassius Clay/Muhammad Ali, former heavyweight champion Sonny Liston was thought of by some boxing insiders as being if not greater than Joe Louis, at the worst, the greatest heavyweight since Louis. Sonny destroyed everything across the ring from him on his way to his title shot against Floyd Patterson in September of 1962. And

once Liston had Patterson in the ring he only needed two minutes to relieve him of his title. Then in July of 1963 he repeated the feat needing only four more seconds to dispatch a better strategically prepared Patterson. And in reality, Liston was probably three years past his prime by the time he challenged Floyd for the title.

Then Cassius Clay came along and as a 7-1 underdog and upset Sonny and the rest became history. Today, fifty years after Liston took the title from Patterson, his legacy is all but forgotten and Clay, who became Muhammad Ali after beating Liston, is regarded as the greatest heavyweight champion in history. And yes, a lot of that is based on him beating the invincible and unbeatable Liston.

As most fans know, there's a lot of speculation that Liston dumped both fights against Ali. I'm not going to go into that. Personally, despite being told different by those who were around Liston at that time, I believe an ill trained and eroded Liston lost to Clay legitimately the first time, and went into the tank for the rematch against Ali 15 months later. Also, based on their styles and physicality, Liston, who may have demolished Ali foe "Smokin" Joe Frazier and also handled the human wrecking machine George Foreman, didn't match up with Ali. Muhammad had the style, size, speed, strength, chin and mental constitution to beat Liston if both were at their best.

So in essence it's the two fights with Ali that tarnished Liston's perception and reputation. And that's wrong. For the record, Liston is one of the top five greatest heavyweight champs in history, regardless of whether you use his record and resume or you concentrate on what he brought to the ring as a professional fighter.

As a fighter, Liston could box, cut off the ring, slip the jab, parry the right and hit with both hands. He was strong as a bull, punched effortlessly and had a cast iron chin. No doubt Sonny was a born fighter. He never got wild or spaghetti armed, and he kept the pressure on. Fighters who tried to box him either lost every round or didn't survive to hear the final bell. And those who tried to take it to him, like Cleveland Williams, Nino Valdez and Mike DeJohn, were taken apart and knocked out.

Liston was also a tremendous boxer who was fundamentally sound and hard to hit. Sonny had a great left jab that he used both offensively and defensively. Everything he did started with his jab. He pressured his opponents from behind it and forced them to deal with his 84 inch reach. His jab came out straight and even when he missed, which was seldom, his usually retreating

opponent was out of position to launch a counter attack. Sonny's high guard and partially extended left hand covered his center beautifully and therefore his opponents were forced to punch around his left hand when they felt the gumption to go on the attack, which made it easy for Sonny to redirect their jab and punch inside of it. And unlike every other big puncher and aggressive heavyweight, Liston had no problem moving backward when he need to.

Another Liston tactic was to hook off the jab, which usually forced his opponents into his right hand. He was also able to get close and work his iron-fisted uppercuts from both sides on the inside. And because he held his guard tight and his elbows close to his body, he was hard to hold and move around, simply because there wasn't any body part to grab. And if you opened your arms and tried to wrap him up, he could take your head off coming up the middle.

Think about all the great heavyweight champs from John L. Sullivan up to the Klitschko brothers. How many can it be said about that they were both a great boxer and puncher? I would say after Joe Louis, is Liston, and a tier below them are Lennox Lewis along with Vitali and Wladimir Klitschko. And in all fairness, Lennox Lewis was a good boxer, but he could be forced to fight with his back to the ropes and then be held or he'd look for the referee to break the action. As for the Klitschkos, they're more than adequate boxers, but they rely more on their size and length to stymie their opponents, and offensively, they aren't very imaginative. What they do, they do well, but it's more driven by not making any mistakes and taking what's being given to them.

The only thing unimaginative about Sonny Liston was his pace. Sonny was aggressive, but he was measured in the way he pressed. He applied just enough pressure to where he forced his opponents to react, but not too fast to where he couldn't see every escape route they had.

Liston 50-4 (39), who stood a shade under 6'1" and weighed between 215-218 in his prime, is one of the top five greatest heavyweight champs in history. He would've mutilated swarmers who brought the fight to him, like Dempsey, Marciano, Frazier and Tyson. He was too polished and refined for punchers/sluggers the likes of Max Baer, James Jeffries and maybe even George Foreman. As for boxer-punchers like Lennox Lewis and Vitali and Wladimir Klitschko, I could see him beating them using whatever style they chose to fight him. If they tried to box him, he'd force them to fight - and if they went at him, he'd force them back to trying to box him or they'd get beaten up or stopped in the process. In reality, only Muhammad Ali and Larry Holmes present Liston with a match-up problem.

And, finally, there's the issue of intimidation. Foreman and Tyson got a lot of mileage out of it, but Sonny was its undisputed champion. He didn't try to be intimidating: he was intimidating. Even a genuine tough guy like Chuck Wepner was candid about being undone by Sonny before their fight (and this was the ancient version of the former champion). When he felt the first punch, matters only got worse.

Because I think that Liston dumped the second Ali fight, it's worth taking a moment to look at the three fights that I believe Sonny lost legitimately. The first was against Marty Marshall, who got him to laugh, then broke his jaw. Sonny lost a split decision, then beat Marshall twice decisively. As an old man, he ran out of gas against the talented Leotis Martin, after beating Martin up for most of the fight. He got knocked out with a great shot. That leaves the first Ali fight. History has distorted some facts about the fight. Lost in the myth about it is the fact that, at the time of the stoppage, the fight was even on the scorecards. So think about it this way: an older than advertised, badly trained, and too confident Liston lost to a prime version of the greatest (and certainly the fastest) champion the division has ever had. It's hard to speculate on what might have happened if a younger, more motivated Sonny had had a chance against the same Ali. I won't say Liston would have won. But I won't say it's a given he would have lost either.

Other than that, Liston went through everyone he ever fought. And he fought everyone willing to fight him. He destroyed all the contenders who Floyd Patterson avoided; his ascension to a title shot came from there being literally no one he hadn't beaten. But Liston came up at the wrong time. There was simply no place for him. In today's market of bad guy notoriety, he'd be a superstar—the most emulated fighter on earth. Boxing could desperately use a Sonny Liston today. But there'll never be another heavyweight anywhere close.

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Comment on this article

ultimoshogun says:

Good stuff F-Lo!

Radam G says:

Super archmaster pugilistic scribe F-Lo masterweaved some sweet, mean copy. And I don't have a retort, because Sonny "Night Train" Liston was a super @ss-whuppin' mofu! Oh , YUP! I

heard the stories and saw the films. Enough spit! I'm not gonna mess with _ _ __ _! Holla!

brownsugar says:

Move over Toledo,... Flo Lo is closing fast.

Boudicca says:

There is no race, brownsugar. Lotierzo is unquestionably solid and prolific, but Toledo is a poet. Two very different styles, too different for comparison.

brownsugar says:

Thanks for your opinion Boudicca, ... my comment was a genuine compliment(the best I could give under the circumstances), not a writing contest promotion. If comparing Flo Lo to Springs is the ultimate compliment, you should feel good that Springs is the Gold Standard,... not like you have to protect him. That wasn't the intent of the comment.