

BUGNER

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Ali's Latest Triumph Was Far From Dull

No matter what Muhammad Ali does, it's just not good enough for some. There is that segment of jock journalism, those old-guard sports-writers and sportscasters of the country, who will never forgive Ali for betraying them.

Almost overnight, as far as they are concerned, Cassius Clay, the Olympic gold medalist as a light heavyweight, changed from a charming young fighter who was good copy into a Black Muslim who wanted to be called Muhammad Ali. He also did not hide the fact that he did not particularly trust whites.

They've never forgiven him. It shows.

IF YOU READ the accounts of Ali's victory Monday night over England's Joe Bugner in Malaysia there is the definite impression that Ali did almost nothing and Bugner did even less. It was dull. It was boring. Bugner would be better off finding another line of work.

Well, that's garbage.

A sportswriter for the Brand X paper called the fight a stinker. "It was," he wrote yesterday morning, "the third unbloody bore of a mismatch in which Ali has engaged since regaining his title from George Foreman in October."

This guy also suggests that even British journalists feel Bugner is not much of a fighter, asserting, "No one gave him a serious chance to lick Ali."

The problem, it seems, is that these people, these guys who peer down their noses at boxing and the seedy types that permeate the game, have never understood nor appreciated Ali's extraordinary ability. It follows, too, that they never have tried very hard to understand his character and personality, perhaps because it still rankles them that Ali never has conformed to their standards of athletic All-Americanism.

WHATEVER their hangup, too many in the press don't seem to know when Ali is good or when he is a bad, and certainly no one is saying he hasn't fought a couple of stinkers in his stormy career.

It was not that Bugner was bad. ~~Ali, in the third defense of his world heavyweight title, was overpowering.~~ He moved like the Ali of 15 years ago, despite the heat and humidity. He did it for 15 rounds. You can't beat that.

Against an opponent who was taller, had a longer reach and possessed a better-than-average left jab by any measure, past or present, Ali took away all of Bugner's advantages shortly after the first bell rang. He stayed in close, punched solidly when he wanted to, then, just when it seemed that Bugner might solve that style, Ali would revert to his dancing, moving out of danger while tactically laughing at his opponent.

Another bad rap against Ali is that he isn't fighting anybody worthwhile. He's on his version of the Joe Louis "bum of the month" campaign. It reads well. But it isn't true.

Ali already has defeated seven of the top 10 heavyweight contenders. According to Ring Magazine, George Foreman is ranked first. The whole world saw what Ali did to him in Zaire last October to reclaim the heavyweight crown. Joe Frazier is second. Ali, after a 3½-year hiatus, dropped a close decision to him in one fight and then dominated Frazier in their second meeting.

THEN COMES third-ranked Ken Norton. Two fights, one loss, one victory for Ali. Joe Bugner, ranked fourth, two fights, two victories. Oscar Bonavena, Ron Lyle and Chuck Wepner, ranked eighth, ninth and 10th, respectively, also have been defeated by Ali.

The only fighters in the top 10 whom Ali has not faced are fifth-ranked Jimmy Young, sixth-ranked Bunny Johnson and seventh-ranked Ernie Shavers. All of whom can be dismissed with a shrug.

So what is it exactly that these apparent anti-Ali types want from him?

Harry Barnett, a former fight promoter and an attorney who handles business for Dick Sadler and George Foreman, obviously is not an avid Ali fan. Barnett has been saying for some time that Ali's legs are gone and, as knowledgeable boxing people realize, Ali never did have a big punch.

Yet Barnett looked at the fight and was ecstatic at the condition of Ali. The moves. The thinking. Ali put it all together again.

"I read the stories about the fight and I saw things about Bugner's being bad. But that isn't the fact of it. Bugner could do only what Ali let him do in that fight. Ali took everything away from Bugner," Barnett said.

"Bugner kept waiting for Ali to wilt in the heat and waiting for his

aging legs to give way. But Ali didn't wilt and his legs didn't fold. He was fantastic. It wasn't that Bugner was bad. ~~It was that Ali was tremendous.~~ That's the whole thing in a nutshell."

JOHNNY ORT of Ring Magazine felt the same way yesterday as he talked about the fight.

"There was nothing that Bugner could do. He kept waiting and waiting. But Ali never slowed down. These guys are writing that Bugner's a bum. Well, he's beaten some very good fighters and he has a jaw like iron," Ort said.

In Malaysia, Gene Kilroy, who knows Ali quite well, still was trying to get his breath after living through the fight in which the heavyweight champion danced and danced and danced.

"It was weird, man. I mean, Ali kept saying, 'They're waiting for me to slow down. But I'm not going to do it. I'm going to fool them.' You never know what he's going to do when he gets into the ring," Kilroy said.

"People can talk all they want about Bugner being bad, but the people who say that just don't know boxing. Ali never gave Bugner a chance. That's it. I almost went crazy in the corner during the fight. I didn't see how Ali could maintain that pace. But he just kept going and going. He's magic, man."

IF THE punctilious sportswriters wish to berate something, perhaps they should address themselves to the fact that the heavyweight division is devoid of first-rate talent other than Foreman, Frazier and Norton. And, although Ali has beaten all three of them, he'll never get more than lip service paid to his greatness.

Which it is the way it is, sometimes, when you say things, as Muhammad Ali has, that twit a nation's social conscience.

