

## Ron Stander Lost To Joe Frazier, Won The Respect of a Region

Written by Michael Woods  
Friday, 27 June 2014 22:08

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I called Toddy at 1:30 ET on Friday, and asked her if it was a good time to talk.

“Sure,” she answers, “I’ll put The Butcher on.”

Wait a minute. Before you do, can I ask, Do you always call him The Butcher...or do you call him Ron, or....?

“Usually Ronnie,” says the third wife of **Ron Stander**, not the lady in that 1972 Sports Illustrated story by the writer who tapped the typewriter from upon a high horse, looking down at the boxer blessed with more in the way of willingness and a super-abundance of cajones than pugilism skills galore, “but sometimes I call him Champ in public...or Butcher.”

He was “The Bomber” before he was christened “The Council Bluffs Butcher,” till someone wised up and thought to themselves that the style of the guy from Council Bluff, just-across-the-river-from-Omaha, was not cut from a similar cloth as The Brown Bomber, but more so of someone accustomed to and not put off by having the blood of another animal on them. Or, for that matter, their own...

While I had Toddy on the line, looking to get more info on the last time a big bout came to Omaha, the last time the pugilism big top rolled into town before **TopRank** and **HBO** hauled

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their caravan topped by the current pride of Omaha

**Terence Crawford's**

lightweight title defense against

**Yuriorkis Gamboa**

to this location for a Saturday night set of tussles for the amusement of the citizenry, I asked how long she and The Butcher had been together.

"It'll be six years in October," she says, adding that Halloween will be her anniversary.

And, I wonder, is there any irony or symbolism in that date?

"Ron was acting the fool, as usual," with not a hint of an edge, which told me she loves this "fool" immensely. "He said, on Halloween, 'Let's get married today.' October had had sad days for me before, my daughter had died in October and my previous husband, too. So he wanted something nice."

I was getting a different picture of the semi-buffoonish persona portrayed by Mark Kram in SI, in the story titled "The Bluffs Butcher Gets Tenderized," the one which did more than insinuate that Stander was moron for doing what his warrior heart demanded, which was get right in Frazier's face, and look to land a game-changer of an uppercut, and bring Joe Frazier's heavyweight title crowns out of the Civic Auditorium in Omaha, to his residence in Iowa.

This Kram did what so many of them did then, and now, from the safety of the sidelines and the insulation which comes from owning a flak-jacket of snark and condescension, and opined that Stander was better off finding a new job. As if so many of those were and are so easy to come by, as if men unlike him were built different, to test themselves on stages where the stakes were as high as they can get, you could lose real, real bad, and die, or be left brain damaged...and where the payoffs were the sort which could leave a guy able to point to his bank book, and smile, because he knew he could live off the interest.

In third round of the bout which unfolded on March 25 of 1972, by the way, Stander let loose an uppercut which, he'd tell me, was almost that game-changer sort.

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He'd planned, with a trainer hired special for this gig by the consortium of dealmakers in a crew called the Cornhuskers Boxing Club, to drill on throwing that uppercut, and looking to land it on a Frazier who'd been into the deepest of waters a little more than one year before, March 8, 1971, at Madison Square Garden in New York City.

Frazier had been pushed and pulled and mashed more than he'd been accustomed to, having piled up a 31-0 record to that point, when he met the fighter he was still calling Clay. There was no mass movement against Frazier at that time when he followed the win over Ali with a defense of his titles against Terry Daniels, a 28-4-1 boxer, in January of 1972, and while there was agitation to get Smokin' Joe back in against Ali for a rematch, people who knew the fight game knew that a defense against a solid but unspectacular sort, like "The Butcher," rated as high as No. 9 by one sanctioning body, wouldn't be dismissed as a larcenous cash grab.

And if there was yapping, to hell with them, because of course it's infinitely easier to demand a champ glove up in short order against a guy who'd shared a ring in which both men strove for Armageddon of the other.

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The last remaining member of the Cornhuskers Boxing Club, Tom Lovgren, now 75, was kind enough to offer his recollections of the night Stander, owning a 23-1-1 mark, much of it built up in the two large sized auditoriums in Omaha at the time, the City and the Civic Auditoriums, almost landed that uppercut on swarming Joe.

