

'WE WENT TO MANILA AS CHAMPIONS, JOE AND ME. WE CAME BACK AS OLD MEN'

MUHAMMAD ALI

The epic 1975 boxing match between Muhammad Ali and Smokin' Joe Frazier – the Thriller in Manila – was famously brutal both inside and outside the ring, as a new documentary shows. Neither man truly recovered, and nor did their friendship. At 64, Frazier shows no signs of forgetting – but can he ever forgive?

WORDS ADAM HIGGINBOTHAM PORTRAIT STEFAN RUIZ

COLD AND DARK, THE BIG BUILDING ON North Broad Street in Philadelphia is closed now; the battered blue canvas ring inside empty and unused for the first time in more than 40 years. On the outside, the boxing glove motifs and the black letters that spell out the words 'Joe Frazier's Gym' in cast concrete are partly covered by a 'For Sale' banner.

'It's shut down,' Frazier tells me, 'and I'm going to sell it. The highest bidder's got it.' The gym is where Frazier trained before becoming World Heavyweight Champion in 1970; later, it would also be his home: for 23 years he lived alone, upstairs, in a three-storey loft apartment. But in the end, he says, he just got sick of paying for the place. It cost him \$150,000 a year in electricity alone. He spent years training young fighters, only to have them turn their backs on him, and sign with big-name managers, when it came time to turn professional. 'And I'm left here trying to build another fighting champion. And I didn't think it was right.'

At 64, Joe is cheerful and sharply dressed, in a black suit and cowboy hat, matched with a broad tie bearing a geometric design in gold lamé. These days, he says he's bearing up well: 'Not bad for an old guy. Not bad for an old guy at all.' And yet, when he speaks, Frazier is frequently difficult to understand; words come out mushy and mangled.

Inside the gym, the walls around the ring are still hung with framed pictures and memorabilia of Smokin' Joe Frazier's decades in boxing. On one wall hangs a dusty row of giant boxing gloves painted with names and dates commemorating Frazier's bouts with some of the most famous names in heavyweight boxing: Frazier v Jerry Quarry, Madison Square Garden, 23 June, 1969; Frazier v George Foreman, Nassau Coliseum, NY, 15 June, 1976; Frazier v Muhammad Ali, Manila, 1 October, 1975. But it is Ali, who now lives in the Arizona desert – surrounded by experts to treat the symptoms of the Parkinson's disease he suffers as a result of the traumatic punches he took to the head during his years in the ring – with whom Frazier will always be linked.

Over the course of four years during the golden era of heavyweight boxing, the two men met three times. The final bout – the 'Thriller in Manila' – was one of the greatest and most brutal boxing matches of all time, and ended with Frazier's defeat. The fights and the public spectacle that surrounded them resulted in a bitter and personal enmity, which drove one of the longest-running feuds in sporting history. When I suggest to Frazier that, in all his years as a fighter, Ali was one of only two men who succeeded in beating him, Smokin' Joe is quick to correct me. 'He didn't beat me ... Look at him,' he says. 'Look at me now. How did he beat me?'

Frazier's route to the heavyweight championship

of the world, like that of Ali – born Cassius Clay in Kentucky – began in the segregated heartland of the Deep South. Born in 1944, Frazier grew up on 10 acres of unyielding farmland in rural South Carolina, the 11th of 12 children raised in a six-room house with a tin roof and no running water. As a boy, he played dice and cards and taught himself to box, dreaming of being the next Joe Louis. In 1961, at 17, he moved to Philadelphia. Frazier was taken in by an aunt, and talked his way into a job at Cross Brothers, a kosher slaughterhouse. There, he worked on the killing floor, where the cattle were chained up, heads raised so that the rabbi could slit their throats, and in the cold store, where he practised his punching, the split sides of beef hanging overhead standing in for a heavy bag.

Years later, Sylvester Stallone would incorporate this – and Frazier's subsequent habit of running up and down the steps of the Philadelphia art museum – into the script of *Rocky*, forever cementing elements of Frazier's life into a cliché of the underdog fighter. But for Frazier, already married by 19, with the first of an eventual 11 children to support, the struggle was real enough, and in boxing he glimpsed a chance of escaping a life of exhausting manual labour and borderline poverty.

