

Dull Sameness Of Ali's Act an Unbloody Bore

After the fight, Joe Bugner said: "I couldn't find a burst of energy in the late rounds. I think the climate beat me."

If so, it would be the first time three boxing judges ever put their heads together after 15 rounds and voted a unanimous decision to a neat wave. Another, more identifiable element, was in the ring. The judges decided Bugner had been thrashed by one Muhammad Ali, supreme heavy-weight of the world and super con man of boxing.

This one, Ali had promised, would be his last fight. Only Ali has been able to make each bum-of-the-month fight sound like an upcoming epic.

Shirley Povich on Sports

Come one, come all, to the closed-circuit TV theaters all over the world, to see if Ali's aging, 33-year-old body is up to the onslaughts of a younger, bigger man like Bugner, who also happens to be white.

The fight was, as they say in impolite circles, a stinker. It was the third unbloody bore of a mismatch in which Ali has engaged since regaining his title from George Foreman in October. In succession he has licked a New Jersey bartender, an ex-con paroled from a murder rap and now Bugner, who succeeded mainly in re-establishing the long held belief, even among British journalists, that he couldn't fight much. No one gave him a serious chance to lick Ali.

The whole boxing business, if, indeed, it is worth saving, has been diminished by the dull sameness of Ali's performances in recent fights. His pattern is to pick an unworthy opponent, spout rhetoric that makes each nondescript sound like an Oncoming Terror and then fight just enough to win.

Ali is a great fighter, and an excellent businessman. He has pocketed \$4.5 million in purses in the last 100 days. But the heavyweight title defense as an exciting passage at arms has suffered from Ali's recent presence.

After proclaiming how he would demolish Ali, Bugner proved to be the reluctant warrior. He relied almost wholly on left jabs, hardly the tactic of an eager attacker. When newsmen noted that he seemed to neglect his right hand, good honest Joe Bugner said, "Unfortunately, yes." The result, for those who anticipated a rugged fight for their closed-circuit admission fees, was the Great One-Armed Robbery.

A week before the Kuala Lumpur caper, Ali summoned boxing writers to announce: "I'm retiring after this fight. You can write it. I'm getting too old to be a fighter; I want to study more about Islam." Only those boxing writers completely oblivious to Muhammad Ali lore believed him. He vindicated them on fight night by unretiring with three-ply vigor. He had suddenly decided, he said, to fight Joe Frazier and George Foreman, and Ken Norton was also in his future. All of this without a blush. A man is entitled to change his mind.

Ali is such an easy sell that Don King, the new promoter-genius, was able to persuade a Malaysian chief of state, Dato Harun, to put up \$3 million in front money for the contest, even with Bugner the party of the second part.

Bugner used to be the British schoolboy record-holder for throwing the discus, which, regrettably, he cannot bring into a prize ring with him. He won the European heavyweight title by licking

Henry Cooper, a 37-year-old bleeder, five years after Ali licked Cooper. Even when he was British champion, Bugner was booed frequently in England. When he barely licked a widely unknown Hollander named Bud Lubbers, it was in what one British journalist called "a very untidy fight." In Kuala Lumpur last week, Reg Gutteridge of the London Evening News said of Bugner, "He freezes. He has no movement." Neither was it any accolade when Ken Jones of the Sunday Mirror wrote, "He has a key in his back. He's too mechanical."

It was a sufficient forewarning of the fight that was to evolve, particularly with Ali dedicated to carrying his opponent for the benefit of closed-circuit television promoters who frown on early knockouts. With Bugner hurrying to get on the defense, it was 15 yawning rounds of Malaysian malaise.

With Bugner lacking even animal aggression, Ali had to orchestrate the fight himself. A good showman, he

knew that last impressions counted. So just before the final bell, he unleashed seven consecutive blows to Bugner's head, not heavy enough to bring the Briton down, but a sufficient reminder that the old Ali will be around to take on Joe Frazier in Manila.

So, all you people, come to the closed-circuit TV again in October. He's a promoter's dream.

The fight in Kuala Lumpur didn't draw many natives, only an estimated 6,000, barely two for each of the 3,000 islands in the Malay peninsula. But Ali and promoter King already had their money, with \$500,000 left over for Burgner.

Reports from across the U.S. indicate it was no bonanza for TV theaters, but Kuala Lumpur officials seemed content. "Our main purpose," said Chief State Minister Harun "is to project Malaysia and Kuala Lumpur." They did that.

Everybody is now aware that Kuala Lumpur is not in Africa.

With Ali as the fulcrum for prying millions out of chiefs of state eager to put



themselves and their countries on the map, promoter King has brought a new dimension to boxing. Out of Zaire's President Mobutu he received a \$10 million guarantee to stage the Ali-Foreman fight in Kinshasa last October. The fact that Zaire is now moaning about an \$11 million deficit and a new economic crisis is hardly any of King's business. He is doing very well in his new \$7,000-a-month promotional suite in Rockefeller Center, where Zaire and Kuala Lumpur have helped to pay the rent.

The price was only \$3 million for Kuala Lumpur, but for the defense against Joe Frazier in Manila, King suggested and received a \$12 million package for himself and the fighters, with Ali saying things like \$8 million for his end.

If it is not a state-underwritten affair in Manila, it certainly has the full endorsement of President Marcos, without whose favor it couldn't be staged. Ali will put Manila on the map more firmly, at least for a few weeks, after which the Phil-

ippines will have to think up something new, like another revolt, to match the attention Ali will command for those islands.

Ali will not lack for future client countries as long

as he keeps breathing and owns that world heavyweight title. Almost every Muslim nation is clamoring for him to visit and Don King is ready to name the price Ali will accept for title

defenses in those favored nations with oil revenues. King will make only reasonable demands on behalf of Ali, a man with simple tastes, with two Rolls Royces in his garage.





— Associated Press

Muhammad Ali landed a strong left to the jaw of challenger Joe Bugner (above), who seemed to fall backwards like a statue, during the 14th round and Bugner later was holding the side of his face (right) at a press conference as a result of it.