

Joe Frazier, one of the greatest boxers of all time, has died from complications of liver cancer. He was 67 and lived his life to the fullest. He was one of the pioneers in the "Golden Years of Boxing". What I liked most about Joe is that what you saw in him in the early 1960's; you saw the same human traits up until his death. He was a good man, i.e. provider for his family (husband and father), philanthropist, role model for young men and a national treasurer/ambassador for our great nation. He certainly inspired me and had an affect on my molding.

Young Black males were having a love affair with the sport of boxing. Prior to Joe, came the great Muhammad Ali. He won the 1960 Olympic gold medal and started defeating people with an incredible fight schedule and a remarkable personality. In 1964, Joe won the Olympic gold medal. Both he and Ali seemed odd for heavyweight fighters. Their speed and Joe's height, 5'11", seemed out of place. Joe would say, "Yes, I am usually shorter than my opponents but I have knocked all of them out." Me and my crowd were in love with both of them.

Joe Frazier got the nickname Smokin' Joe because of the power of his punches and the fast repetitions of painful blows. An example of his ferociousness was the first time he came to Los Angeles. He was matched with Iron Man Thornton who was a local and undefeated at the time. In the fourth round, Joe threw his famous left hook and it connected with the right side of Thornton's chest. It knocked him out. Again, Joe threw a left hook to Thornton's chest and knocked him out! From that day on he was Smokin' Joe.

From 1960 to 1985, the "Golden Age of Boxing" existed in America and the rest of the world. We were producing champions at all weight classes. Smokin' Joe, Ali, Liston, Foster, Leonard, Hagler, Hearns, Norton, the Spinks brothers (Leon and Michael), Foreman, Pryor and dozens more provided great entertainment and ushered in pay-per-view television. Las Vegas wouldn't be what it is today without hosting some of the greatest fights in history. These fighters were colorful and, most importantly, set good examples for the youth who followed them. Even the boxing announcers were colorful and became great marketers like the late Howard Cosell.

I studied them and came to one conclusion. Boxing training can be applied to football. My ambition was to play big time college football which would finance my education as my parents could not. Long distance running, punching bags, jumping rope became my disciplines. The rope transformed me into a very agile runner. The punching bags developed my forearm rip which is important to linebackers. The running made me a person who would not tire. Pretty soon many of my friends started down the same path. We were busy being conditioned and not

getting into trouble, i.e. drugs, theft and gang banging.

Boxing was big on network television. People would pay big bucks to go and watch a fight on a big screen at a movie theater and later in major arenas. It was big money and the fighters were keeping most of it which was a change in the sports/entertainment business. The notoriety played a key part in the formative years for young Blacks during this period. It was positive and inspirational.

Joe grew up very poor in Beaufort, South Carolina. He moved to Philadelphia and began working in meat packing plants. Sound familiar? Yes, Sylvester Stallone put Joe's background into his Rocky character which became quite famous also. I doubt if Joe ever wasted a penny. Anything he made would eventually make its way through his family members, church and community. Truly, this makes the term "Only in America" a confirmed reality.

Muhammad Ali was his nemesis but also his lifetime friend. Most people who fought Ali met their demise. Joe fought him not once but three times – the only boxer to do that. Each fight was close with Joe winning the first and Ali taking the last two. Each was a historical match and lived up to their billing with both fighters making millions of dollars. The third fight, "The Thrilla in Manila", showed the character of both fighters. They fought fourteen rounds mercilessly. An exhausted Ali was refusing to stand up and start the 15<sup>th</sup> round. Then they saw Frazier's team throw in the towel signaling surrender. Ali managed to stand up and won the fight. That is just how close all three of these fights were.

Boxing has since gone down now. There are few long-term champions and most have personal lives we don't want our children to emulate. Joe Frazier came during a "Golden Age" and his contributions made it a precious 25 years. Farewell Smokin' Joe; Heaven just recruited the best left hook ever.

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