

Jimmy Ellis: Confidence And Courage Personified

Written by Frank Lotierzo
Monday, 12 May 2014 08:47



As most know by now, former WBA heavyweight champ Jimmy Ellis 40-12-1 (24) passed away on May 6th.

So much has been written about what a tremendous human being Ellis was, and how as a professional fighter he was the ultimate overachiever on the baddest block in boxing circa 1965-75, the heavyweight division. In that era, monsters named Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier, George Foreman, Floyd Patterson, Jerry Quarry, George Chuvalo, Oscar Bonavena, Jimmy Young, Ron Lyle, Earnie Shavers and Ken Norton roamed.

And you know what, Ellis weighed less than everyone of those guys except for Patterson, and officially did something that Quarry, Chuvalo, Bonavena, Young, Lyle, Shavers and Norton never could in 12 total attempts - that's win a heavyweight title bout. Ellis accomplished this feat on April 27, 1968 when he decisioned Jerry Quarry in the final of the WBA elimination tournament set up to determine Ali's successor after Muhammad was stripped of his undisputed heavyweight title one year earlier for refusal to be inducted into the United States Army.

In 1961 Jimmy Ellis turned pro as a middleweight. And without much of any money behind him, he was fed to the lions and gatekeepers of the era when he was just starting out and inexperienced. Ellis was weakened by making the 160 pound middleweight limit and lost decisions to tough guys and top contenders Holly Mims (who he beat in a rematch) and Henry Hank. He was out-boxed by slickster George Benton and out-worked by the hard punching Rubin "Hurricane" Carter. In what had to be the low point of his career Ellis lost a split decision to Don Fullmer in between fighting Benton and Carter. Discouraged and thinking about retirement, Ellis wrote a letter to Muhammad Ali's trainer Angelo Dundee and asked if he would

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train him. Dundee agreed to do so and became Ellis' manager and trainer. Jimmy won eight straight bouts (with six being on the undercard of Ali title bouts) under Dundee, with the final being a first round knockout over the highly touted prospect Johnny Persol on the Muhammad Ali vs. Zora Folley title bout undercard. Ali's seventh round knockout of Folley was his last fight of the sixties and he was stripped of his undisputed title a month later for refusing military induction. Ali's removal from boxing led the World Boxing Association to set up an elimination tournament between the top eight heavyweight contenders to determine Ali's successor.

Ellis was ranked eighth at the time and was the underdog in every fight he participated in during the tournament. Joe Frazier refused to enter the tournament and was replaced by Leotis Martin who at 24-1 had the best record among the eight fighters vying for the title. Ellis battered and cut Martin's face in his first fight of the tournament and was declared the winner when the bout was halted in the ninth round.

In his second tournament bout he hurt and dropped Oscar Bonavena twice enroute to a unanimous decision victory. Incidentally, Ellis had much less trouble overwhelming Bonavena than both Ali and Frazier did when they rumbled with Oscar.

In the tournament final Ellis captured the WBA title with a 15-round majority decision over Jerry Quarry. Ellis used his sharp jab to offset the favored Quarry's counter-punching and let his hands go more freely to win rounds. Five months later Ellis successfully defended the title in Sweden against former champ Floyd Patterson via a 15-round points decision, although some observers thought Floyd may have deserved the nod. Ellis suffered a broken nose against Patterson and was inactive for over a year after the fight.

Then he was scheduled to defend the WBA title against British Champ Henry Cooper, but the BBBC wouldn't sanction the fight because they were affiliated with the WBC. The fight was on and off, then Cooper hurt his knee training and that canceled it for good. Ellis was then scheduled to defend the title against Argentine Gregorio Peralta in Argentina, but the bout was canceled 24 hours before it was to take place by the promoters due to poor ticket sales.

Finally, after 17 months of inactivity Ellis fought undefeated "Smokin" Joe Frazier for the undisputed title. Frazier was on a roll at the time and was recognized as the WBC title holder along with holding the state titles of New York, Pennsylvania, Maine, Illinois, Texas and Massachusetts. Ellis and Dundee said before the fight that Jimmy would box Frazier and not fall into the trap of going toe-to-toe with Joe like his previous opponents were forced to. However,

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Jimmy had too much heart and willingness and not quite enough firepower to keep Frazier from forcing the fight. After getting the better of Frazier in the first two rounds, he succumbed to Joe's aggression and power, going down twice in the fourth round. The left hook that Frazier dropped Ellis with the second time in the fourth round is probably the best punch Joe ever landed in his career with the exception of the one he dropped Ali with a year later. Jimmy beat the count but was in no condition to continue and Dundee wisely stopped the fight as the bell sounded to start the fifth round. Unfortunately Ellis was too small for Frazier and had the misfortune of fighting him on the second best night of his career.

Ellis won three bouts after the Frazier fight and then met his childhood buddy Muhammad Ali, with Angelo Dundee working his corner due to Angie being his manager and trainer, whereas he was only Ali's trainer. Jimmy thought he needed speed to handle Ali and weighed in at 189 for the fight, 35 pounds less than Muhammad. For three rounds Ellis gave as good as he took, but in the fourth round he was hurt by a right hand and Ali was pretty much in control after that. Ellis never went down against Ali but by the middle of the 12th round Ali was knocking him all over the ring and the referee stopped the bout with Ellis against the ropes on rubbery legs.

After losing to Ali, Ellis won eight straight bouts by knockout and then met the hottest fighter in the division, knockout sensation Earnie Shavers 44-2 (43). Once again Jimmy's heart and courage got in the way. In the first round Ellis hurt Shavers badly and had him on the verge of going out. After being forced to break from a clinch, Shavers put his left hand around Ellis' head and held him as he unloaded a pulverizing right uppercut to Jimmy's chin. The punch dropped Ellis and despite desperately trying to beat the count, he didn't, and the fight was over.

