

***** WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP *****
- 15 RDS - YANKEE STADIUM - TUES. SEPT 20 -

ROCKY
MARCIANO
- VS -
JOE LOUIS
NO TELEVISION.

PEAK-FOR-PEAK...WHO WINS?

After Rocky Marciano bludgeoned his way to the heavyweight throne in 1952, trainer Charley Goldman reportedly claimed him as his *second* heavyweight champion. Twelve years earlier, Arturo Godoy used a low-crouching, crowding style that Goldman had taught him to embarrass Joe Louis for fifteen rounds. Godoy lost a split decision, though one judge gave him all but five

Dreamland Ring Wars: Rocky Marciano vs. Joe Louis: A Peak-for-Peak Analysis

Written by Springs Toledo

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rounds and many agreed that a new champion should have been crowned that night. “The way he fights he was too hard to hit,” Louis explained. “I could’ve hurt my hands hitting the top of his head.”

“It was my worst fight,” he added.

The rematch was different. Seconds after the opening bell, Godoy rushed into range and Louis planted his feet and fired uppercuts. He positioned his hands inside of the grabbing gloves to find the middle, landing hard shots that sap the spirit. By the seventh round, Godoy could only stumble forward, blinded by his own blood, and Louis knew exactly what to do. He stepped backward and pivoted around with perfect uppercuts and short hooks to bring an artful end to an erstwhile annoyance.

“That was the worst beating I ever gave a man,” he said afterward. The copy editors had a field day coming up with headlines: “Louis, Back in Business as Murder, Inc” said one. “Beating of Godoy Resembled a Bull Fight” said another, more to the point.

CROWD CONTROL

In 1940, while the Louis camp was busy repelling and reanalyzing the odd style of Godoy, sixteen-year-old Rocco Marchegiano was playing baseball at the James Edgar Playground in Brockton, Massachusetts. He was a catcher who batted clean-up. Seven years later, he walked into Stillman’s Gym in Manhattan and clobbered a professional in the second round as Goldman and Godoy watched. Goldman took a look at his tree trunk legs and taught him the same low-crouching, crowding style he had taught Godoy.

By the time Marciano faced a comebacking Louis in 1951, his curious pose would thwack nostalgic to the ex-champion. Louis was thirty-seven and sporting a bald spot that said it all. He was diminished in every category save one—his physical strength, and yet Marciano, despite being outweighed by twenty-five pounds, bulled him to the ropes as easily as Godoy had. Louis was in trouble from the opening bell. He no longer had the timing and reflexes of his youth but with two decades of experience behind him, he could detect patterns and adjust accordingly. In the third round, he began stepping back after punching and Marciano’s fearsome “Suzie Q” became a whistling wind. When he saw Marciano’s habit of slipping to the outside of jabs, he

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turned his jab over into a hook to meet the predictable slip. Despite these adjustments and despite the fact that he won two of the first five rounds, Louis showed signs of breaking down early.

The fourth round is a snapshot of the quandary that was Marciano. Louis may have won the round on all three judges' scorecards but the film shows him constantly forced backward and on the defensive. He's not dictating the pace, he's not in control; he's not even the puncher. He's fighting like a man trying to hold off a crowd—valiant and doomed. At one point he tries to shove Marciano back, but Marciano's legs are spread and he doesn't move. And that's the story: Marciano's attack was as psychological as it was inexorable. Old Joe survives until the eighth round, when he is unceremoniously knocked through the ropes and lay frozen in time; his head hanging over the ring apron, his right foot dangling daintily on the bottom rope. All at once, cameras explode, the fight is called, and hands appear from everywhere to help the fallen hero.

When great, aging fighters crash down, the world seems to stop. It is they themselves who break the silence; and they tend to say the same thing. "I saw the right coming," said Louis in the dressing room, "but I couldn't do anything about it."

A peaking version of Louis (*circa* 1939-1941) would have done something about it. He would have fired more counter shots and combinations while managing to avoid most of the overhands that Marciano was slinging throughout the first half of the Fifties. The quandary, though, would remain. Trainer Jack Blackburn, who died in 1942, made critical adjustments for the Godoy rematch in 1940; however, it's a stretch to assume these adjustments would have been successful against Marciano. Godoy weakened by the seventh round. Marciano wouldn't weaken. Unlikely to ever lose a test of wills, he seemed to get stronger as fights wore on and opponents wore out. Louis would have been faster and with Blackburn in his corner, better informed, and yet a good handicapper would set odds against him anyway.

