

Philadelphia Fighters

The Golden Era of Greatness

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Smokin' Joe Frazier

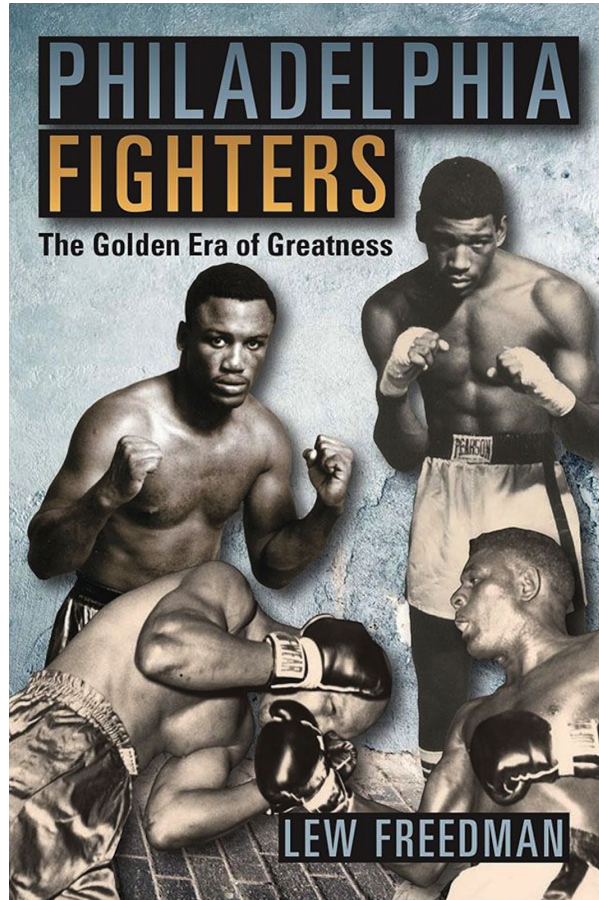
Boxing is sport as war, without the determination to kill, maim or capture territory. It is a challenging, brutal and demanding sport, but when two great practitioners of the "sweet science" are matched, they can steal the breath from a crowd and make memories that endure for lifetimes.

It is said that the true measure of greatness is the confrontation with an equal, not simply dominance over the weaker. And while Muhammad

Ali and Joe Frazier would have been regarded as all-time greats whenever they inhabited the heavyweight division, their time was the same time and their head-to-head battles defined an age of boxing.

They also became a metaphor for great sporting clashes, as in saying that a football game was an Ali-Frazier fight. Ali-Frazier became a synonym for classic meetings in sport. The men were each other's foil, and their incredible skill and will to win on display three times can without hyperbole be termed the greatest individual rivalry in the history of sport.

Circumstances allowed both men to become heavyweight champions, both after representing the United States and winning gold in the Olympics. Ali won the title first, but then was suspended from the game because he declared himself a conscientious objector and refused to accept induction into the Army. He was the champion of the young fans who loved his braggadocio, jokes, poetry and swift fists.



When Muhammad Ali was tossed out of the sport temporarily as he took his case against military service to the Supreme Court, Joe Frazier stepped in and won the title. A good man with a big heart, Frazier brought a deep-seated ferocity to the ring, and his fists were sledgehammers capable of beating down anything in his way. The Frazier trademark was a left hook that gave opponents indigestion when it struck their stomachs. It was as important to Frazier's arsenal as the hook shot was to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. When he was at his best, Joe was very difficult to hit. His defensive style, bobbing and weaving, protected him from opponents' biggest shots.

Ali had movement and style in his favor. Frazier had power and pride in his when they first fought on March 8, 1971 in New York City. Frazier, proving his fill-in as champion was far more than that, won a 15-round decision. He walked out of the ring still in possession of the heavyweight crown, one of the most valuable properties in sport. The two met a second time in January 1974 when neither was champion. George Foreman had lifted Frazier's title. Ali won this time in a 12-round decision. Their third fight, "The Thrilla in Manila," came in 1975 after Ali improbably regained the crown from Foreman.