Lovgren, then living in Ohio, was tasked with finding foes for Stander, who debuted as a pro after showing good form as an amateur, in August 1969. Lovgren, though, got a shock of news when docs told he had multiple sclerosis, so keen to make meaningful moves after that piano fell on his head, he loaded up the wife and four kids, and moved to Omaha, to get closer to the action, to make the most of his 25% interest in the Club, which also featured Stander and manager Dick Noland getting 20%, and another money-man, a finance guy named of Don Moran, owning 20%, with a bunch of smaller players holding 5% stakes.

Back then, Yank Durham was handling most of Frazier's business, and after Daniels, he thought it wise to get another defense going against a less-than-Godzilla level foe. Durham,

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Lovgren says, reached out to the Stander crew. Mutual interest was there, but a mutually beneficial financial package wasn't.

"The first contract had Frazier making all the money," Lovgren says. "We eventually got to a sixth contract, and the arrangement was OK."

A Madison Square Garden wasn't going to pony up for a Frazier-Stander fight, and an ABC wasn't going to put up significant enough dough to satisfy Durham and Frazier...but based on Standers' history as a draw in Omaha, they knew they could pack around 10,000 people into the joint, and a shrewd dude who loved making inventive deals named Eddie Einhorn brought his skills to the table. Einhorn, who eventually rose to head up CBS Sports, peddled the fight via his syndication company, TVS Television Network. He improved his leverage by packaging the fight along with the second NBA vs. ABA All-Star game, which took place on May 25, 1972, at Nassau Coliseum on Long Island. Now, there would be enough money, for certain, to satisfy all the parties, and cement the biggest fight promotion in Omaha since forever.

So, now the question was, would Stander, not being ever so fond of the grunt work needed to get the body and mind in prime shape for a 15 round obstacle course of blood and sweat, get into proper condition to give himself even a modest chance at winning?

The Club decided to bring in a guy named Johnny Dunn, who'd impressed them when he'd handled another guy who scrapped in Omaha, to work with Stander, in Boston, away from the pull of the adoring masses in Council Bluffs. Lovgren went along, watched the fridge and Stander's visits to it, and made sure he didn't hit the snooze button on the alarm clock when it was time for AM road work.

"But this is my lot in life," Stander tells me, on Friday afternoon, the day before he will visit the arena to cheer on Omaha's Crawford. "Two weeks before the fight, in Boston I was sparring Mighty Joe Young, from Brooklyn, and he tapped my nose, and broke my nose. You can't stop the fight or postpone it, you get one chance at a chance of a lifetime."

The show but of course had to go on. Stander mostly enjoyed the buildup, and found Frazier to be a decent sort. He got stung by wiseguy media, like the guy with the Boston paper who chatted with him for 30 minutes, and then did a column based on a stupid joke Stander made in

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the last 30 seconds of the interview. It was like when he was chatting with Kram, of SI, and made a goofball crack about Frazier's power, and he pretended to hit the deck, using a hotel room bed as the canvas, and Kram wrote that Stander was twitching on the bed, showing him how Frazier was going to knock him out. "Kram was a jerk," Stander says. "I tried to be cute but...I was facetious, on the bed, acting the fool."

Yes, while we are at it, let us give the man the proper forum to stand up for himself and say that for the record, he wasn't miming what he thought would be his imminent landing place come fight night. He saw himself as a guy with a chance, maybe a 10-to-1 underdog, but for certain, no version of a laydown patsy seeking only to make his fall look plausible. No, Stander has faced off with a lightning storm wearing tinfoil cap before, against then 12-1 Earnie Shavers, a couple years before, so he knew Frazier's power would be of a lesser grade than that. "Shavers, he hit you with a jab and it felt like being hit with a nightstick," he says.

Counting down to fight night, Lovgren admitted to Dunn that he was worried about Standers' chances. He knew they'd make money, probably gross \$250,000 with a full auditorium...but could Stander go the distance, go 15, if need be? There'd be no need for that, fightgame lifer Dunn told him.

