

Great Heavyweights

And the Punch Felt 'Round the World

by Henry Brown,

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When I first became the Two-Fisted Blogger, I didn't know much about all the public domain images available on the web (or even much about blogging, for that matter). When Blogspot prompted me to upload a banner, I went to my own digital scrapbook and chose a picture taken at the conclusion of Walcott/Marciano I. The photo captures what is arguably the most famous and dramatic one-punch knockout in history.

For 12 rounds and change (championship fights were 15 rounds in those days), spry, poised and cagey champion Jersey Joe Walcott outboxed the challenger Rocky Marciano. Undoubtedly, many in the Press were already writing Marciano

off as a „white hope.“ Sure, most of the victories comprising his perfect record were one-round K.O.s, but it was nothing new to see a brawling slugger rise to public awareness by blowing out a carefully selected succession of palookas, only to get his commupance when matched against a seasoned, skilled professional. In fact, every generation sees something similar happen, in any given weight division.

Jersey Joe Walcott's road to the heavyweight title was a rough, rocky one, loaded with adversity and disappointments. In 1947 he challenged Joe Louis for the heavyweight crown. Probably the greatest heavyweight of all time (more about that later), Louis was well past his prime by then, partially dehydrated for the fight, and in the dangerous position of having underestimated Jersey Joe. Walcott beat him soundly and deserved to go home with the belt by all accounts but, certainly not for the last time, ringside judges ignored the obvious and gave the fight to the champion.

Jersey Joe got a rematch with Louis seven months later, but the advantage of surprise was not his this time and the aged Brown Bomber put Walcott's lights out in the 11th round.

When Louis retired, Walcott faced the other top contender, Ezzard Charles, for the vacated title belt in 1949. He lost a decision to the quick, tough Cincinnati Cobra. Amazingly, he got a third title shot in 1951, but was outpointed by Charles again. But Jersey Joe never gave up. A couple months later he fought Charles yet again, and finally knocked him out, becoming the oldest man (37) to win the heavyweight championship up to that time. Heck, he'd been the oldest to challenge for it back when he met Joe Louis the first time.

Walcott was a solid, well-rounded fighter who could both dance and punch, as the situation dictated. Despite his age, he was not only in fantastic physical condition—he looked it, too. Jersey Joe had an enviable physique, and could have passed for a much younger athlete. On September 1952, he faced an undefeated challenger with questionable skills but an impressive knockout record.

Rocky Marciano's jock dream was to play baseball. After his WWII service, he still didn't look like much of a boxer. He was awkward, clumsy, and really too small, with arms too stubby, to have any kind of advantage in a professional fight. What he did have was a granite chin, iron fists driven by lightningbolts, and the heart of a lion. Trainer Charley Goldman is rumored to have used rope around Rocky's ankles during training to force him into the proper stance. After the conditioning took, the Rock may still not have been graceful, but he was a lot less clumsy. Only a cruiserweight by modern standards, Rocky smashed a punch-drunk swathe through the heavyweight ranks. Outsized by nearly everyone he faced, he nonetheless packed dynamite in each fist and nothing short of a wrecking ball could take him out of a fight. Still, he was largely dismissed as just a brawler until, sadly, he put an ignominious end to the comeback effort of his childhood hero Joe Louis.

When the Brockton Blockbuster got his title shot against Jersey Joe in 1952, his millions of fans had reason to panic for 12 punishing rounds as the champion stuck and moved, getting off first, out-thinking and outmaneuvering his younger opponent. He even dropped the Rock in the first round. Marciano jumped up quickly, more embarrassed than hurt, and stuck his face right back into Walcott's gloves. But he wasn't receiving a boxing lesson, as many observers assumed. He

resigned himself to absorbing whatever punishment was necessary, hoping he'd find an opening for that one punch that would turn everything around. Walcott always seemed to be two steps ahead of him, though, never presenting enough of a target for that bomb to land on.

After round 12, the Rock was cut up so bad that there was speculation that the referee might end the fight, awarding a TKO to Walcott, if Rocky didn't „do something, fast.“

In round 13, the Rock managed to herd his elusive foe against the ropes. He fainted with his left and, for some reason (probably gunshy-ness, for even a glancing blow from Marciano jolted the toughest of men to their nerve center), Walcott fell for this old, old ploy, slipping away from where he thought the punch was coming. He dodged right into the oncoming juggernaut the Rock called his „Suzy Q.“ The right cross Rocky threw traveled less than 6 inches, but landed like a freight train hauling nitroglycerine. When that murderous punch caught Joe flush, so did Father Time. Jersey Joe's Fountain of Youth elixir expired. His marvelous physique wrinkled up and blubbered out all over with flab not evident an instant before, as if every cell in his body simultaneously lost the motivation, discipline and resiliency he drew on to become a champion. Jersey Joe Walcott hit the canvas like the proverbial sack of potatoes, an old man.

The Brockton Blockbuster whirled and returned to his stool with all the cocksurety of someone who knew beyond any doubt that Jersey Joe would not beat the count. And with good reason—Marciano was one of the two men alive with any inkling of how hard the 38-year-old champion had just been hit. Jersey Joe didn't even stir for quite some time. By the time he was fully conscious, his championship belt was clutched in Rocky's blood-splattered paws.

Walcott got his rematch, but like nearly every man who fought the Rock twice, he didn't last nearly as long the second time. Rocky bludgeoned him into palookaville in the first round.