ZOOMING IN

As technically proficient as he was at every range, Louis would not be the dominant force in close. Marciano had a way of leaning into his opponent like some fabled strong man pushing a boulder over a cliff, or a fighter over a hill. He'd use his arms as barriers to prevent escape and lock his gloves inside the crook of the arm to stop offense—all the while pushing, pushing forward. Louis did not and would not try to outmuscle Marciano; the trainer who built him insisted on economy of motion and cautioned against wasting energy. This explains why Louis

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can be seen with his back on the ropes punching with discipline or spinning out against Godoy; he was a machine programmed for a strict, one-track purpose. He does not wrestle. Against Marciano, he would allow himself to be moved backward to the ropes and squared up, which would make him a wider target and compromise his offense. It's a dangerous concession.

Louis's best chance would be to command center-ring while taking full steps backwards. He'd have to rely on his balance to make those steps launching pads for counters, and those counters should be horizontal instead of vertical. In other words, uppercuts, though lethal when thrown by such a puncher, are not advisable here. They tend to leave a rather large window unshuttered and Marciano knew how to put a rock through it: he anticipated them and was ever-ready to counter over the top. Louis's willingness to open up on Godoy to "bring him up" from his crouch would be riskier against Marciano, who was at his best in exchanges—particularly when the chin he was aiming for was something less than his own. However, Marciano was less prepared for short left hooks. With his head low and his right hand positioned more to the front of his chin, he had trouble seeing and blocking them as he pushed forward. Louis would want to pivot off the hook to his left to get outside of the looping right, set up his own straight right, and work in a circle.

Zeroing-in on Marciano is easier said than done. Besides presenting a low target and burrowing under stand-up fighters and their line of fire, he was given an array of subtle skills that could only have come from one of boxing's true masterminds. He was taught to anticipate the return after punching and move his head automatically and accordingly to get into position to counter the counter shot. He learned to ride incoming jabs by shifting his weight backward onto his right leg and then spring in with a counter that felt like a kitchen sink. Awkward, short-armed, and prone to throw wildly from too far away, Goldman taught him to shift his weight forward with the momentum of a missed shot and then follow up with something harder from somewhere closer. This is better than mere balance-recovery because Marciano's missed shots—his mistakes—could conceivably double the impact of what was coming next.

Goldman reminded everyone that Marciano hit considerably harder than Godoy. "The great thing about this kid is he's got leverage," he told A.J. Liebling. "He takes a good punch and he's got the equalizers." Joe Rein watched Marciano spar at Stillman's. "To see him punch," he told *Sports Illustrated*, "it was like he was lobbing paving stones." Indeed, that deep weave wasn't simply to get under an opponent's offense; it powered-up his own enough to send much larger men reeling backward. It's a critical point. Before the opponent could recover either his wits or his balance, Marciano would be at his chest grinding away and throwing right hooks to the flank and left uppercuts to the sternum. Few men anywhere near his weight would have the strength to resist his low-centered power thrusts and fewer still would have the speed of foot to step back out of range, counter, and then spin off before he pinned them on the ropes.

Joe Louis isn't among them. He was not stronger than Marciano and his mobility was efficient, deliberate—and not fast enough. He was a thinking fighter who worked off the jab and tried to blast through the back of an opponent's head. It made for a compelling spectacle when he was stalking opponents and closing the distance on his own terms, but Marciano would concede nothing. Marciano was too stingy a fighter to allow either room to punch or time to mull things over. "It is very hard to think," cutman Freddie Brown quipped, "when you are getting your brains knocked out."

Boxing historians and fans watch clips of Louis's knockouts, compelling spectacles all, and are rightfully astonished. Many are astonished enough to deny an odds-busting truth of boxing: *Styles make fights*.

