

The Unforgettable Fire of 'Smokin' Joe

Written by Frank Lotierzo

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During the final countdown of the past millennium, we had been subjected to an overwhelming number of Top Ten lists. I had paid particular attention to the lists ranking history's top ten greatest heavyweight champions.

After reviewing several boxing publications, internet sites and conducting a personal survey of writers and trainers, I found two irrefutable parallels: (1) Muhammad Ali and Joe Louis were named one and two a majority of the time and (2) Joe Frazier was often found in the bottom third and consistently behind Jack Dempsey and Rocky Marciano. The names Holyfield and Tyson were usually above Frazier as well.

I found myself wondering if the individuals who ranked these fighters saw the same Joe Frazier I did during the years 1968 through 1974. Perhaps ABC replayed Frazier-Foreman I so many times that Howard Cosell's call of "Down goes Frazier, down goes Frazier, down goes Frazier" is what most remember when recalling the career of Smokin' Joe. Maybe the overwhelming presence of Muhammad Ali during the 70's and the emergence of the colorful George Foreman of the 90's have overshadowed the accomplishments of Frazier's renowned boxing career.

Looking back at Frazier's career, several things stand out. He was without peer as a body puncher. He fought with never-ending stamina and became stronger as the fight progressed. He cut off the ring and forced his opponents to fight his fight at his pace and possessed a left hook that was without equal in the heavyweight division. Frazier's record is a virtual list of the top heavies of the late 60's through the mid-70's. As early as his 11th pro bout, he took on the "Argentine Bull," Oscar Bonavena who was a veteran of over 30 fights as a pro. After being down twice in the 2nd Round, Frazier stormed back to win the hard-fought 10 Round decision. He was the first to stop the iron-chinned Jerry Quarry and the reigning WBA Heavyweight Champion Jimmy Ellis. Frazier will always be remembered as the first fighter to defeat Muhammad Ali in the biggest and most highly anticipated fight in history. It has been said Frazier won because Ali had just returned to the ring after a 43-month layoff. What is sadly overlooked is that Ali was still a great fighter and fought one of the best fights of his career that night. Frazier's strength, aggression and determination made it impossible for Ali to fight at anything but his best, or Frazier would have half killed him. Had Ali fought anyone except Joe Frazier that night, he would have been a knockout winner. Let's not forget that Frazier was no walk in the park for Ali in their second fight and that he had Ali thinking "No Mas" after the 10th Round of their third and most grueling fight in Manila. Ali has been quoted as saying Frazier was the roughest and toughest fighter he ever faced in the ring. No one can deny the fact that Ali fought the world's top heavyweights from 1960 through 1980. Shouldn't his opinion count for something when evaluating Frazier? He fought more rounds against him than any other fighter.

Over the years Smokin' Joe has been criticized because he never fought any big punchers other than George Foreman. My retort to that is, unless you are talking Baer, Louis or Shavers, every other fighter looks like Slapsie Maxie if Foreman is the measuring stick. Manuel Ramos stood 6' 3" and weighed 230 pounds and had a pulverizing right uppercut that Frazier walked

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through on his way to scoring a 2nd Round knockout. Oscar Bonavena was a 6' 210 pound wall of granite. In their second fight, with Frazier's title on the line, Frazier cruised to victory, winning almost all 15 rounds on the judges' cards. Jerry Quarry was a good enough puncher that the 6'3" Ron Lyle retreated after being hit with Quarry's bombs, and Earnie Shavers could not get out of the 1st Round with Quarry. Frazier stood up to the hardest punches Quarry ever landed and kept coming forward and wearing Quarry down. Joe repeated his performance more thoroughly five years later when they met a second time. How about Ali? Ali hit hard enough to be the first to stop Liston and Lyle and was the only one to stop Bonavena and Foreman. The rugged Chuck Wepner was knocked down only once, accomplished by Ali something Liston and Foreman could not do. Joe Frazier, over the course of three fights, spent 41 grueling rounds in the ring with Ali. During that time Ali hit Frazier with some of the swiftest combinations and hardest punches he ever hit any opponent with and did not knock him down. The only time Frazier was stopped by Ali was in the Manila fight. His eye was completely swollen shut and he was getting hit with punches he could not see.

Frazier's title tenure lasted five years. He made ten successful defenses, winning eight by knockout. He lost the title to Foreman and failed to regain it from Ali. Some of the fighters who were often ranked higher than Frazier lost their titles to fighters who on their best day would be honored to pay their way into the gym just to see him shadow box. Mike Tyson was stripped of his title by a journeyman named Buster Douglas. Michael Moorer, a fat light heavyweight, dethroned Evander Holyfield and Michael Spinks, a manufactured heavyweight, beat Larry Holmes. You do not need me to tell you that Douglas, Moorer and Spinks would have had more than their feelings hurt had they attempted to take Frazier's title.

Two fighters Frazier is most unfavorably compared to are Jack Dempsey and Rocky Marciano. Who did they fight anywhere near the caliber of Ali or Foreman? How do we know how Dempsey and Marciano would have fared had they fought the Foreman of 1973-74? Don't be misled that it is a foregone conclusion either one of them would have been victorious. Dempsey was knocked out in the 1st Round by Fireman Jim Flynn and knocked out of the ring by Luis Firpo. A left hook courtesy of 38-year old Jersey Joe Walcott dropped Marciano, and 40-something Light Heavyweight Champ Archie Moore put Rocky down. Is it a reach to say Dempsey and Marciano would have been stopped by the Foreman who made Frazier a former champ? Not one bit!

Over the years many blanket statements have been made diminishing Frazier's accomplishments because of the way he lost to Foreman. I have this to say to those who have admonished him. Foreman is not just another puncher. He came back and won the title at age 45 with a one-punch knockout.

Foreman throws arm punches and has knocked out fighters from 1969 through 1995. Boxing has never seen such a monstrosity, before him or since. Dempsey, Marciano, Holmes, Tyson and Holyfield have never shared a ring with a fighter who is in the same zip code as Foreman in punching power. Holyfield barely survived his fight with him when he was 42.

After thoroughly and objectively reviewing Frazier's career, it is abundantly clear that to beat him you had to be a great fighter. Two fighters can claim victory over Frazier, George Foreman,

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the most powerful heavyweight in the last hundred years and maybe ever, and Muhammad Ali, the most skilled and widely accepted as the greatest heavyweight ever. Ali is a legend today because of his victory over Foreman. You can't have it both ways.