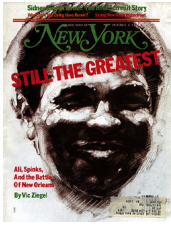


## It's Been 35 Years Since Muhammad Ali Was Officially The Champ

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Wednesday, 25 September 2013 20:21

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The date was Friday night, September 15, 1978. It was close to 11:00 PM and Howard Cosell was proclaiming on ABC television that Muhammad Ali, who moments earlier just won a unanimous decision over Leon Spinks in their rematch, had turned back the hands of time to capture the world heavyweight boxing championship for a record third time. Cosell communicated to the viewers that Ali regained his speed and physical brilliance for one night and dazzled the young Spinks who had just competed in his eighth pro bout.

As Muhammad often said during the 1970's, Howard should stick to announcing football on Monday night because he didn't know anything about boxing. Ali may have never uttered a more complete and accurate statement. Because Ali was far less physically superior in his rematch with Spinks than he was during their first bout in which he lost his undisputed title via a split decision. During their first fight and in spite of the fact that Muhammad was in terrible shape and barely trained for it because he didn't fear Spinks, with only seven pro fights, was a challenge or a threat to beat him. In addition to that, Ali planned on Leon running out of steam by the seventh or eighth round, then he'd come on and smack the kid around and either stop him late or walk away with a clear cut decision win. Only Spinks never tired and Muhammad did.

During the first fight there were numerous occasions where Ali hurt Spinks and had him reeling a few times especially during the second half of the fight when he knew he was behind and had to stage a rally. There were some terrific exchanges over the last third of the fight when Ali was seeking to put Spinks away. He pushed him to the edge of the cliff a few times but every time Leon looked as if he'd had enough, he'd rally back and seize Ali's momentum. Physically, Ali actually manhandled Spinks at times, but he dug himself too big of a hole and lacked the energy to climb out of it and salvage the fight.

The rematch seven months later was a dud of a fight. Ali, who was supposedly in great shape, went into the bout not even looking for a knockout or stoppage win. His strategy was stick a couple lefts in Leon's face, if he felt he could sneak in the right hand, he'd let it go, then he was up and gone. If Spinks got too close and wanted to rumble inside, Ali grabbed him and shut him down until they were broken apart by the referee. This was the pattern for the duration of the fight. Ali landed maybe three or four memorable combinations and punches, whereas Leon was

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lucky to get through with anything clean or memorable.

Physically, Ali was even less imposing or willing in the rematch compared to what he was the first time they fought. That's how much he eroded in just seven months at age 36, four months shy of turning 37. He never really hurt or shook Spinks once in 15 rounds. He just circled to the left and flicked his jab out in order to keep Leon away and off of him. When Spinks tried to be aggressive and assert himself, Ali held him and wouldn't let him get off. It was not only a smart strategy on Ali's part - it was the only one he could employ in order to win the fight. At that point of his title tenure his punch was gone and he couldn't sustain fighting for an entire round. Sticking and moving, yes, but not fighting and exchanging. So he did what he had to do in what was a very pedestrian fight and made history on a night that any other top-10 contender probably would've decisioned him.

The point is, many don't realize that Muhammad Ali was far less of a fighter the night he beat Leon Spinks in their rematch than what he was when he lost to him the first time they fought. It's just that Muhammad was so resourceful and versatile that he could adjust to almost any style or fighter. In addition to that, he had a way of making it appear that he was fighting his ass off and killing his opponent when in reality not much was going on. And that was the story of Ali-Spinks II.

Since that night 35 years ago when Muhammad won his last bout as a pro, aside from Mike Tyson circa 1986-88, there hasn't been one heavyweight champion who has captured the public's interest or imagination. Larry Holmes followed Ali and turned out to be damn near as great of a fighter. But his personality or lack of it prevented the fans from ever really accepting him and he was also cursed by the fans for not being Ali. In addition to that Holmes lacked the great competitors and rivals that Ali thrived off of matching wits and skills against.

Mike Tyson followed Holmes and had an Ali like following. But his reign didn't last very long and the purist questioned his character and toughness when he was challenged by an opponent who resisted him and fought back. Evander Holyfield followed Tyson. Evander was actually a better fighter and tougher than Tyson. He was also involved in several exciting and thrilling fights. However, because he wasn't a life-taker like Tyson and wasn't much of a personality, he never captured the public's interest. The Lennox Lewis era followed Holyfield, but Lennox was overshadowed by Tyson and even Holyfield to a degree. It also didn't help that Lennox was knocked out twice by one punch and didn't get to fight either Tyson or Holyfield until they were in their late thirties and on the wrong side of the hill. But make no mistake about it, Lennox could fight. He could box and punch and he was very versatile. He also never met an opponent who he didn't beat.

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Currently we are in the midst of the Klitschko era. Vitali Klitschko had his finest hour the night he lost to Lennox Lewis 10 years ago. Since then he's gone undefeated. Wladimir Klitschko has been unbeaten for eight years and hasn't been close to losing many rounds let alone a fight since he was stopped by Lamon Brewster in 2004. The Klitschkos are very big and strong and can both box and punch. The problem with them is through no fault of their own, it's just that there's no outstanding heavyweights around today who can test them in order to gauge how good they really are. They've cleaned out the division and there's nothing left for them to prove. Vitali is 42 and Wladimir is 37, so even if they lost now it wouldn't be a barometer as to how good they really were as fighters. Let's just say that they've done what they were supposed to do - and that is thoroughly dominate a very shallow and forgettable heavyweight division.

That is a quick capsule as to what has happened in the heavyweight division since Muhammad Ali won his last title fight a little over 35 years ago. Oh, there is one difference in being heavyweight champion today compared to when Ali, Holmes, Tyson, Holyfield and Lewis were the champ and ruled the division.....when they held the title it was the biggest and most prestigious prize in sports.

In 2013 that is no longer the case, and by a long-shot.

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**Bernie Campbell says:**

You mean the Chump!

**Radam G says:**

Right on, Super Boxing Scribe F-Lo! Heavyweights of nowadays are pathetic. No knock on the K-bros/docs. They are dealing with what has been handed to them -- a bunch of sorry-arse tallies and fatties lazy as \_\_\_\_\_. Holla!

**Carmine Cas says:**

Very nice article, the Klitschkos are doing what they are supposed to do, I have no criticism for

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them. Someone needs to be able to challenge them. Hopefully Bryant Jennings and Deonanty Wilder blossom well

### **The Shadow says:**

Yes, they are doing well. Huge fan of the brothers. But it is interesting to see that the last guy to give Vitali problems was a fat, out of shape Cuban who blew his knee out, probably from excessive pressure on the joints from all that fat.

IMO, Lennox Lewis would blast out Wladimir. An unprepared and overweight Lewis stopped Vitali. And before anyone says he was losing, well, yeah, he lost every round to Frank Bruno before catching him, too.

Would love to see what a prime Riddick Bowe would do to the brothers. He would beat Wlad, I think, but Vitali would probably f him up.

I'm utterly convinced Big George would send Wlad sprawling all over the canvas in two rounds. Larry Holmes beats both, too, I think.

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