

The Joke That Almost Ended Ali's Career

Written by Aaron Tallent

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The 1970s were full of overblown, hyped affairs that may have seemed like a good idea on paper but turned out to be absolute disasters when brought to life: the *Star Wars Holiday Special*, the Billy Jean King/Bobby Riggs "Battle of the Sexes" tennis match, and, of course, the Muhammad Ali/Antonio Inoki "Boxer versus Wrestler" exhibition match in 1976. However, in this bout Ali's wounds went deeper than his pride. The Greatest took punches from seven Hall of Famers (it will be eight when Larry Holmes is inducted) but only a few of them hurt Ali's career as badly as Inoki.

Ali came into 1976 on the heels of the most brutal fight of his career, the Thrilla in Manilla, his third bout with Joe Frazier. Many said it at the time, and now you will find that the majority of boxing writers and fans think it: Ali should have retired after the fight. "The measure of attrition, of brain tissue, of kidney tissue; everything that went with that fight was as close to death as you can get in the ring," says Ali's longtime fight doctor Ferdie Pacheco.

Nevertheless, after the hematomas on his hips healed, Ali continued. In February of 1976, he easily knocked out handpicked Belgian Jean Pierre Coopman in five rounds, following that with a bloated, lackluster decision over the slick but light-punching Jimmy Young. Less than a month later, Ali scored a fifth round knockout over Richard Dunn. His next bout would be the June 25th exhibition with Inoki.

"Now Herbert [Muhammad, Ali's manager] came to me and he said these Japanese people have come to him with all kinds of money to go over and fight this wrestler, Inoki, in Japan," says Bob Arum, who promoted the exhibition. While Arum has promoted some of the biggest fights in boxing history, he has also promoted other extravaganzas, most notably Evel Knievel's attempt to jump the Snake Canyon in a rocket car.

Ali's handlers began putting the fight together in April of 1975, when Ali met Ichiro Yada, the then-president of the Japan Amateur Wrestling Association, at a party in the United States. Ali asked Yada, "Isn't there any Oriental fighter to challenge me? I'll give him one million dollars if he wins." Ali was probably joking but Yada brought his comment back to the Japanese press. When Inoki read Ali's words, he relentlessly pursued a match, finally getting him to sign a deal in March of 1976.

The money was without a doubt great: \$6 million for Ali, \$4 million for Inoki. And the bout seemed like it would be nothing more than fun, entertaining fare. As Arum put it, "Professional wrestlers are performers. The thing is a fraud."

However, Inoki had not planned to put on a show. To him and his manager, it was a serious fight between a boxer and a wrestler. According to Pacheco, "Ali's fight in Tokyo was basically a Bob Arum thought up scam that was going to be 'ha-ha, ho-ho. We're going to go over there. It's going to be orchestrated. It's going to be a lot of fun and it's just a joke.' And when we got

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over there, we found out no one was laughing.”

Ali arrived in Tokyo on June 16th. The first media event with both athletes took place at a lunch party. The Greatest, showman that he is, went on one of his usual verbal tirades with Inoki. In response, Inoki presented Ali with a crutch.

In America, the match was the final part of a closed circuit television event dreamed up by WWF owners Vince McMahon Sr. and Jr. A match earlier that evening was held in Shea Stadium between Chuck Wepner and Andre the Giant. Wepner's knockdown of Ali in 1975 inspired Sylvester Stallone to write *Rocky*. Wepner's match with Andre probably inspired the Rocky/Thunderlips (Hulk Hogan) fight in *Rocky III*.

After that match ended with Wepner being tossed out of the ring, the telecast went to Tokyo's Budokan Hall. Ali came into the ring escorted by his usual ringside crew. For this match, he also had a legendary wrestling personality, the late "Classy" Freddie Blassie, acting as his manager.

When Ali realized the event was not going to be orchestrated, there was a substantial debate over the rules. Obviously, Ali did not want to jeopardize his future by being tossed around the ring by a professional wrestler, so it was decided that suplexes would not be allowed. Head-butts, knee blows below the belt, and open handed eye attacks were banned as well. Finally, Inoki would not be allowed to kick Ali above the waist either.

Inoki handled these rules with a very boring but damaging approach. When the bell rang for round one, Inoki ran out and slid at the legs of Ali, who dodged the Japanese wrestler by stepping back. Inoki stayed on the ground for 2:46 of the first round, kicking at Ali and landing one clean hit to Ali's right leg.

Inoki spent much of the fight on the ground trying to damage Ali's legs. Ali spent most of the fight dodging the kicks by stepping out of the way or staying on the ropes. Occasionally, Inoki's boot would connect. By the third round, a wound had appeared on Ali's left knee.

Ali threw his first punch in the seventh round. In the eighth, Angelo Dundee, Ali's trainer, demanded that Inoki tape the tips of his shoelaces because one of the eyelets came loose and was cutting Ali's legs. In the tenth, Ali threw his second punch. He only threw six punches in all during the fight.

The match went the fifteen round distance and was declared a draw. Inoki would have actually won the match had he not lost three points on a foul. The exhibition is considered by boxing writers and fans as one of the most embarrassing moments in Ali's career. Unfortunately, Ali suffered much more than a blemish on his outstanding career.

“Finally at the end of the 15th round, the referee calls it a draw. So fine, okay. It was terrible, it was embarrassing. But Ali is bleeding from the legs. He gets an infection in his legs; almost has to have an amputation. Not only the [Ken] Norton fight would've been not happening, but Ali could've been a cripple for the rest of his life,” said Arum.

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Ali suffered two blood clots in his legs as well. His handlers had also scheduled exhibition bouts in South Korea and the Philippines. As Ali lay in bed with icepacks surrounding his legs, Pacheco told him that he should check into a hospital because clots could form in his brain, heart, or lungs and kill him. Ali went against Pacheco's advice and did the bouts. "But," as Pacheco said, "Ali's luck held, and all he had to do was spend a few weeks in an L.A. hospital."

But Ali never knocked out anyone again, and his fight with Norton in September of 1976 is when sports writers and fans began to insist that he retire. Norton's style had always troubled Ali. The two split a pair of close decisions in 1973.

When it came time to fight the rubber match in Yankee Stadium, Norton brought the fight to a game but not completely recovered Ali. "Ali was still feeling the effects of the leg injury, and his mobility was not what it had been," said Pacheco. Throughout the fight, Ali tried to keep his distance with Norton, but the challenger would close in and batter the champ on the ropes.

Ali managed to win the last round and squeak out a unanimous decision. "The vote was very close," said Pacheco. "Ali won, but the public booed. The feeling was that Ali's popularity had influenced the judges."

Ali went through a series of saddening performances over the next five years. In 1978, he lost and won the title back from Leon Spinks. He finally retired in 1981.

Inoki went on to wrestle for the next two decades, battling such greats as Andre the Giant, Stan Hansen, and Sting. However, his biggest claim to fame was the Ali match. In 1977 he used a song from Ali's film *The Greatest* for his introduction. In 1986 he pinned Ali-conqueror Spinks in an exhibition match. When he retired in 1998, Ali, ever so gracious to his opponents, flew to Tokyo to watch his final match.