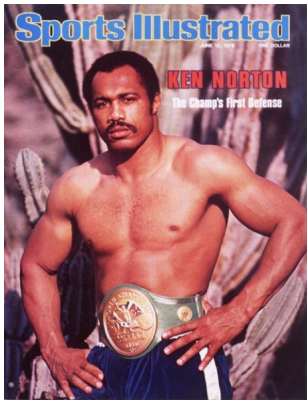


Rest in Peace, Ken Norton

Written by Michael Woods

Wednesday, 18 September 2013 20:17



It wouldn't be fair to Ken Norton, the former heavyweight champion who died on Sept. 18 at age 70, if the first words of this homage were "Muhammad Ali." Norton deserved better than that, just as he quite likely deserved to have better than a 1-2 record against the Greatest.

No tears of woe for the former football, track and basketball star from Jacksonville, Illinois who entered the Marines, learned to fight in the corps, and exited this plane as arguably the toughest puzzle for Ali to attempt to decipher.

A story in the LA Times said Norton, who earned scores of fans for shutting up the mouthy Muhammad in their first bout, in 1973, when he broke Ali's jaw, died in an Arizona hospital. Norton had a stroke last year, and was suffering from congestive heart failure.

The last few decades weren't smooth sailing for Norton; in 1986, he was driving home from a fund raiser, lost control of his car, and crashed. He was left partially paralyzed on his right side, and his speech was affected. But he soldiered on, relying on many self-help aphorisms which helped him make the leap from contender to full-fledged Ali Kryptonite.

Norton turned pro in 1967, and in 1973, got a shot at an Ali with a lone loss, to Frazier, on his ledger. Norton won a split decision in San Diego, but Ali'd people had him convinced that it was more so his lack of respect for Norton, and for a properly rigorous training camp, which made his evening arduous. In the rematch, though, a more fit Ali still couldn't solve the Norton puzzle with a degree of certainty. Another split decision resulted, with this one being awarded to Ali. The rivals gathered again in 1976, in the semi-majestic [setting of a "Bronx Is Burning" era Yankee Stadium](#). By now, Norton was respected, wasn't dismissed as merely pretty packaging, a bodybuilder reject. He'd do his self-hypnosis, and recite his favorite passages from his favorite book, "Think And Grow Rich,"

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and believe that this time, he'd do his thing, and the judges would do theirs, the right way.

They didn't, not in Norton's mind, nor a majority of watchers. He wept, openly, in the ring after the call. "I wasn't even tired," he said post-fight. "If I thought it was close, I'd have fought back harder and more. When you fight Ali, you're behind at the start. It's obvious you have to knock him out to win. When it's that obvious, you have to think the judges stole it. They made asses out of themselves. The fight speaks for itself." So will Norton's role in that heavyweight golden age of the 1970s.

He leaves behind a 42-7-1 mark, with 33 KOs, and the respect of his peers, like George Foreman. "We were all were called handsome, Ali was called "pretty," but Kenny Norton was the fairest of them all," Foreman told me on Wednesday night. "You didn't want to take off your shirt around him. He was a lovely man, inside and out." That physique attracted attention, from ladies, from fellas, from Hollywood; Norton was cast in a feature called "Mandingo" which came out in 1975. The reviews he received for fighting were of a higher grade.

Norton bobbed and weaved against Ali, stalking him often, using an underrated accuracy to pierce Ali's armor. He'd often outwork Ali, or so he thought, even if the judges perhaps gave Ali credit for some "rope a dope" strategizing. Norton's left hook could bother you, as could his overhand right. The jab wasn't a poleaxer like Holmes but it was a more than competent tool. You had to be aware from damage coming from underneath with Norton, who used the uppercut when called for, to great effect. He could work at medium range or inside, and didn't mind getting into squared up, rock em sock em rumbles. You had to guard high and low against Norton, who could redden either side of your body. Norton left the stage in 1981, no longer willing to act as an offering to hot shots wanting to add a sweet scalp to their resume. Besides his 39 rounds with Ali, he stepped in with Foreman (losing a TKO2 in '74), and was able to earn another crack at the glory, beating 38-0 Duane Bobick, Lorenzo Zanon and Jimmy Young, after which he was handed the WBC crown, because Leon Spinks didn't want to defend that strap against Norton. Using that crossed arm defense, he started slow, but got cooking, and impressed all with a furious 15th round effort. All except the judges; they liked Holmes via, you guessed it, split decision.

The lack of love from the arbiters didn't keep the International Boxing Hall of Fame from inducting Norton in 1992. To sum up Norton's legacy, it might be most apt to emply an adage he held dear: "What the mind can conceive, the body can achieve." Indeed...even if the judges don't agree with you.

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amayseng says:

RIP champ,

when i think of norton and see his pic i think of a silent badass. the man was a soldier, athlete and champion. much respect for his accomplishments and ones stolen from him, RIP

DaveB says:

So sorry to hear about his passing. Norton was one of my favorites. Seems like his last years were pretty rough. Being inducted in the HOF was such an honor for him. Condolences to his family. He seemed like a really great guy.

Hop says:

I wondered when this announcement might be coming -- Kenny looking and sounding frail in interviews the past few years. I really liked him.

Radam G says:

My dearest condolences. I'll see him at the crossroad. Holla!

louisvilleip2 says:

Gotta chance to meet Ken Norton in Arizona in the early nineties. He was good friends with a guy who owned a car dealership, and he stopped by there to meet fans and sign autographs. He seemed like a real down to earth guy, and I felt bad after hearing him talk about his accident. I was in line behind a little old white lady , who told him that she didn't want to hurt his feelings, but she was always a bigger fan of Ali's. He proceeded to remind her almost jokingly that he cracked Ali's skull. I couldn't help but laugh, that in itself was no easy task in his heyday.

R.I.P champ. Say hello to Smokin' Joe for us, you were both class acts.

jzzy says:

Ken was a perennial at the IBHOF, what a wonderful human being he was. We're very saddened by his passing. His

greatest fight was after his accident, he carried himself with much courage and dignity ever since despite his troubles.

RIP

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kidcanvas says:

it was a great time to be alive when he was in the mix.. 73 i was sitting in a rec room while in the us army listening to ali / norton 1 and to say we were all stunned and distraught is an understatement RIP

puncher says:

The guy was one of the best and in all three fights he took it to Ali. To me he went 3-0 against the so called Greatest. RIP

dino da vinci says:

RIP, Mr Norton.

I met Ken for the first and only time a year or two ago prior to the start of a function we were both in attendance for. Former champ Leon Spinks was in attendance as well. Both men were in wheelchairs, which saddened me a bit. We talked for about an hour. What surprised me was Leon is much better spoken than I've seen him on tape which just might be a matter of him tensing up a bit when the cameras are rolling. Ken, of course, was extremely articulate. I did ask him if he could get about without the chair and he said he could, but that they (those putting on the function) asked him to use it, which I didn't quite understand, and sure enough, at one point he went off to use the rest room, although he shuffled rather slowly. And yes, he struck me as very much a down to earth guy who just happened to be one of the most dangerous men to apply his trade on the planet. Ken was part of that immensely deep heavyweight division and deservedly inducted into the boxing hall of fame. And I'm equally certain he'll be inducted to the afterlife party where the good souls go to be amongst their own.

Radam G says:

Ditto, ddv! Nice post. Holla!