

Remembering Joe Frazier
By Jim Carney Jr.

The first time I ever heard of Joe Frazier was in a Ring magazine article which noted that the 1964 Olympic heavyweight champion was turning professional. Shortly thereafter a Sports Illustrated article stated that the heavyweight division was enjoying an influx of promising young fighters. Included were Frazier, James J Woody, Jerry Quarry and several others. Boxing historian and reporter Nat Fleischer, though he spoke well of all those mentioned in the article, seemed to feel that Quarry was a more spirited fighter than Frazier.

Frazier was initially but one of the cream of a larger-than-usual crop of heavies. He first cracked the ratings when he scored a victory over one of the toughest of this group, Oscar Bonavena, an Argentinian with a big punch and a colorful and eccentric personality, who had just cracked the ratings by winning a close split decision over contender George Chuvalo. Bonavena was about a year and a half older than Frazier in both age and experience and had approximately twice as many fights. His record included a loss to long-time contender Zora Folley but that was only Oscar's ninth pro fight. Frazier came off the floor twice to win a disputed split decision and was on his way.

In his next two bouts, Joe pulled away from the pack when he crushed veteran Eddie Machen – who had fought almost all of the top heavies of the previous decade – and Doug Jones, who had lost by only an eyelash to the then Cassius Clay three years earlier. Matched against Chuvalo, who –like Joe – had fought a basically even battle with Bonavena , Frazier became recognized as a threat to the champion Muhammad Ali, who was starting to appear invincible. Joe stopped the never kayoed, never floored, brutally tough Chuvalo in four rounds. One Frazier left hook nearly popped one of George's eyeballs out of his head. My friend Geoff Sindelar – who later became Cleveland's top-rated radio sports talk show hosts – saw Frazier as the coming man and thought he would eventually be the fighter who would stop Ali. I also saw Joe as the best of the new faces and clearly the second best of the heavies. And an article in the Police Gazette dubbed Joe “The Man Who Will beat Muhammad Ali.”

Several months earlier, the then universally recognized heavyweight champion Ali had had his title withdrawn by both the World Boxing Association and the New York Board for refusing to be drafted into the Army. He was still recognized as champion in Europe and by Ring magazine. Frazier was chosen by the WBA for its elimination tournament along with Jimmy Ellis, Ernie Terrell, Thad Spencer, Karl

Mildenberger, Jerry Quarry, Floyd Patterson and Oscar Bonavena. Perhaps in order to make him stand out more as the hottest prospect, Joe and his manager Yancy “Yank” Durham spurned the tourney and was replaced by Leotis Martin. Joe and his old amateur nemesis Buster Mathis – who had beaten Frazier twice in the amateurs – were chosen to fight for New York’s version of the title.

In the amateurs, Mathis, who fought at 260-280 pounds, had speed and durability (but not stamina that rivaled Ali’s), only had to fight three rounds. Lo and behold, if the fight had been another three-rounder Buster would have won again. The fight was basically even after six rounds, but Mathis was out of gas after that and collapsed like a mountain of Jello from a Frazier left hook to the head. In the meantime, Jimmy Ellis won the WBA tourney and many continued to recognize the undefeated Ali as champ. As a result there were now a record three heavyweight titleholders (commonplace in 2012 but an oddity at the time).

Initially, Frazier was a fighting champion, winning an exciting brawl with Manuel Ramos, who hit Joe with what he said was the hardest blow he’d been struck with up until then. Joe won two-thirds of the rounds in a tough rematch with Bonavena. He ran over Dave “The Animal” Zyglicz in one round and went two rounds of hell with the endurance-challenged Jerry Quarry, who burned himself out trying to beat Joe in his own style and was stopped in seven. Frazier was then matched with Jimmy Ellis and, with Ali proclaiming that he was retired, it seemed that the winner would become the undisputed champion. However, as with some other champs – most notably James J Corbett – Ali’s retirement was not taken seriously.

Frazier, as he had done with Quarry and Mathis, put pressure on Ellis, considered a talented but stamina-short fighter. After winning the first round, Jimmy unraveled and exited in five. Even more than the Chuvalo fight, this was Joe’s most awesome performance in terms of punching power. At that time, for the first time, I definitely picked Frazier over Ali if and when they would meet.

When Muhammad came back a few months later, I again became uncertain. He faced Jerry Quarry, who Ellis barely had edged in a split decision, and stopped the Irishman in three easy rounds, turning Jerry’s face into a mask of blood. Ali appeared to be as good, if not better, than he was before his three-year layoff.

A month later, Frazier faced Bob Foster, a great light heavyweight champion who lacked a flair for fighting bigger men. Joe had his usual sluggish start, accentuated by an attempt to demonstrate his skills as a scientific boxer. As we watched the fight in a theater, one of my friends - an Ali fan - was gloating until Joe quickly

destroyed Bob with his left hook.