After losing to Shavers, Ellis went 2-4-1 and retired. Three of his four losses were to contenders Ron Lyle, Joe Bugner and Joe Frazier again, and only Frazier stopped him, but this time Joe needed nine rounds to do it.

Jimmy Ellis was a real man and fighter.

He never tried to be Ali and never got sucked into the Ali vortex. He never drew attention to himself when he could've lashed out and complained about being often referred to as Ali's sparring partner and understudy by the media. But the fact is, Ellis and Ali fought nothing alike. Jimmy was a counter-puncher and on many nights he fought as a boxer-puncher. Ellis didn't set out to win by decision, he went for the knockout and it didn't matter a bit to him who the fighter was in the other corner. No, Jimmy Ellis wasn't an all-time great heavyweight fighter, but how

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many are? But he did win a piece of the title and successfully defended it during a time when it really meant something in boxing. How many fighters can say that? I'll tell you who can't say that, Jerry Quarry, George Chuvalo, Oscar Bonavena, Jimmy Young, Ron Lyle, Earnie Shavers and Ken Norton.

Ellis beat some really good fighters during his era and only lost to two all-time greats in Frazier and Ali when he was at or near his prime fighting as a heavyweight. And getting knocked out by Shavers, (who some believe is the hardest hitting heavyweight in history) at the end of his career after almost knocking him out is no disgrace.

All that being said, the thing that stands out most to me about Ellis is how he fought with so much courage and confidence every time out. Jimmy was fearless and much harder and physically tougher than most remember him being, because he was so laid back and easy going. It didn't matter if it was Martin, Bonavena, Quarry, Frazier, Ali, Shavers or Lyle, Ellis didn't back down or away from anyone. You can go back and watch all of his big fights against the monsters I just named and you won't find a second of footage where Jimmy looks intimidated, scared or like he wants out. And he was physically smaller and lighter than everyone of those fighters. In every fight of Jimmy's career, when he got nailed with something of consequence, he came back firing. In some fights it was his undoing but in other fights, against Quarry, Bonavena, Martin, Patterson and Lyle, it prevented them from taking their liberties with him and either tilted the fight in his favor or kept him in a bout that he was closely trailing.

Jimmy Ellis was not only a good man who was liked by all who met him, but he was the personification of confidence and courage in what many have referred to as the cruelest and most unforgiving sport of all.

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El Dude says:

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A moment of silence for the man who went Toe 2 Toe with the one and only Legend, Ali. "From Louisville Kentucky, weighing 189 lbs. The former WBA Heavy Weight Champion Jimmy Ellis", was the calling to the fans from the announcer who named the rival of the great Muhammad Ali. Rest in peace champ and from above send a message of love to our loved ones and give the Boxers your blessing from above as they do what you did which was doing what many call impossible. We all have our moments and our time to do what we do and Boxing was what Jimmy loved to do. Long Live The Champ from Kentucky, Jimmy Ellis, we will miss you dude. El Dude Paying respect.

Radam G says:

Nice Sweet Science copy about one of the best human to ever be in the seedy hurt business.

A thousand salutes to you, Super Boxing Journalist F-Lo.

Big James, or Jimmy, as most people called him, was also an outstanding coach for the famed Muhammad Ali Boxing Club, based in Santa Monica, Cali, during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

I will always have much luv for Big James for teaching me how to shoot stealth sneak crosses when I was still a rubrat.

May Big James enjoy all what is wonderful in the afterlife. Holla!

dino da vinci says:

Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr. Frank Lotierzo...

The Commish says:

Simply another great piece by F-Lo.

Jimmy Ellis was the first big-time fighter I ever interviewed. I was in college and as a final for a sportswriting course, we had to interview a professional athlete, by contacting a team or the league. Most of my fellow students chose the Knicks, Rangers, Giants, Jets, Mets & Yankees. I was the only one who chose a boxer.

It was early February, 1969, and on February 15, Joe Frazier would be facing Jimmy Ellis in Madison Square Garden. I called the MSG Boxing Department, and asked for John F.X. Condon, an executive with MSG Sports. Boxing was Condon's favorite sport, and he waqs always the go-to guy when the local boxing beat writers needed a quote.

I asked Condon if I could interview Joe Frazier (who would, in later years, become one of my best friends), but Condon laughed me off saying, "Kid, go interview the quarterback of your college football team." I whined and pleaded and groveled (something I've honed, perfected and fine-tuned over the years), and convinced Condon to let me do an interview. But instead of

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Frazier, he told me I could have Jimmy Ellis--for 10 minutes--but only after each of the local writers finished talking with him.

When I finally had my one-on-one with Ellis, he could sense I was nervous. I told him I was a big fight fan, but admitted this was my first interview with a professional athlete.

"Hey, don't be nervous," he said. "Believe it or not, I get nervous every time I do an interview. So, knowing that, let's have fun.

We did. The 10 minutes--before Condon yelled "Time's up, kid!"--seemed like 10 seconds.

Over the years, I got to know Jimmy Ellis quite well. Whenever he was in New York, he would visit me, first in my office at The Ring Magazine, and in later years, in my office in the New York State Athletic Commission.

All my colleagues loved him. He treated everybody with respect. One time, while walking across the street from my NYSAC office with Jimmy, he rushed from my side. I watched as he ran across the street. My eyes followed him. He had seen a mother, struggling to get her wheelchair-bound daughter up the curb onto the sidewalk. He gave the mother an assist.

Jimmy Ellis was more than just a champion in the ring. He was a champion out of it, too.

R.I.P. Jimmy Ellis.