In the 14th round, with Ali pouring it on, Frazier's trainer, Eddie Futch, refused to let his man go out and take more punishment for the sake of going the 15-round distance. The fight propelled the series into boxing lore and also sent both men to the hospital because their equality in the ring was almost too much for their bodies to take. The three-fight series ensured that when Ali and Frazier retired, they both departed the sport as legends.

He may have been born in South Carolina, but Joe Frazier built his legend in Philadelphia, raised his children in Philadelphia, and opened his gym in Philadelphia. Frazier was 32-3 after losing to Ali the second time and did not believe he was through as a contender. He was just shy of his 31st birthday.

Joe Frazier lost his title to young George Foreman in Jamaica and was knocked down six times. Foreman was much bigger, with a longer reach, and the comparatively stationary Frazier could not cope with Foreman's explosive punches. After recovering from the last title bout with Ali, Frazier engaged in a rematch with Foreman in June 1976, but that didn't go well, either.

By the time I had my car towed from in front of Joe's gym, he was nurturing son Marvis' impending move from amateur to the pro ranks. He also kept busy playing nightclub dates as the front-man singer for a group billed as "Joe Frazier and The Knockouts." People came to listen, but not many critics were kind. Frazier had other businesses going, including a limousine service and a barbeque restaurant, and he acted in beer commercials.

Thus I was startled when an interview session back at the gym (this time legally parked) in January 1981 turned into an announcement of an impending Joe Frazier comeback to the ring. It was a couple of days before Frazier's 37th birthday, and although four and a half years had passed since he last threw a bunch in anger (or better put, for pay), Joe thought he was in fine shape, needing to lose just 10 pounds from the 235 he weighed. Also, studious attention to the top-10 heavyweight rankings convinced him that there was no one around who could prevent him from earning a title shot against World Boxing Council champ Larry Holmes or World Boxing Association champ Mike Weaver.

"Who out there can beat me?" Frazier declared, a firm look of confidence on his face. "Nobody. I am the best in the business. There ain't nobody out there who can hold their head up and say, 'I'm the champion.' There's nobody walking proud.

Larry Holmes, for one, would have disputed that. Only a couple of months earlier, he had put the same foolish intentions of a comeback for Muhammad Ali to rest with a thorough beating in Las Vegas. Ali looked as if he was in shape, but Holmes was younger and stronger and simply overwhelmed him. Mike Weaver was less dangerous, but at Frazier's age, after all that layoff time, anybody would be dangerous.

It takes phenomenally single-minded focus to whip a body into top, firm shape for a high-level boxing match. Running long distances, sparring many rounds, belting that heavy bag for long periods of time, all are required. Almost all boxing comebacks end badly, fueled by too much bravado and too little training. Frazier insisted he had never been out of shape: "I ain't never left. I've been in the gym from the time I retired. I've run on the road with my music group."

Being in the gym training other fighters is not the same as being in the gym training oneself. This appeared to be an ill-advised quest, but it was the job of his wife, Florence, his children and his close personal friends to get that message across to Frazier, not the sporting media.

Joe had a simple game plan in mind. Clearly, he would be trading upon his good name to get a bout with someone in the top 10. It didn't matter much to him who it was, though he kind of liked the notion of fighting Leon Spinks, who for an eye-blink of six months in 1978 had borrowed the heavyweight crown from Ali in one of boxing's greatest upsets before returning it to him in a rematch defeat.

The way Frazier saw it, he would beat one guy in the top 10 and then get a title shot against either Holmes or Weaver, beat one of them, remind the world of his greatness and then retire again—two fights and out.

"There are too many champions," Frazier stated. "I want to show them I can beat them and I'm still the best." Frazier was never a theoretical philosopher. When he said something, he meant it. So despite the caveat that he needed his five daughters' permission to go ahead with this plan, he sounded serious.