"It's not going 15," Dunn said. "Frazier gets hits with uppercuts. If Ronnie can nail him with a great one, the fight will be over. And Ronnie, he's got one of the greatest chins around, but he will get cut up. He's not going to get kayoed, but he could be cut so bad, between maybe round eight or ten, they'll have to stop it."

Nearing fight night, Stander had been doing the road work and sticking to a diet to where he'd be weighing around 215 for the weigh in.

Zach Clayton, a friend of Frazier who'd been installed when Frazier agreed to let team Stander pick the judges...as if they'd be needed...if he could pick the ref, stood watch as Stander got a massive hail of cheers as he was announced at 218 pounds. Frazier was 217 1/2, with a record of 28-0. Nebraskans and lowans with those Midwest manners gave him a nice ovation, and then the world heavyweight championship bout was underway.

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Stander heard the ref say that the three knockdown rule was being waved, and then they got to cracking. Stander in round one landed a right hook right away, and he stood tall and didn't willingly give an inch of ground. Kram called the strategy suicidal, basically, but Stander was what he was. No, not Nureyev, not an ounce of dancer in him. But did he do a little jig in his head when his left hook to the body made Frazier do a hiccup step? The Butcher saw the slip, and pressed, and Omaha lost a lung, propelling their man to get on it.

"If it were in an alley, I'd be the favorite," Stander had told people pre-fight, and heck with that, using the standard Queensberry rules, he won himself the first.

Frazier heard it from the corner after the first, and came out with more steam popping from his ears, his engines gunning for the Stander torso. Yet Stander chugged forward, while eating a larger volume of hooks. The Philly swarmer stood flat footed, winging with both hands, adding jabs and right uppercuts to the mix.

"Wild uppercut, he swung that one from Council Bluffs, Iowa," the blow by blow man Wes Carter said to a Stander miss midway through the second.

Lovgren still sees that launch, plays it in his head, wonders what if the placement was better.

"In the second, Ronnie's uppercut just missed," he says. "I was two inches from becoming a millionaire."

Stander ended the second in Fraziers' face, Joe's back to the ropes, his mind comprehending that he'd have to summon some A grade stuff to get the W here, that 'B' wouldn't suffice.

In the third, the 27-year-old Stander came out strong, but he ate a left, and his nose was cut, on the bridge. It was music to Fraziers' eye.....The Philly boxer bobbed, weaved, ripped those hooks, danced a bit, giddy with the way it was now playing out. Frazier used every allowance, getting space with his left forearm and elbow. A right uppercut snapped Standers' head back,

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but he kept trying to advance. A right cross landed clean on Frazier, and then a bit later, a left hook sent Joe back a step. But a left uppercut in answer jellied Standers' legs some. Yet, he fired back to end the round.

In the fourth, Standers' offense, and stubborn courage, had the fans retaining optimism. Stander found a home for a right cross, but was Frazier just getting some rest? A cut over Standers' right eye emerged, and the lowan started clinching more, as blood obscured his vision. Stander went to his corner, intent on continuing, letting it play out how however fate demanded. But a doctor, a man named Jack Lewis, who still lives in Omaha, pulled the plug. The blood had become a blindfold, made it so The Butcher was guessing where Frazier was, and getting confirmation back in the forms of hooks to the right side of his head, and uppercuts lifting up his chin.

Stander calls himself a fool, plays the role of the goofball jester, jokes that with his luck, he'd be lucky enough to score a Floyd Mayweather-type payday, and the next day get felled by lightning. But Stander isn't one. To label him one does a disservice to the man, and to the ferocious pride which fuels a soul when lessers would cave in to severe circumstance and neurologic trauma. Yes, proud, for sure, maybe tipping towards a level which can be seen as excessive to laymen. He still, 42 years later, wants to have it be known why that fight ended.

"Frazier didn't beat me," Stander says. "The doctor stopped it. I was ready to go on more. I would have the whole night. Man, I would have gone outside to fight. I asked Joe, he didn't want to. I was ready to rumble."

