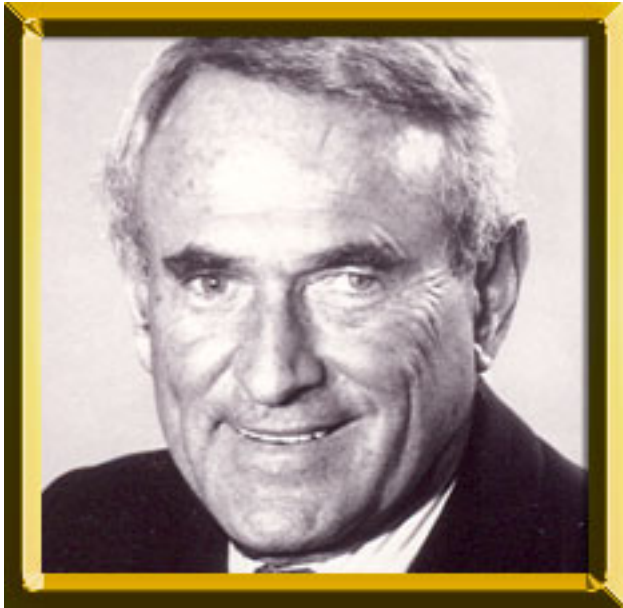


Clancy's One Strategic Miscalculation "Reinventing Foreman To Face Ali Again"

Written by Frank Lotierzo
Tuesday, 05 April 2011 10:13



Gil Clancy was the trainer of many world champions and is probably best known for guiding the hall-of-fame careers of Emile Griffith and Rodrigo Valdes during the sixties and seventies. Ironically, both Griffith and Valdes fought middleweight champion Carlos Monzon twice each during his reign as champ circa 1970-77. Griffith, after being stopped by Monzon during their first fight in 1971, lost a disputed decision to him in their rematch 21 months later. Valdes was the only fighter to drop Monzon as champ when he turned the trick during the second round of their July 1977 rematch. So it should come as no surprise that one of the greatest middleweight champs of all-time was given two of the toughest fights during his reign as champ by fighters trained by Gil Clancy.

With Clancy's passing last week the accolades have been pouring in. Gil loved to talk boxing and I remember having him on my ESPN 1490 radio show in the late nineties after George Foreman lost a controversial decision to Shannon Briggs in what turned out to be George's last fight. We discussed how terrible the decision was in that bout, which led us to talking about the careers of both Foreman and Gerry Cooney. Gil intimated that Gerry Cooney could've been a great heavyweight had he only believed it himself. He also went into how if Foreman could punch as fundamentally correctly as Jerry Quarry, he would've never lost to anyone.

During the conversation regarding Foreman's physical strength and career, Gil went on about how a trainer should never change a fighter from being who he really is as a fighter. And that Angelo Dundee's greatest asset to Muhammad Ali was the fact that despite immense pressure, he never attempted to convert Muhammad Ali into a by the book boxer/fighter. That took me back a little because if there ever was one miscalculation that Clancy did strategically to a fighter, it was him changing George Foreman's style from a catch-an-kill aggressor into a wait and react counter-puncher after he lost his undisputed heavyweight title to Muhammad Ali in "The Rumble In The Jungle."

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As everyone knows, Foreman dismissed his trainer Dick Saddler after he lost to Ali. At that time Foreman was blaming everyone but himself after the fight. George was embarrassed that he punched himself out against Ali and thought he should've been better prepared for Ali's rope-a-dope style. This was a strategy that failed miserably against "Smokin" Joe Frazier in the "Fight Of The Century" three years earlier. Enter Gil Clancy, who was hired by Foreman to replace Saddler and help him prepare for an impending rematch with Ali.