At some point during these public ruminations about his comeback, an 8-by-10 folder that appeared to be the beginning of the campaign to promote Frazier's return came into my hands. More than 30 years later, I still have it. The front cover of the four-page foldout featured a nice sketch of Frazier's head, as if he was modeling for a bust, and a glove-encased fist. It was accompanied by the words: "The Fire Is Back in the Heavyweight Division Now...watch out for the smoke. Smokin' Joe Frazier, Comeback '81." The other three pages of the handout were blank, waiting to be filled in with information about Frazier's comeback fight.

Just six weeks later, I was back in Frazier's office in his gym, listening to him say that he had shelved the entire comeback idea. His family had given him the OK. That wasn't the problem. He didn't really need the money (although he would have liked to get more). That wasn't the issue. But Marvis was 2-0 and back in action after an injury layoff, and he needed his father's help with training. Likewise, the other raw boxers working out in the gym also needed him. He couldn't abandon them: "My boys, I can't leave them alone. I don't

know nobody in the world who can do my job. I've got a gym full of guys and they need me."

Eddie Futch, Frazier's longtime trainer, was credited in the third Ali-Frazier bout for having the resolve to stop the fight because he worried about Joe's overall health if it continued even for one more round. He did not wish to see an older and slower Frazier come out of retirement and risk his well-being. "Joe was a great fighter," Futch admitted. "He left a legacy to the boxing world of fine performance. I would hate to see him go in there as a shadow of himself and destroy that image."

That was the end of that—we thought. Likely the right decision—we thought. Let Joe teach his son and a younger generation the finer points of the fight game.

Some months later, I was given a tip that seemed almost too stunning to believe. There had been a plan afoot for a fourth Ali-Frazier fight, the two old-timers meeting for another fight in their epic series in Atlantic City during the summer of 1981. The talks had gone beyond the loose discussion stage and a venue was selected—the Playboy Hotel & Casino. Ali had fought in Las Vegas in October 1980, and although he went into the ring at Caesars Palace at a trim 218 pounds, he was easily dispatched by Larry Holmes in a title fight. Frazier had been talking comeback since January. Presumably, those two circumstances had sparked in someone's brain the idea that they should get together one more time for something beyond coffee and cake.

An Ali legal representative approached the New Jersey State Athletic Commission and chairman Jersey Joe Walcott, a former heavyweight champ, and his deputy, Robert W. Lee, discussed the matter. They wrote a letter to Ali in care of his associates and listed pre-fight conditions that had to be fulfilled because both men were more than 35 years of age.

The letter laid out a plan for a New Jersey license. Both Ali and Frazier were required to journey to Trenton and pass a detailed physical examination. Then they would have to engage in an exhibition of at least six rounds while wearing heavier-than-usual 12-ounce gloves. Then it would be up to Walcott to determine if they should be licensed. The back-and-forth communication took place in the spring, but there was no follow-up and the plan evaporated.

Such a match-up between the two old adversaries would have been a shocking development. By the time I heard about these discussions and reported them in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the idea was dead. Muhammad Ali had not officially gone back into retirement, however, and did fight one more time in December 1981, losing to Trevor Berbick in the Bahamas. That was his last hurrah.

Despite Joe Frazier's February proclamation, the itch to fight again had wormed itself under his skin, and while he pretended he had no need to scratch it, before the year was out, Frazier escalated his comeback from talk to reality. He too would fight in December, although not against Ali and not in the Bahamas. Once again the two protagonists were on parallel trails, but I never again heard a whisper that any additional talks took place to arrange that fourth fight. In light of the results of the separate December Ali and Frazier fights, that made sense.

Frazier dug up an opponent, found a venue and three weeks before Christmas 1981, my Philadelphia colleagues and I were in Chicago to witness the boxing comeback of one of the legends of the sport. Joe Frazier, now only a month shy of his 38th birthday, couldn't talk himself out of finding what he had left.

Frazier was the youngest of 13 children on the 50-acre farm in Beaufort, South Carolina tilled by his father, Rubin. For some reason, when he was born, his dad declared that "this will be my famous son." Rubin died in 1965 without knowing just how true his words would prove. Joe Frazier still had the fame, and he did not need this notoriety at a comparatively advanced boxing age—at least that's what everyone said out loud. But apparently he did or he wouldn't have committed to this highly suspect errand of a scheduled 10-round fight at the Chicago International Amphitheatre.