Rocky Marciano is the only champion who fought as a heavyweight and never suffered a defeat in his entire professional career. But there's more to the Rock than his record, his jaw of granite, fists of iron, and even his heart of a lion. As merciless a savage as he was inside the ropes, he was a friendly, gentle regular guy outside them. And both he and Joe Louis had a quality most talented athletes have lacked for a long time: humility.

Speaking of Louis (and egos) ... no doubt 75% of those who read this will dismiss me as a lunatic for suggesting anyone but Muhammed Ali was „the greatest.“

Certainly Ali had a huge ego and the most prideful attitude ever displayed on national television up to that time. He was also the most elusive target any heavyweight ever aimed at. He had fantastic lateral movement, hand speed almost matching Floyd Patterson's, good height, good reach, and a capacity to absorb punishment commensurate with Ray Mercer's. It also helped that the referees let him get away with tactics during a bout that would result in deducted points for anyone else. And, like many champions, there were decisions given to him by biased judges for fights that he frankly lost. Another advantage Ali had was that he was always „on“ for a fight—at least until the post-Foreman years.

Like many successful athletes, Ali had great luck, too. He was lucky first of all by merely living in the era he did, when fighters lacked the discipline of earlier times. For some reason, both fighters and managers became obsessed with headhunting in the '60s and '70s, and this played right into Ali's odd leaning, swaybacked defense. Shortly before his fight with Cleveland Williams, „Big Cat“ suffered a gunshot wound. Ali's most famous fights against Frazier (he was soundly beaten in their first) were after Smokin' Joe had about 20 years beaten out of him by George Foreman. Sonny Liston, who had possibly the best jab of any heavyweight in his era, hurt his shoulder just before his title defense against Ali. It was one of those minor injuries jocks get and then forget about, until it reasserts itself during strenuous activity.

But Liston's shoulder was not the major factor in Ali/Liston I or II. Liston was a textbook victim of Ali's psychological warfare. Liston himself was a bully; and like most bullies, he had a huge yellow streak hiding under his intimidating facade. He played mind games of his own, but they were minor league compared to Ali's. Liston's fragile self image was so thoroughly destroyed that he took a dive at his first opportunity during their rematch, whereas someone like Sugar Ray (Robinson or Leonard), Jersey Joe or the Brown Bomber would have learned from their mistake the first time and fought a better fight the next.

Joe Louis was actually „off“ more than he was „on“ for fights. But even when he was off, he outclassed most fighters who faced him. Despite his state of unpreparedness for the first Schmeling fight, he had the German in trouble a couple times, and the fight could have gone either way. He underestimated Billy Conn in their first fight but still knocked him out. WWII postponed their rematch, but even over-the-hill and at a plodding 213 pounds, Louis dominated him.

But when Joe Louis was ON ... hoo, baby! The Brown Bomber was a *machine*.

Joe Louis was economy of movement personified. He had good defense, threw punches in combinations, knew how to cut off the ring, had a world-class left hook and a piledriver of a right cross. He took shots from heavy-fisted sluggers like Max Baer and Mack Schmeling, wearing gloves that were little more than mittens, and pushed himself off the canvas to go back to war and, all but a couple times, take his man apart. Who knows how hurt he really was in some of those leather-slinging donnybrooks—you sure couldn't tell by his poker face.

Joe Louis won his fights with skill and punching power—never by „psyching out“ his opponents as Ali did. Or by wearing them out by having them chase him around the ring until they were exhausted.

Compare the „definitive“ fights of each heavyweight:

At the „Rumble in the Jungle,“ Foreman underestimated Ali, not even looking at so much as a reel of fight footage. Ali did not reciprocate this careless oversight. Then an accidental cut during training postponed the fight well beyond Foreman's peak. At that time Foreman's trainer habitually deprived him of water, and, for this particular bout, most probably drugged George as petty revenge over a contractual dispute. If you watch the first few rounds, you'll notice Foreman is staggering around like a drunkard from the very beginning, as if his equilibrium is off (and he was ill for a prolonged period afterwards). The ropes were so loose that night that when Ali adapted an old Jack Johnson tactic now famous as the „rope-

a-dope," even Foreman's gargantuan arms couldn't reach Ali's head when he rested back against the ropes. And, though this time the referee made a few token gestures at keeping it fair, he allowed Ali's holding-and-hitting tactic to go unpenalized all night. So yes: After the careless, dehydrated, and probably poisoned George Foreman punched himself out, Ali swarmed him with a picturesque flurry that finished him off.

At the rematch with Schmelling, however, Louis didn't play head games or talk smack-monologues about what a bad dude he was for the benefit of Schmelling's pre-fight psychological disposition. He did all his talking with leather. No fighter has ever been as machine-like in the destruction of another man. Schmeling, obviously a tough, seasoned, and savvy warrior (and dangerous puncher), was screaming in pain from the horrific body shots he took before going down for the third and final time in that fateful first round. There were no tricks or ploys or illegal tactics. Just a very determined, very talented heavyweight who would redeem himself honestly or die trying.

When Joe Louis bothered to prepare for a fight, both physically and mentally, he was the greatest heavyweight the world has ever seen.

I don't know exactly how to rank Rocky Marciano, but I put him somewhere close to that zenith. It's hard to argue with a 49-0 record and the trail of carnage the Rock smashed through a division of bigger fighters. There's no doubt he could take the worst Ali could dish out. On the other hand, if the Rock landed a a punch or two flush on the button, it's doubtful even Ali could survive.