The first fight Clancy worked with Foreman was his comeback bout against the underrated boxer and big punching Ron Lyle. Foreman, under Clancy, fought more in a more measured fashion and didn't go all out and attack Lyle. The thought was George would conserve his energy and have more stamina for later in the fight if he didn't get the early knockout. The only problem with that was - Lyle almost took Foreman's head off in the process. Finally, out of desperation, Foreman reverted back to the pre-Zaire version of himself and knocked Lyle out in the fifth round. In his subsequent fights against Joe Frazier, Scott LeDoux, Dino Dennis and Pedro Agosto, the measured Foreman looked like a more finished fighter. However, what was hidden in the victories over Frazier, LeDoux, Dennis and Agosto was, Foreman could easily jab their heads off from the outside without really having to push the fight. And if by chance they'd try to change things up and bring the fight to him, it only sped up the inevitable and got them knocked out sooner. In those fights between Lyle and Agosto, the supposed new George Foreman looked like he was ready to dethrone the aging and physically declining champ, Muhammad Ali.

In March of 1977, after beating five consecutive contenders by stoppage, Foreman met third ranked Jimmy Young. If George could beat Young, Ali would have to make his next title defense against the top ranked heavyweight in the world, George Foreman. Young, a slick boxer, was thought to be the perfect tune-up fight to help get Foreman ready for Ali's style. Against Young, Foreman wouldn't attack. Instead he'd fight at a measured pace (under Clancy's instruction) and hope to draw Young to him and nail him with big counters. Only Young didn't go for it. For the first five rounds while Foreman was laying back and looking to conserve his stamina and land the perfect shot, Young peppered George with straight lefts and rights while he was winning the rounds. In the seventh round a desperate and tiring Foreman caught Young with a big left-hook that knocked Jimmy across the ring. Foreman tried to finish Young in a somewhat measured fashion because Clancy embedded it into his head that he shouldn't go all out. And because of that Young survived the round and his confidence escalated.

In the other corner, Foreman appeared concerned and caught in-between styles. For the last five rounds of the fight Foreman fought just hard enough not to punch himself out, but not hard enough to prevent Young from picking his spots and flurrying in spurts and winning the rounds. The fight went the distance and Young won a deserved unanimous decision. Six months later Earnie Shavers, not Foreman, challenged Ali for the title at Madison Square Garden. Shavers gave Ali a tough fight, but Muhammad eventually prevailed and would make what turned out to be the last successful title defense of his career. Had Clancy not changed Foreman's style, more than likely there's Ali-Foreman II.

In the years since the Foreman-Young bout, it has been speculated by many what would've happened if George fought Ali a second time. Well, there shouldn't be any speculation what so

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ever about how it would've turned out. If a measured and counter-punching Foreman couldn't beat Jimmy Young, he would have never defeated Ali fighting that style. Clancy changing Foreman's style looked as if it initially worked, and at the time Gil was receiving plenty of praise for re-inventing George Foreman. The only problem was, the fighter Clancy was brought in to help George beat ended up being the beneficiary of his new wait and react style. Had Foreman not changed his style and tore into Young like he did the first forty opponents of his career, Jimmy Young wouldn't have got out of the third round with him - and Ali would've met Foreman in a rematch in September of 1977 instead of Earnie Shavers.

The bottom line is, Foreman was an attacker. If you make him box and taper his aggression, he's no longer George Foreman. The only way George was going to beat Young and have a chance to beat Ali in a rematch was to go after them and be driven by his strength and punching power. Foreman didn't lose to Ali because of his style. He lost to Ali because Muhammad had one of the greatest bodies and chins in heavyweight history. It wasn't like Ali was out-boxing George and Foreman couldn't get to him. It was purely the case of Ali being durable enough to take his Sunday punch. And had that not been the case, Muhammad Ali would've been stopped during the "Rumble In The Jungle." So there was no need to try and re-invent George Foreman. His style worked for him, and only Ali could've survived the wrecking machine version of Foreman. The last way in the world you'd ever advise Foreman to fight Ali would be to go at him in a measured way and then react to what he does. Because of Ali's reach and speed the fight would've been like Muhammad and George playing tag. And George would've been "it" the whole fight and lost.