The next month, Ali fought Joe's nemesis Bonavena. While stylistically it was understood that Oscar would be a headache for Joe, he seemed made for Ali. He had looked awful early in his career against stylist Zora Folley, had barely beaten a washed-up Folley years later and had not been able to use his superior endurance to avoid losing a unanimous decision to the stamina-short Ellis. But Oscar's inconsistency was not really based on styles. He was a fighter who tended to fight at the level of his opposition. And when faced with greatness, he fought at least almost great in his own clumsy way. There was little to choose between the two fighters until the 15th round when Ali, tired and not normally the top echelon hitter his physical qualities should have made him, put his weight, great speed and highly underrated strength into three left hooks (not normally his best punch) and put Oscar down and out. Frazier's greatest fan Geoff Sindelar was smiling and enthusiastic about Ali's problems just before the kayo. The smile instantly disappeared as Bonavena went down the first time.

After that there was only the anticipation of the Ali-Frazier confrontation, which was aptly being called the battle of the century. All the carrying on before the fight was interesting but I concentrated on who I thought would win. I'd leaned toward Frazier after the Ellis fight, Ali after Quarry and then Frazier again after the Foster match. The Ali-Bonavena fight only made the pick harder. While having trouble with Oscar was more of a negative for Ali than for Frazier, his stoppage of Bonavena seemed to indicate that he might now be able to match Joe in power, which would ultimately nullify Joe's edge in any match-up. Finally I decided that my pick was Frazier based on the fact that Ali ultimately seemed to see Joe as just another foe, while Joe was very much aware of who he was fighting. "Don't worry, Frazier's a bum," Ali proclaimed to his mother Odessa Clay. "Honey, his worried mother replied, 'Frazier is no bum.'"

While I picked Frazier and overall was a fan of both men, I was rooting for Ali. This was not because I was enchanted with his speeches about race, religion or politics. I really didn't care about these things either way. I favored Ali because he was entertaining and frequently defended his title. At that time Frazier wasn't defending his title as frequently as Ali had. I also saw Ali as a fighter of my generation who was gaining recognition as an all-time great. Given that it's initially hard for any fighter to get this kind of recognition, I felt that if Frazier defeated Ali, Ali would lose this budding recognition and Frazier, who had been around four years less, wouldn't necessarily gain equal status with the "experts." In other words, it was a generational pride issue. I now realize that every generation

of fighters faced similar skepticism by ring “authorities” of previous generations.

I had the privilege of being at Madison Square Garden for the fight. It was a hellacious bout for both men. Many of the rounds were really close and technically the fight could have gone either way. There were those who picked Ali as the winner, but most – including this writer – thought the decision was just. Ali was in danger of being stopped twice while Joe was never in that kind of trouble. Muhammad also wasted a certain amount of time resting and clowning while Joe was continually busy. There were those who argued that Ali deserved the win because Joe ultimately suffered more damage but this was due to his own exertion as well as from Ali’s punches.

The period when Joe was the undisputed champion was for me, and I’m sure many of his other fans, the most disappointing of his career. Somehow, the world’s number one fighter decided to open up another career as a singer. After listening to a tape of Joe’s singing – which Sindelar had obtained – I can honestly say that he was the worst singer I’d ever heard. Not just among people who sang for a living but among everyone I’ve ever heard sing. Joe and his band “The Knockouts” performed all over the world.

Ali’s insults about Joe’s looks notwithstanding, Frazier cut a rather handsome figure in his tux, it was the singing that was ugly. Attendance at his concerts went down, down, down, down to Joe’s extreme chagrin. He was both indignant and puzzled when Ali turned down Joe and the Knockouts as part of a double bill along with his own closed circuit fight against Jimmy Ellis. Ali did not necessarily turn this down because of hostility but because he believed it would hurt the gate. Unfortunately Joe persevered with the Knockouts until at least 1994. In the first two years after beating Ali, Joe made two unimpressive defenses against unrated fighters. In each case, the once Spartan Frazier came in 10 pounds overweight.

Joe was next matched with former Olympic champion George Foreman. Much bigger and stronger than Frazier – at least in the upper body – and an even harder puncher with an iron chin, Foreman had compiled an awesome knockout record, although mostly against stiffs. However, he had beaten Frazier’s time in stopping the iron-hard Chivalo in three rounds. He was a very fast starter, usually knocking opponents out in the first three stanzas. This was a huge stylistic advantage over the slow-starting Frazier.

But Joe seemed to take George no more seriously than he did his two previous defenses against Ron Stander and Terry Daniels. His trainer Eddie Futch described

Frazier's fight preparation as "a vacation for everybody, especially Joe." Futch advised him to stay away from the stage in the hotel lounge and begged him not to sing. Not surprisingly, Futch found Joe in the lounge belting out songs, perspiration running down the lapels of his jacket and Eddie pulled the microphone out of his hands and yanked him from the stage.

