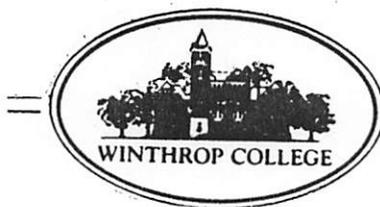


S.C.'s Joe Frazier Fought

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'The Greatest Fight'

South Carolina's Story
The making of a state



BY LOUISE PETTUS
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Many still consider it the greatest prize fight of all time. Until March 1971 it certainly was the most publicized.

The bout took place in Madison Square Garden before nearly 21,000 screaming fans. It featured two undefeated gladiators — the amazing Muhammad Ali and South Carolinian "Smokin'" Joe Frazier.

When it was over, Frazier had outpointed Ali in a grueling 15-round contest to become the world's undisputed heavyweight boxing champion.

The world's heavyweight championship had been vacant since 1967 when Ali, champion since 1964, was stripped of his title for refusing to be inducted into the armed forces.

But boxing fans refused to recognize Frazier as champion and considered him a pretender to the throne until he met Ali in the ring.

When Frazier won "the greatest fight of all time," it marked the culmination of his rise from poverty in rural South Carolina to the highest echelons of professional sport.

Joe Frazier was born Jan. 17, 1944, in Beaufort, the second youngest of 13 children. His parents owned a small hog and vegetable farm.

Joe's father lost his left arm in an accident and young Joe became his father's "left arm," as he told a writer for "Sports Illustrated" in 1970. "He'd hold a bolt with his right hand and I'd screw it," Frazier said of his father. "By the time I was seven, I could drive a tractor, and when I was eight, I was driving an automobile. He taught me everything I knew about life."

At age 14 Frazier dropped out of school and headed to Philadelphia, where he found a job cutting meat in a slaughterhouse. Frazier had a weight problem, so he tried to keep fit by working out in a Philadelphia Athletic League gym. Yancy (Yank) Durham, a well-known boxing manager, saw Frazier's potential as a boxer and became his trainer.

Frazier had a successful amateur career, winning 35 of 37 bouts. In 1964 he won the gold medal at the Olympic Games, despite suffering a broken hand.

After a stellar Olympic performance, Frazier turned professional under the guidance of Durham, who matched him against relatively easy opponents until he was ready to face stiffer competition.

When the New York State Athletic Association and World Boxing Association took away Ali's title in 1967, a tournament was held to determine his successor. Jimmy Ellis won the tournament, but Frazier refused to participate in it.

Instead, in March 1968 Frazier fought Buster Mathis under the aegis of the New York State Athletic Association. Frazier knocked Mathis out in the 5th round and became champion in New York,

Illinois, Massachusetts and Maine.

Joe Frazier could not be denied. After defending his title four times and being named Fighter of the Year in 1969 by the Boxing Writer's Association, Smokin' Joe fought Jimmy Ellis for the W.B.A. crown in February 1970, winning by a technical knockout in the 5th round.

This set the stage for perhaps the greatest boxing rivalry in history. A federal court ruled that the revocation of Ali's boxing license was "arbitrary and unreasonable" and he returned to the ring, winning two fights and thus setting the stage for "The Fight of the Century" in Madison Square Garden.

The fight was beamed to 310 million viewers and total receipts were estimated at \$2.5 million. Both fighters received \$2.5 million, with Frazier getting to keep half of his purse after taxes and expenses.

Frazier and Ali went on to engage in two more bouts, including what many have called the greatest boxing match of all time — "The Thrilla in Manila" — won by Ali when Frazier gave up the fight in the 14th round.

Joe Frazier eventually retired from boxing, but staged an abortive comeback at age 39 when he fought "Jumbo" Cummings to a 10-round draw. For a while, he also engaged in a singing career.

Today Joe Frazier operates a gym in Philadelphia, where he trains young boxers, including his son, Marvis. Despite success and fame, Joe Frazier has not forgotten his roots. He often returns to South Carolina to visit his mother, who still lives in Beaufort.