Sure, when Foreman made his comeback 10 years after losing to Young, he had success fighting at a slower pace. But that pace wasn't by design, it was more because George was older, slower and less powerful in his late thirties opposed to his mid to late twenties. And he was out-boxed by Evander Holyfield and Tommy Morrison fighting at a measured pace and not going for the kill during his second career.

Gil Clancy was a great boxing trainer. That's part of history and has been well documented over the last 50 years. However, Clancy made a monumental miscalculation strategically when he took over for Dick Saddler and began training Foreman after he lost to Ali. The thing Gil admired most about Angelo Dundee was that he didn't change Ali from who he was as a fighter, which is the exact opposite of how he approached Foreman with the intent being to defeat Ali in a proposed rematch.

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[Comment on this article](#)

FighterforJC says:

Agreed. Funny I was just watching Foreman-Young over at YouTube a week ago, along with his fights with Chivalo and this really tall and skinny guy that resembled a white Steve Urkel.

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Foreman was a beast against Chuvalo and actually looked quick against that tall guy. Against Young and Lyle he looked very average. I never knew the story about Gil Clancy deliberately changing Foreman's style. I just figured that Foreman was either way past it and didn't have it anymore or he simply never recovered psychologically after the Ali fight and became hesitant. It makes perfect sense. Each fighter is different. Pacquiao is/was an attacker, too, but Roach turned him into a perfect boxer/puncher.

Radam G says:

Wow! I never really thought about this sweet science edge-ee-mocation [sic], but Masterscribe weaver F-Lo is super spot on. Da late, Gil "da kill..." vehemently believed that da [Rev.] George F needed to slow down, and this way he would be even most powerful and crushing dangerous. Wow! Some of the best laid plans don't [and didn't] work. This is why I have mad luv for this Universe. Scribes can get those toenails in an adroitly weaved piece and BIG TIME school ya, never try to fool ya. @FJC, Da Manny has never been an attacker. He is get backer and a finisher. When a fighter attacker him, he smothers the attack and fires back, and if his rush hurt you, 95 percent of the time, he will finish you. As you know, only Juan Manuel Marquez managed to survive against the small, starved down PacMan.

The Grand Master Coach Freddie "Top Notch Trainer, No Joke" Roach enchanted, improved and added on to Da Manny's style. Freddie made absolutely no changes. Freddie learned from his mentor, the late, great trainer, Eddie Futch, that you don't fix what ain't broken. Great trainers don't have archetype fighters. Gil "da kill..." was GREAT! He made a misjudgement that F-Lo has pointed out. Taking the rush and crush outta a beast will exposed him. The late, great Gil "da kill..." made an error. He inadvertently stripped the beast of the beast's best weapons -- rushin,' cussin' and crushin.' Freddie "Always Ready Coach No Joke" Roach doesn't change 'em, he just correct 'em and enchant 'em! He is DA MAN, who always has a PLAN! Holla!

JaketheSnake says:

Nice argument. But perhaps you're ignoring the great success that Foreman had in his second career, i.e. preacher Foreman. I've always thought the second Foreman was a great fighter, he had underrated defense that got the job done, he had a great chin that could withstand the power of Moorer and Holyfield all night long, and best of all, he knew how to conserve his energy. That defense of putting up your hands away from the face and trying to swat away punches rather than covering up (ala Clotney) takes major balls and chin to implement.

I think Clancy was right but he was too early. George was not ready for this mature style because he was still listening to his inner beast that told him to go for the kill at all costs. Once he matured, he knew how to stay back and let the opponents dictate the fight, knowing he had the one-shot killing power.

@RG - You're spot on! I've always thought Manny was a great counter puncher rather than an all-out attacker. His little step back to the left and left straight was working all night long in the Margarito fight.

