

Requiem for a heavyweight bout

by William C. Kashatus

On March 8, 1971, Philadelphia's Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali waged one of the greatest heavyweight boxing matches ever. In the 15th round, Frazier landed a hard left hook that caught Ali on the jaw and dropped him for a four-count. After enduring months of Ali's offensive remarks and racist stereotypes, Smokin' Joe had finally silenced the Butterfly. Minutes later, he left the ring as undisputed champion of the world.

Today, 30 years after the fight of the century, Frazier remains a home-town hero as well as an inspiration to anyone who ever dared to rise above seemingly hopeless circumstances.

Born Jan. 12, 1944, in Beaufort, S.C., Frazier was the son of a sharecropper and the youngest of 12 children. When his mother refused to let him play football, he took some of his father's old burlap bags, stuffed them with corncobs, Spanish moss and bricks, and began boxing with makeshift punching bags. Inspired by such legends as Sugar Ray Robinson, Joe Louis and Rocky Marciano (to whom he is often compared), Frazier dropped out of school at the age of 14 and left home, first for New York, and then Philadelphia.

In Philly, he took a job with a janitorial service and began working out at the Police Athletic League gym, strictly to lose weight. But Yancey "Yank" Durham, a pro trainer, recognized the young fighter's potential and took him under his wing.

In 1962, Frazier won a Philadelphia amateur heavyweight title and followed it up with three consecutive Middle Atlantic heavyweight titles. Named an alternate to the 1964 U.S. Olympic boxing team that competed in Tokyo, the 20-year-old fighter got his chance when Buster Mathis was injured during a practice bout. He seized the opportunity. In the heavyweight finals, Frazier defeated his German opponent, Hans Huber, to win the gold medal. The following year, he turned pro under the guidance of Durham, and reeled off 11 straight wins.

Frazier's budding success mirrored the American Dream, endearing many Philadelphians to him. "I'm a Philadelphia guy," he modestly admitted. "This is my home town,

and I want to do what's right for it."

To be sure, Joe Frazier was a boxer, nothing more, nothing less. In that respect, he was the polar opposite of Muhammad Ali, a colorful entertainer who made history but also happened to be a boxer. In that dual role, he had become the most controversial and widely known of all heavyweight champs.

Ali, born Cassius Clay, had been at the center of controversy since 1964 when he defeated Sonny Liston for the heavyweight title. Shortly after, he announced his ties to the Nation of Islam, an all-black religious group, notorious because of its advocacy of black self-defense and racial separatism. He also rejected his "slave" name in favor of a new one. Many sports-writers and boxing officials continued to refer to him as Clay and some even demanded that his title be withdrawn. The hostility increased in 1967, when he refused to be inducted into the Army, saying that his religion forbade him to do so. Stripped of his title, Ali was later convicted and sentenced to five years.

With Ali's exile from the sport, the heavyweight division was thrown into disarray. The World Boxing Association held an elimination tournament in 1968 to determine a new champ. Frazier won the title by defeating Buster Mathis on March 4, 1968, at Madison Square Garden. During the next two years, he made six defenses, including a fifth-round TKO of WBA champ Jimmy Ellis on February 16, 1970. When the Supreme Court overturned Ali's conviction four

months later, the stage was set for the so-called "Fight of the Century."

Ali prepared himself by knocking out top contenders Jerry Quarry and Oscar Bonavena and by instigating a media campaign to embarrass Frazier into a showdown. He labeled the Philadelphia boxer an "Uncle Tom," and played on racial stereotypes by calling him a "gorilla." Assuming the role of spokesman for his race, the outspoken Ali cajoled other black athletes and entertainers to follow in his footsteps.

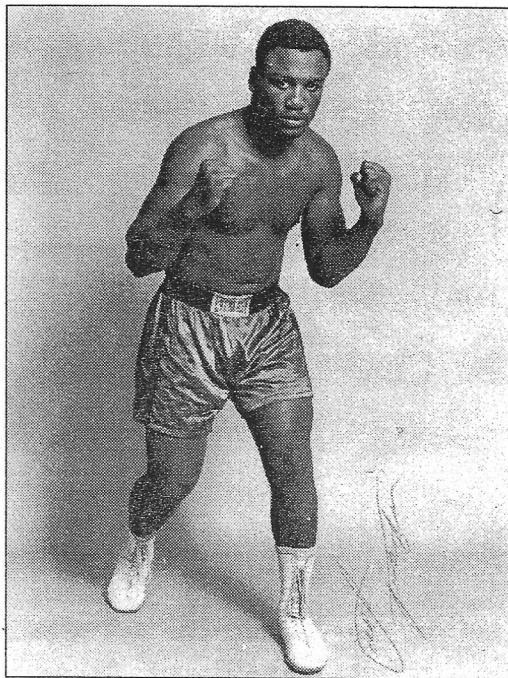
"I hate to see black men, once they get prestige, to go leave their race and marry somebody white," Ali said in a June 1970 interview in the *Black Scholar*. "That makes me so mad. Now the white man's got the heavyweight champion — Joe Frazier's got a white girlfriend."

On March 8, 1971, Frazier silenced Ali in a 15-round decision. Getting the nod from all three judges, he left the ring as the undisputed heavyweight champion of the world. He would retain that tide until Jan. 22,

1973, when he suffered the first loss of his professional career to George Foreman in Kingston, Jamaica.

Before retiring in 1976, Frazier would lose to Ali twice, in January 1974 and September 1975. But neither of those defeats — nor his unsuccessful comeback in 1981 — could tarnish the luster of their first bout, which transcended the sport of boxing itself. ■

William C. Kashatus is a professional historian who works at the Chester County Historical Society.



Joe Frazier helped make boxing history.

PHILADELPHIA DAILY
NEWS

THE PEOPLE PAPER