If Frazier had expected the boxing world to welcome him back after almost five years of inactivity by throwing big money at him, he guessed wrong. There were millions of dollars to be had in the fight game at that time, but his share of the purse for the comeback bout was \$85,000, plus \$15,000 in training expenses. That was recompense for his name because other fighters

not competing for championships were being paid much less, even if they headlined a card.

Frazier was not going up against Leon Spinks, as he had hoped some months earlier, and he was not going up against any ranked fighter. His opponent was Floyd "Jumbo" Cummings, a heavyweight with a 17-1 record who was originally from Mississippi, but whose home address in recent years had been a variety of Illinois institutions specializing in incarceration.

A couple of days before the fight, Frazier met the press on a cold Chicago afternoon, and his give-and-take was lighthearted. Inevitably, he was asked if he was fighting because he needed the money, often the root cause of boxing comebacks. He didn't say yes and he didn't really say no, although his old connection to Cloverly, his original backers, meant that he was paid \$70,000 a year out of a trust fund.

"I always need money," Frazier remarked as he towed sweat from his brow. "I love money. I love to spend money, to party." It was not clear just what to take from that comment, but spending any time talking to Joe about this adventure made it seem too simplistic to conclude that it was only about the money.

Maybe Frazier believed he had retired too early. Maybe he truly believed he could whip any man in the house, or the rankings themselves. "I found out I had something left," Joe reflected at one point. He had to learn that piece of information in the gym, when he was working with the boys. "I've been training, running, going to bed early, staying away from the partying. Believe me, that's a hard job."

There was plenty of skepticism about just what kind of shape Frazier kept himself in while training others in the gym, but Marvis spoke up for him, announcing that not only did the family support his dad, but that his dad still packed a pretty good wallop. "He's taking it and dishing it out," the younger Frazier said of the action at his father's gym.

Joe Frazier's comment about resisting the party life drew laughs from the assembled crowd. Everyone wished him well. They doubted that his comeback would go very far. He was never a big heavyweight, though very muscular and sturdily built, standing five-feet-eleven. For Frazier's first fight

against Muhammad Ali, he weighed 205 pounds. But heavyweights were not only younger, they were getting bigger.

Floyd Cummings was nearly six-feet-three and weighed in at 228 pounds. His biceps bulged, mostly from weightlifting during 12 years at the Joliet penitentiary, not from picking cotton as a youth in Getback, Mississippi. Cummings was 30, but at age 16, he drove the getaway car in a robbery which left one person killed, and he was originally sentenced to at least 50 years in prison. Floyd pumped so much iron behind bars that he bulked up to 275 pounds and gained the nickname "Jumbo the Elephant." Losing pounds reduced the nickname to just Jumbo.

Cummings was a surprise attendee at one of Joe Frazier's workouts, and he looked dashing in a cowboy hat and a red-and-white jacket that had the words "Believe It" scrolled on the sleeves. Cummings tapped Frazier in the mid-section and told him he was soft. Frazier just chuckled and thanked him for fighting an old man when other boxers wouldn't sign to face him. "I'll remember you in my will," Joe promised.

Frazier weighed in at 229 pounds, the most of his career, and that number may have served as confirmation that he was a bit soft around the mid-section. Indeed, once the contest began, the once-firm belly of Frazier did some jiggling as he boxed

Neither man moved around the ring very quickly. Both plodding heavyweights, the fighters actually resembled elephants, not merely the aptly named Jumbo. There was little speed in their movement, but there was sting in their punches. It was not surprising to see Frazier unload his favorite left hook with abandon and stagger the larger Cummings with it on occasion. It was more surprising to see Cummings draw blood from Frazier's mouth and for the former champ's left eye to be nearly closed by punches.

What both men lacked was the precision timing they needed to take control of the fight. It was more alarming in Frazier's case, though it should not have caught too many of the 6,500 observers in attendance off-guard. He was rusty after being away from the ring so long, despite his protestations of maintaining his crispness in the gym. And as the eighth round passed, it appeared as if age had caught up to Frazier, too. He was definitely slowing.