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Coxs Corner says:

George was never going to be successful fighting at a measured pace as a counter puncher like Joe Louis, he didn't have the hand speed or laser accuracy for it. Foreman was a seek n' destroy bludgeoning slugger with freakish strength and punching power. The 73-74 Foreman was a monster. I agree completely with the main points here that a) Ali only survived the prime Foreman because of his great chin and athleticism. b) that Foreman was at his best as an attacker. It is that version of Foreman that would be feared by most heavyweights had they met in the ring and c) that George was successful fighting at a more measured pace when he was older but he really didnt have a choice and also he was outboxed by Holyfield and Morrison fighting as an older man in that style. The young 25 year old Foreman who came to kill knocks them both out on the same night.

Robert Curtis says:

I have to disagree with this the thesis of this article, that it was somehow Gil's fault for Foreman's failures after the Ali loss. Young George had all the physical tools to be the champion of his time, but he needed spiritual guidance or a clinical psychologist more than a trainer in those early days. He had not yet transcended the anger, confusion and insecurities of his youth back then. Despite his early brutish conquests, George Foreman was at heart fragile and underconfident BEFORE he stepped in with Ali in Zaire. After Ali, YG was a wreck. If Dundee had left Ali to train young George, it still would have done no good. A Summit of Giants in Foreman's corner that included Gil Clancy, Cus D'Amato, Archie Moore and Angelo Dundee could not have made young George do what he was psychologically and sprititually unequipped to do at that time. Also, I have to say that this article is poorly timed. I don't want to hear about any of Gil's supposed "failures" just days after his death. I do not appreciate it.

Robert Curtis says:

Gil was right. It just took George 20 years to prove it. End of story.

FighterforJC says:

[QUOTE=Robert Curtis;5125]Gil was right. It just took George 20 years to prove it. End of story.[/QUOTE]

You're obviously emotionally involved. However, Gil was wrong to try to reinvent Foreman when Foreman still had all the physical tools that took him to the top. If Gil promised George Foreman that he will regain his title no earlier than 20 years, Foreman would've walked out on the spot. It took 20 years and a blown up light heavyweight with no chin for Foreman to regain his title.

Radam G says:

Danggit! FJC, you have some mad killer instinct. Hehehehehe! Foreman walking out on the spot and not waiting for "20 more years to regain his..." title from "a blown up light heavyweight with

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no chin for Foreman..." is coldhearted. [How many other fighters have kayoed Michael "Master of Misery" Moorner at any weight?] Be NICE, man. Let Gil, "da kill, always work and always will" body get cold and bury first. Chillax, GUYS! He who has never been wrong, cast the first stone and just sing a song: "Ya got knocked da fudge out!" I luv this Universe. Agreeing to disagree is da BOMB! I partly agree with both of you guys. Holla!

Radam G says:

David Tua in one round. Evander Holyfield in a retirement after the eight. The MM Man, Moorner chin was not that weak, besides Rev. George F and Tua hit him with lucky never-saw-it-coming punches. The luckiest punch in history is Rocky Marciano's sneak right that put Jersey Joe Walcott into a deep sleep. The second one would be Mike Weaver clocking "Big" John Tate in the 15th round. The third, IMHO, is "Big" [Rev.] George Foreman suckering Mike Moorner in to moving in range to get the fudge KO'd. Somebody up in this TSSU oughta give his list of the luckiest kayo punches of all time. Holla!

FighterforJC says:

Don't forget Moorner was knocked down twice or more by Bert Cooper in the 90's version of Foreman-Lyle. And it wasn't like Cooper caught Moorner the way Cooper caught Holyfield. Moorner cannot take a punch.

brownsugar says:

your right FighterforJC,.. but he sure could throw one.

the Roast says:

Good call F4JC. Moorner-Cooper was one hell of a brawl. If anyone has not seen this fight go watch it right now. Too bad Cooper got hooked on the crack. If Cooper was active today he would.....get pounded by a K brother. Bert would beat everyone else around, including David Haye. Cooper was like a poor mans Mike Tyson. He scared the crap out of me when he fought my man Holyfield. He was this close to being the champ that night in Atlanta.