At only 5ft 11in, Frazier was small for a heavyweight fighter, with a short reach that made it difficult for him to bring taller opponents within effective range of his punishing left hook. But he made up for it by developing a relentless, aggressive style. Today, Frazier says it was his unrelenting, high-volume punching technique that led his manager, Yank Durham, to coin Smokin' Joe's nickname: 'He'd always say, "All right, goddammit! I want you to go out and make smoke come from them gloves, understand?"'

In the summer of 1964, Frazier qualified for the US Olympic boxing team and went on to win gold in the heavyweight finals in Tokyo. When he got back to America, he turned pro. At the end of his first fight, he took home \$125.

Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali first met in March 1967 at Madison Square Garden, the night after Ali's ninth successful defence of his world heavyweight title in just three years. Frazier was emerging as a serious contender for the championship, but Durham was in no hurry to have him meet Ali in the ring. Ali was at his peak – apparently unbeatable – and had already established his reputation as 'The Greatest'. When the two were introduced, Ali snapped Frazier's braces and told him he was too small for him – 'but we'll make some money anyway'. Ali began talking up a potential match to the press, telling anyone who would listen that Smokin' Joe wanted to take his





'Not bad for an old guy'
Despite his battle scars,
Joe Frazier says he's
bearing up well



title. Today, Frazier says he was unmoved by this: 'He was a noisemaker... I look at it this way – an empty wagon goin' down a road makes a lot of noise; ain't nothin' in it. So I didn't pay no attention to him. I really think that he was afraid of me, the way he carried on.'

But by the time of that first meeting, Ali was also at the centre of a national controversy over his refusal to accept the US Army draft to fight in Vietnam, and a month later, he was charged with a felony, and stripped of his title and his boxing licence; so began what would become a three-year exile from the sport.

In his absence, Frazier embarked upon a series of fights that would allow him to compete for the now-vacant title, and on 16 February, 1970, he beat Ali's former sparring partner Jimmy Ellis by a technical knock-out to become the heavyweight champion of the world. Watching the fight on closed-circuit television in a Philadelphia cinema, Ali leapt into the aisle and began shadowboxing for the crowd: 'I want that Joe Frazier!' he shouted. 'I'm starting my comeback now!'

But in the meantime, Frazier and the exiled



champion had become friends – or something like it. 'Well – I wouldn't say friends,' says Frazier now. 'We were talkin' buddies. Because I helped him get his licence back.'

While Ali continued to fight the Boxing Commission's decision through the courts, Frazier tells me he petitioned President Nixon on Ali's behalf. 'I went to the White House and had coffee with him and the wife and the kids. I asked him, would he please give Muhammad his licence? And he said, "Well, Joe, do you think you can take him?"' I said, 'I've got him in my back pocket. All you have to do is give him a licence'.

Ali moved to Philadelphia for a time and Frazier lent him money when he needed it; the two also discussed how, when Ali returned to boxing, they would finally meet in the ring for a big payday, and split the purse straight down the middle. But well before he was finally permitted to return to boxing, in October 1970, Ali's publicity-seeking agitation for a fight with Frazier grew more heated. In 1969 Ali appeared on local radio in Philadelphia, calling Frazier a clumsy fighter, a coward and an Uncle Tom. When Ali called him out to meet at the PAL gym, to have a fight then and there, Frazier rushed across town to find Ali surrounded by a crowd of 1,000 people. Frazier tore off his shirt to fight, before the police and then Yank Durham intervened. Smokin' Joe was furious at being humiliated in his hometown.