The bout went the distance and ended in a draw. The judges' scores were very close, and each man believed he should have been declared the winner. "I thought I won the decision," Frazier recalled.

Joe was ahead early on, for sure, but he probably lost that edge in the eighth. Still, there were times when he was smiling in the ring and seemed to enjoy himself. He was back in his element. Frazier began almost every round by trying to land a roundhouse hook on Cummings' head. He got some of them in, but didn't score much with the big swings. When they went toe-to-toe, however, the old hook did some damage to the body, and the short shots connected to Cummings' head.

But the eighth round changed the picture. It certainly had to seem like more than three minutes long to Frazier. That was the dominant round for Floyd, who backed Joe up along the ropes with several shots to the head and then trapped him in a neutral corner and unleashed 15 straight blows. The fight was close enough that any result would have been hard to protest. On my unofficial scorecard, I had Cummings ahead by one point, a direct result of a generous two-point spread in the eighth. If not for that, I too would have called it a draw.

In my heart, I wanted to see Joe Frazier win. I knew him and I didn't know Floyd Cummings. I knew of his legend and place in boxing history, and although I didn't think the smart move was to return to the ring after such a long layoff, I didn't want him to be defeated or embarrassed

Somehow the draw seemed an appropriate result. Cummings could always say that he went the distance with the great Joe Frazier. He later lost to such well-known heavyweights as Frank Bruno, Mitch Green, Renaldo Snipes and Tim Witherspoon. Although Floyd Cummings' record was said to be 17-1 when he met Frazier, other sources give his lifetime boxing mark as 15-6-1. Worse for him, in 2002, he went back to prison. He was sentenced to serve a life term for armed robbery.

In the immediate aftermath of the fight, Frazier seemed reasonably content with the draw. He felt he had shown something by withstanding Cummings' pressure in the eighth round without being knocked down, and he could see

losing some weight and taking another fight over the coming months. In his mind, the comeback was still on.

A day after the bout, Frazier's face was not an advertisement for skin cream. He had facial lumps and wore dark glasses to cover the swelling. But he dismissed his aches, saying, "I didn't get hurt. Bumps and bruises, so what? Everything I wanted to do, I did out there." Maybe, maybe not, since he didn't win and he didn't stop Cummings.

There were plenty of critics around who seemed likely to have a private moment or two with Frazier and tell him to give it up. Florence, his wife, only ventured a "No comment" on his showing, which was not a strong endorsement.

Butch Lewis, a boxing promoter and a close friend of Frazier's, offered a wise assessment: "I came because I love him. He has been a special individual to a lot of people in the world. But if everyone saw with their own eyes what I saw, we could say, 'Joe, you proved your point. Now let's quit while we're ahead.'"

It was Lewis who said that the one person Joe Frazier might listen to with advice about terminating his comeback was Marvis. I don't know if such a conversation ever took place, but the months came and went and there was no more discussion about another Joe Frazier fight; there were no summonses to the gym to talk about Joe's next opponent or about a fourth fight with Ali. The topic faded away, and the Frazier who increased the pace of his fight schedule was Marvis.

Joe Frazier had too much pride to say that he was over the hill. He was too proud to admit that he was too old to wage a fresh campaign to regain the heavyweight championship. He did not possess the kind of self-deprecating humor that would allow him to call a press conference, make fun of the erosion of the skills that made him world-famous, and pull off a retirement show.

Instead, he just stopped talking about fighting again. Months passed. Years passed. The official Joe Frazier boxing slate remained stagnant, the final bout on his record a 10-round draw against "Jumbo" Cummings in 1981.

I was glad that I had seen Frazier fight in person, although I knew I was not seeing the genuine model. But it was fun to be around him when he was thinking those grand thoughts all over again. And Joe Frazier remained on the scene, front and center with Marvis at all of his fights as a cornerman, so it wasn't as if he went into seclusion.

We could still visit Joe at his gym, still see him at ringside. The Philadelphia legend was still in the game.