To be sure, Louis had the ability to handle almost any style. He could be counted on to overcome modern giants, flatten punchers, and, contrary to popular myth, search out and destroy mobile boxers. "If he runs, will you chase him?" Louis was asked before his rematch with Billy Conn. His classic response ("He can run, but he can't hide") isn't just a good outline, it rings with truth. Louis had trouble with one style in particular and he knew it: "I had a bad weakness I kept hid throughout my career. I didn't like to be crowded, and Marciano always crowded his opponents. That's why I say I could never have beaten him." For a man who said Muhammad Ali would have been just another "bum of the month," this admission reveals much.

Peak-for-peak, Rocky Marciano should be favored to defeat Joe Louis by late round stoppage.

X FACTORS

Boxing is a party often crashed by unforeseen circumstances. There are several that could skew or even reverse the result of this match, including the following:

1) *The timing of the bout*. After his first clash with Godoy, it was plain to everyone that Louis was unsure of just how to penetrate or cope with the unfamiliar style in front of him. "We found out this one got to be handled different," Blackburn admitted. "We know now." Marciano's attack only appeared to be similar to Godoy's; it was far more debilitating and allowed no learning curve. If a prime Louis fights Marciano and isn't sharp, he loses badly. If he fights him at any point on or before the night he first faced Godoy, his chance of winning would be further diminished.

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2) *The referee.* If the referee finds Marciano's inside maneuvering and mauling tactics distasteful enough to break them up, then Louis will have a distinct advantage. Marciano needs the inside to grind Louis down. Although the belief here is that he'd be landing heavily on the way in, he would do most of the damage once he was there. He would be outpunched from the other ranges.

3) *Cuts.* A friend from Brockton named Charlie Petti remembered the winter of 1950-51 when the temperature in the city dropped to ten below zero for days. Marciano ran his eight miles faithfully anyway, and said "the cold air toughens my skin and I won't cut so easy." Louis's corkscrew bombs made a red mess of Godoy's face. If Louis manages to do the same to Marciano, there is a considerable risk that the fight would be stopped despite the preventative efforts of the fanatical fighter and the quick-fix coagulants of his cut man.

4) *A perfect shot, followed by a series.* Marciano's fabled endurance, chin, and conditioning are true assets, but Louis was arguably the greatest finisher in heavyweight history. If Marciano makes enough mistakes to get himself badly hurt, no intangible is certain to save him.

Matt McGrain, a boxing historian and analyst of the first order, provided a welcome impetus for this analysis with a gentleman's challenge. References include "Godoy Just a Clown', Says Joe" by Art Carter in *The Afro American*, 2/17/40; "Remembering the Champ," by Charlie Petti, 1970; "Weill Almost Missed Out Entirely on His Meal Ticket —Marciano" by Evans Kirkby, *Milwaukee Journal*, 8/25/68; *AP* 10/27/51; Charley Goldman and Freddie Brown quotes as told to Liebling in his essay, "Charles II," in *The Sweet Science*.

Special thanks to Cameron Burns, the talent behind the graphic opening this essay. He can be

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Boudicca says:

Estimable analysis from a spectacular writer. Specific and engaging, this stuff should be transposed onto charts and nailed to walls in boxing gyms. Fighters today who labor under repetitive and hazy advice could benefit from Toledo's observations. They are a product of the new married to the old, of a respect mined from the tried and true of each era. Through Toledo, the magic of those past times in the ring, of Dreamland Wars, enralls us as though not a second has gone by.

ali says:

Im not so sure Louis beats Marciano even in his prime.

Buzz Murdock says:

Marciano was history's distortion I met Roland La Starza who gave Marciano fits for 11 rounds, he couldn't have been more than five foot nine, Archie Moore knocked Marciano down, ezzard /charles was way gone, when he split Marciano's nose in half, and Walcott confused him badly before (with all credit due) the sensational knockout.

I don't think Marciano would have liked to have seen a prime Sonny Liston or Joe Louis staring across the ring from him. Certainly he wouldn't have shrunk, but proudly gone down on his shield.

gibola says:

Helluva difficult pick. If Louis could hurt Marciano he could possibly finish him, he wouldn't be able to outbox him for 15 rounds. If Marciano crowded Louis effectively he could stop Louis middle/late rounds. However his face might well get busted up before he got on top. On balance I go for a peak Joe to tag and hurt Marciano several times before stopping him in 12 rounds. However, it's a great fight and Rocky could well win it too.

Liston/Foreman would be murder for Marciano.

Ali/Holmes would be murder for Louis.

But I could be wrong!