

THE EIGHT MAN ELIMINATION TOURNAMENT

April 27th of this year will mark the thirty year anniversary of one of the World Boxing Association's crowning achievements. The grand finale of their eight man elimination tournament to find a successor for the deposed Muhammad Ali.

Acting with the swiftness matched only by Mr. Dooley of the New York State Athletic Commission, the W.B.A. immediately stripped Ali of his crown when he refused induction into the Armed Forces. Eight ranking contenders were chosen to box off for the ultimate prize, the heavyweight championship of the world. The fortunate eight were: former champion Floyd Patterson, Ex W.B.A. titleholder Ernie Terrell, the Argentine strongman Oscar Bonevena, the fast rising Californian Thad Spencer, Angelo Dundee's hopeful Jimmy Ellis, the "White Hope" sensation Jerry Quarry, 1964 Gold Medallist Joe Frazier, and Europe's entry Karl Mildenberger of Germany. Frazier, the #1 contender by virtue of his fine record since turning pro declined the W.B.A.'s invitation. The W.B.A. then inserted Leotis Martin to take his place.

The elimination tourney was scoffed at then and even today it is still scrutinized. What if the Vietnam War would not have wanted or needed Ali? What if Ali who had already "cleaned up" the division had remained active? Remember Ali defeated Patterson, Terrell, and Mildenberger, before he was forced to abdicate. He then won two out of three against Frazier and two over Quarry. He beat Patterson again and also whipped Bonevena and Ellis after his three year hiatus. Let's say Ali remained active through 1970. He might have met Frazier as early as 1969. Joe would have then been facing a lean, active and sharp Ali and not the slow and rusty version he met in their 1971 epic. Also remember Joe would have had two years less experience then what he carried in 1971. In 1969, Frazier was not yet the polished fighting machine he was to become. In my opinion the Frazier of March 8, 1971, would have given any heavyweight in history a life and death struggle including a prime Ali.

Muhammad would not have too much trouble beating the rest of the contenders. From 1964 to 1967, Ali made seven successful defenses. If he stayed on that pace from 1967 to 1970 he would accumulate seven more. So Ali successfully defends against Quarry and Bonevena maybe Spencer too. Now there is an interesting parallel as Sonny Liston has re-emerged as a contender with a victory over Henry Clark. While planning for a possible Ali-Liston III, Muhammad eliminates Frazier and then defeats the light heavyweight king Bob Foster. Meanwhile Leotis Martin upsets Liston and Ali has to fight the other boxer to knock out Sonny. Ali then beats unbeaten, but over rated Mac Foster to rack up his fourteenth defense. Outside of a possible jaunt to England to take on a young Joe Bugner or set up Ali-Henry Cooper III, there's not many new worlds for Ali to conquer. Maybe an easy payday in Spain against Jose Urtain. Bored, Ali eventually retires without ever a reason to come back since he whipped everybody. We the fans would never get to see "The Fight" of 1971 or his 1973 "Jaw Breaker" loss to Kenny Norton. We would miss the "Rumble In The Jungle" of 1974 and the "Thrilla In

Manila" of 1975. Ali-Wepner would have never happened, so Sly Stallone would have never been inspired to write "Rocky".

As unfair as it was to Ali to have three and a half years stolen from his career, it might have saved the heavyweight division. The elimination tournament, although not always exciting was at least competitive and complete with a few surprises. With Thad Spencer upsetting Ernie Terrell to start things off no one could clearly project a tourney winner. The absence of Frazier saw to that. Meanwhile Frazier was lining himself up for a nice payday because no matter who the W.B.A. called champion, they would not be accepted until they beat Frazier and Ali if he returned.

Jimmy Ellis and Leotis Martin the two underdogs of the tourney met with Ellis winning in nine rounds. Quarry scored a mild upset in shading ex-champion Patterson and Bonevena was too powerful as he overwhelmed a game Mildenberger. Coming off his impressive showing against Terrell, Spencer was favored to beat the erratic Quarry. Bonevena was thought to be too strong for Ellis who began his career as middleweight. Well Quarry battered Spencer stopping him in the twelfth round. Then Ellis in one of his career best performances dropped the usually durable Bonevena twice en route to a convincing points win. The championship match between Quarry and Ellis turned out to be the dullest bout of the tourney. After fifteen slow paced rounds Ellis was declared champion.

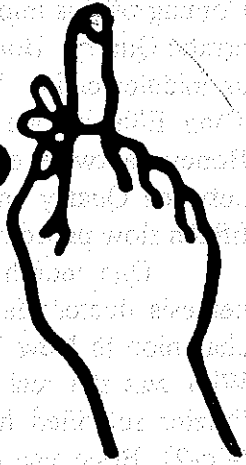
One month before Ellis defeated Quarry, Joe Frazier kayoed his amateur nemesis Buster Mathis in eleven rounds. The victory gained Frazier recognition as champion in New York state and in a few other states. Now the ballyhoo began. Who was the real champ Ellis or Frazier? Would Ali be allowed to box again? Frazier solidified his claim as Ali's successor with victories over Manuel Ramos (Ko-2), Bonevena (W-15), Dave Zyglewicz (Ko-1), and Quarry (K0-7). Ellis was virtually inactive, though not totally his fault. Proposed matches with Henry Cooper and Greg Peralta fell through for various reasons. When Ellis finally did defend his crown he was awarded a very controversial decision over Floyd Patterson. By the time Frazier and Ellis met in February of 1970, Joe was an overwhelming favorite. Few experts picked Ellis even though Angelo Dundee claimed Frazier was made for Ellis. It seemed like Dundee was a prophet during the first two rounds as Ellis outboxed Frazier. All was well until midway through the third round. That is when Joe landed his vaunted left hook that sent Ellis staggering half way across the ring and into the ropes. Ellis lasted the round but he never recovered. Late in the fourth round Frazier pinned Ellis in a corner and after a flurry of hooks Ellis fell flat on his face. He made it up in time and tried to keep Joe off of him until the bell. Frazier would not be denied and just before the bell he connected with a full swing left hook flush on the jaw. Ellis fell flat on his back. How he beat the count is a mystery. Somehow through the game Ellis struggled to his corner as the bell had already ended the round. Dundee had seen enough and showed compassion by not allowing Jimmy out for round five.

Before the Frazier-Ellis bout, Ali had announced his retirement and had stated that he would give his belt to the winner. Eight months later with his boxing license reinstated Ali met Jerry Quarry in Atlanta winning in three rounds. Meanwhile Frazier had broken his ankle and did not return to action till late 1970, with a

crushing knockout of Bob Foster. In December, Ali stopped Bonevena and finally Joe and Ali signed to fight on March 8, 1971, for then, the unheard sum of five million dollars to be split evenly. The rest as they say is history.

JIM AMATO

REMINDER



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