The result of this fight was a shocker. Foreman floored Frazier six times and the bout was stopped in six rounds. Joe had only one more bout in 1973, an unimpressive decision over talented but lazy Joe Bugner. Many people felt that Smokin' Joe was washed up. Meanwhile, Ali had been fighting frequently and impressively. But after his own disappointing win over Bugner and splitting two close bouts with Frazier's former sparring partner Ken Norton, Ali was also adjudged as being over the hill. So the two were matched again. Once more it was close and this time Ali won. Again a majority of fans, including this one, felt that the verdict was fair. But also again, there was a sizeable minority dissent. Ali had landed more blows, including the best one of the fight. But it could be argued that he should have lost enough rounds for excessive holding for Joe to have deserved the nod.

Frazier's next bout would rank with his bouts with Ellis (I), Chuvalo and Ali (I) as one of his best. Jerry Quarry always had a knack of repackaging himself. After one of his losses, there would inevitably be a "second coming" of Jerry Quarry as a "new" Jerry Quarry. Part of this was related to Quarry being white and a mostly (but not totally) media-related fuss over him as a great white hope. Also significant (and usually unsaid) was that, unlike Chuvalo, Bonavena, Bugner and the handful of other good Caucasian heavyweights since Rocky Marciano, Quarry was an American. Jerry was also genuinely talented, if flawed. But beyond that Quarry had a knack of selling himself. Or as one article after the second bout with Frazier put it, "Jerry Quarry did a great job of selling himself but Joe Frazier wasn't buying." Joe came out smoking and, after three rounds, punched Jerry from pillar to post for a five-round kayo. Before his next title shot, Frazier had one more bout, a 10-round stoppage of Ellis.

Meanwhile, Ali combined his defensive skill with Foreman's stamina problems to stop George in eight rounds and reclaim his title. A rubber match was then set up with Frazier. In a fight just as brutal as their first, there was little to choose from for 12 rounds. But Ali worked on Joe's already vulnerable vision and by round 13 Frazier was having trouble fending him off. Joe was brutally hammered in the 13th and 14th rounds and Eddie Futch wouldn't let him come out for the 15th. Ali had proved his slight superiority – or had he? According to some, Ali was ready to stay

in his corner while Joe was said to want to keep going. Perhaps it's better that neither one of these great fighters ever achieved dominance over the other.

It can certainly be argued that both fighters left their real fistic greatness in this ring. Ali stayed active scoring some good wins but still obviously heading rapidly downhill. An out of shape Frazier lost his last major bout, being knocked out in five by his old nemesis Foreman. This time Joe had the right strategy, instead of trying to outslug the awesome Foreman, Joe – who was actually an excellent defensive fighter except when in trouble - tried to box big George until Foreman ran out of gas. However, about 15 pounds over his best fighting weight, a flabby Smoking Joe burned out first.

In 1981, Joe came back to fight fringe contender Jumbo Cummings to a dull draw. This was his last fight. For years afterwards, Joe concentrated on training other fighters. He was a good to great trainer for conditioning, teaching and a good manager for getting his fighters opportunities. But he couldn't resist imposing his own style on fighters who had different basic fistic strengths and weaknesses. His son Marvis Frazier and 1972 Olympic runner-up Duane Bobick adopted Frazier-like aggressive styles but lacked Joe's durability while emulating his lack of skill under fire. Another Frazier trainee, "Smokin" Bert Cooper, was more in Joe's image in terms of physical equipment and natural style but lacked the training, discipline and motivation to reach his potential.

All in all, Joe was a popular ex-champion. A moody, stern and occasionally bitter but good-hearted and likeable man. But just as Ali's unnecessary abuse of Joe prior to their fights had cheapened Muhammad, so did Joe's vindictiveness toward his old rival in later years do him little credit. He ridiculed Muhammad's physical condition and religion and expressed how eager he was to bury him in his grave. When Ali carried the torch for the 1996 Olympics, Joe noted that he'd liked to have thrown him into the fire he had lit. There were times when Joe appeared to reconcile with Ali, but the bitterness seemed to always come back. Joe was, however, gracious to Ali's daughter Laila when she scored a split decision over his one daughter, Jacqui, by embracing both women after the fight. Hopefully, Frazier finally fully forgave his old foe when he saw the ailing Ali standing in respect during the funeral eulogy for Joe. Ultimately, Joe will be remembered as both a good man and a great fighter. While most would agree that he was one of the greatest heavyweight champions of all time, a relative few label him THE greatest.

It's this author's opinion that if Joe had kept his original dedication to his chosen sport and not gotten involved in singing with the Knockouts, he might well have

gotten the best of the Ali series, found a way to solve George Foreman and had far more support as the very best. As it was, he was the winner in what many consider the greatest heavyweight bout of all time. He is greatly missed.