He jokes..I think he's joking, he could be more than a bit serious, I don't think it's my place to really ascertain the pride level...that he softened Frazier up, so that George Foreman, watching from ringside in Omaha, could demolish Smokin' Joe.

We talk some more about that shot, about how timing is everything, and he cracks another one, about how Foreman did quite well for himself, sold that grill line for a boatload. "If I sold the grill line, I'd get hit by lightning right after," he cracks.

On a whim, I reached out to Foreman, who is now back in the boxing business, doing fight promotions with all those sons named George. George, you think Stander helped your cause

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against Frazier, when you met him in Frazier's next contest, in January 1973?

"He really did!" Foreman says. "I got to thank him for it," he says, and delivers a booming Foreman chuckle.

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It sounds like things are OK for Stander today. That wife, that Darlene who busted his chops mercilessly in the Kram piece, they split up not long after, and he doesn't hold any grudge against her. No, the insults in the story, how he never got himself properly trained for fights, that doesn't rankle Stander. He even tips his cap to the ex, for that famous line of hers, "You don't enter a Volkswagen at Indy unless you know a helluva shortcut." Nope, that line, those smackdowns weren't the last straw, he says. The camel's back was already split near in half...

The 69-year-old will be present to watch this big hullabaloo, and he's hoping HBO will come through with some prize seats so he can see if that kid Crawford (23-0 with 16 KOs; age 26), the one nicknamed "Bud," about as far from fearsome as "The Butcher" you can get, can handle a 23-1 Cuban cutie with an experience edge. The return to these parts can be attributed to 82-year-old promoter Bob Arum who'd been in the boxing years just six years when the Frazier-Stander scrap went down. He told Crawford that he'd endeavor to make it happen that he'd defend his WBO title in front of his people on Omaha, and this wasn't a placation of ego, or anything. No, in this day and age when checks from TV suits has made real-deal grass-roots promoting a rarity, putting 10,000 paying customers into an arena is more than just lunch money. Arum isn't a sort of Warren Buffet of boxing because he does such things on a whim.

Lovgren, too, will attend, he tells me. He scored tix in the third row. Now, will this promotion rival the night Omaha scored the heavyweight championship of the world, back when that meant more than a little something, back when our sport didn't have to defend itself from accusations of imminent demise?

"It's a different era," says the 75-year-old who continued to promote shows in Omaha after the big night, many involving Stander. "HBO will be here. Is it better, or worse, or some of both? Here, there will never be a draw like Stander. Now, the 135 pound champ is from Omaha, and there is pride in that... We had a world champion in Nebraska, in Perry "Kid" Graves, who won



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the welterweight title in 1914. But with HBO, Stander would have made a lot more money. Now, are we romanticizing it? Could be.

“So, I’m the last guy alive from the Club, and I remember the fight like it was yesterday.”

Ah, but that yesterday was so different than today...or was it, is it?

“It is different,” Lovgren says. “You have Top Rank here, big money people involved. I had more dreams than money, and Top Rank has more money than dreams.” Lovgren pauses, mind drifting back to when he was in his 30s, still thinking that there would likely be a few more shots at the big score on grand stages, more turns to be taken shooting the dice, and a good probability that the fates would one of those times smile, and give you a great roll.

Well, I’m guessing Stander gets hooked up with prime tix, being that a camera crew went to his house and did some shooting. Stander is gracious about the card, and Crawford, noting that the event is a buzzworthy attraction, but yes, it does lack that certain something, not being a heavyweight tiff. He moved to near Omaha, Ralston is the name of the town, around 1988, and simply loves the caliber of the people there. Him and the missus, who raves about how the fight game people have embraced her, will go to amateur and club shows, and donate some funds from autograph signings to help run those programs. She too has nothing but love for Bud, who is her Facebook friend, and who deserves all points of light from the spotlights trained on him in his moment of possible glory.

Crawford could well get a boxing lesson from a guy who can box a masterpiece in his sleep, but yes, sometimes fights in a somnolent state, or tonight he could stake build his Wikipedia page to the equal of Stander. Stander, though, is one of those guys who will go to his grave secure in the knowledge he’s no one-hit wonder, as far as legacy goes. He used to do bodyguard work for bold-face names, like Liza Minnelli, the Stones, the Eagles. He’s thanked by Don, Glen, Joe and the boys on their “Hotel California” album, which I dare say will still be decent seller long after people forget who the hell Miley Cyrus was. That era, and Stander’s era, the case can be made that they were special, as compared to know, because...well, maybe just to us who were alive then, and there is always that tendency to look backward through the rose-colored binoculars. Or, maybe it pays to poke yourself, and note that yes, we do have that global warming gloom hanging over head...but in ’72, the kiddies had to worry that the Soviets would wake them up with a hailstorm of nukes. Shall we call it a tie?

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Stander seems to wrestle just a bit with how to treat the issue of those jackpots that didn't pay out..he does come back to the issue of timing a few times, noting that while the back-white angle was used some in the build-up to his fight with Frazier, the same marketing angle helped build the pot not that many years later for a Larry Holmes-Gerry Cooney fight so that both men made \$10 million apiece.

"Frazier got \$750,000, I got \$100,00," Stander says of his single best stab at the mega-bigtime. "I needed a little bit of luck," he says, and it goes without saying that the luck was in the trunk of the Volkswagen that night.

He is mildly philosophical, noting that Frazier was a good cat, and they shared that trait of being workmanlike, not caring for the frills-style, the Ali methods of movement and such. "Nothing fancy, get the job done," he says, which he did to the tune of a 38-21-3 mark, doing his last violent waltz in 1982. Toddy is working on a book on Stander's rich and varied life, and that should be available in about a year, he reports.

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As for Omaha, I should note for the record that I think there is a perception that this is a one horse town, and the horse is a nag with a limp. They do have marquee stuff going on here, the College World Series was just here, and Stander says, impressing me with his successful insertion of a current pop culture reference, "Bruno Mars was just here."

"But I am looking forward to the fight," he says. "Gamboa is a good fighter, he might surprise us."

Stander did, back in '72; pre-fight, they were saying round one, maybe two, no later than three for Frazier. But the surprise was contained to how well he did in a losing effort; that uppcercut didn't make Lovgren a millionaire, and Stander had to take regular guy jobs to make the ends meet in the decades to follow. But you won't see me going all Kram on the guy. That's because I know Terence Crawford will be a fortunate soul if in 42 years, he is still strolling about the region, and getting the same love from the salt of the earthers as The Butcher does.

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Omaha isn't the Big Apple, it isn't blessed with such an evocative tag. You make it there, you may well be tempted to jump ship, see if you can do the same in a bigger market. Yeah, the big stage for the Crawford-Gamboa fight will be set up in a city which is the 42<sup>nd</sup> largest in the nation. Not long ago, a national magazine ranked Omaha the third best city to live in; but I dare say, because it doesn't have the same number of bells, whistles and collective ego of many of the other 41 cities of a larger stature, it is a damned fine place to come kind of close to shocking the world, and almost putting a dousing on Smokin Joe. I think it's OK for Stander today, I do think he's OK with that uppercut not landing, and still, 42 years later, possessing more dreams than money.

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### **Buzz Murdock says:**

Nice piece.....

### **The Commish says:**

Super read, especially for a guy who was a Joe Frazier fan and not at ringside for a Frazier fight for the first time. More memorable than the fight itself waqs a line Stander's then-wife (#1) used when asked pre-fight about her thoughts onher husband fighting Joe Frazier for the world heavyweight championship.

"My husband fighting for the World Heavyweight Championship is like entering a Volkswagen in the Indy 500!"

Classic!

I met Stander years later. Had a beer with he and Bert Sugar. The stories that flew around that day were priceless--many of them unprintable. But he did talk about the uppercut which missed, and how, if it did, might have changed his life.

He really seemed okay with talking about the missed punch in terms of "what if?"

Like the words of the Frank Sinatra song, "Regrets? I've had a few, but then again, too few to mention. I did, all I had to do, and saw it through, without exemption...and more, much more than this, I did it my way."

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Ron Stander is one of those guys the song was written for.

-Randy G.