Ali and Frazier's contest for the heavyweight championship was scheduled for 8 March, 1971, at

Madison Square Garden, and there was every reason to expect it to fulfil its billing as 'The Fight of the Century'. Both fighters had been undefeated in the ring, and both could justly claim to be world heavyweight champion: Ali had left in 1967 as one of the fastest and most mesmerising heavyweights of all time, and Frazier had since built a reputation as a terrifying puncher – his last opponent had been knocked out with such force that he returned to the dressing-room unable to remember that he'd been in the fight at all. But by the time the first Ali-Frazier bout took place, the fighters had also

Ali undermined Joe's victory, claiming he had been robbed by a bad decision and the white establishment



come to represent opposing sides in the political and social conflict that had

polarised America since Ali went into exile. As popular opposition to the war in Vietnam grew, Ali's once-extreme pacifist stance was viewed with increasing sympathy, and made him an icon of black radicalism and white counterculture. Unwittingly, Frazier – more because of who he was against than of what he was for – became a symbol of black conservatism, 'hard-hat' patriotism and support for the bloodbath in Southeast Asia.

In the run-up to the fight, Frazier received anonymous threats that he would be murdered if he beat Ali, and he and his family were given police protection.

The night itself was a celebrity-packed spectacle that brought New York to a halt. Burt Lancaster commented, Frank Sinatra attended as a photographer for *Life* magazine; it attracted a global television audience of about 300 million in 50 countries. The referee later described the fight as the most vicious he had ever seen. During the conversations I have with Frazier, it's only when discussing this initial bout with Ali that, his eyes flashing with excitement, he becomes truly animated. 'It wasn't one punch – it was two punches,' he says, recalling the moment when he knocked Ali down for only the third time in his career.

That 15th-round knock-down clinched the fight for Frazier, who won by a unanimous decision.



Afterwards, Ali immediately went to have his swollen jaw X-rayed. Frazier, who had suffered from high blood pressure before the fight, could neither stand, eat nor drink and was checked into hospital, where he lay on a bed of ice for 24 hours and remained in a critical condition for weeks. But it was an astonishing upset: Ali had been beaten for the first time in his career, and Frazier could finally say that he was the undisputed heavyweight champion of the world. At the post-fight press conference, he was asked if he would fight Ali again. 'I've got to live a little, man,' he replied. 'I've been working for 10 long years.'

With the \$2.5 million he earned from the fight, Frazier bought an abandoned plantation house back in South Carolina, and another home with a swimming pool shaped like a boxing glove. In Philadelphia, the city hosted 'Joe Frazier Day'. But Frazier had little opportunity to enjoy his title. While Ali privately acknowledged that he had been badly beaten, in public he successfully

undermined Joe's victory, claiming that he had been robbed of a win by a bad decision and the white establishment. Months after the fight, *Black Sports* magazine carried a cover story entitled, 'Is Joe Frazier a white champion in black skin?'

IN JANUARY 1973, AFTER FACING A further four title challengers, Frazier met the 24-year-old George Foreman, who specialised in knocking out opponents in the second round. It proved a cruel mismatch of styles: Foreman battered Frazier down six times in the opening two rounds. Foreman was heard to shout, 'Stop it, or I'm going to kill him', before the fight was brought to an end. Smokin' Joe had been relieved of his heavyweight title in just four minutes and 35 seconds.

It was almost exactly a year later that Frazier and Ali met in the ring for the second time, and by then both were damaged goods: Ali had been beaten again, by ex-US Marine Ken Norton, and had his jaw broken in the process. But the antagonism between the two remained real and undiminished: five days before the fight, during an appearance on a television sports programme, Ali called Frazier 'ignorant', and Frazier grappled him to the floor before they were separated. The rematch itself was scrappy and, justly, uncelebrated:

BETTMANN/CORBIS

Ali won by a decision, but spent much of his time holding Frazier behind the head to smother his punching. 'The only thing he did is hold – hug and hold, all night long. But he had – or his manager had – a way of getting closer to the referees and the judges, you know?' Frazier mutters. 'That's why he won that fight.'

Afterwards, Frazier was widely thought to be finished as a fighter, and expected to retire; he had just turned 30. His physical decline was complicated by the results of an accident he had suffered a decade earlier: as he worked on a speed bag in Philadelphia, a broken bolt threw tiny shards of metal into his eyes. The incident was kept secret to allow him to continue fighting, but the resulting scar tissue developed into cataracts, and by 1974 Frazier had become practically blind in his left eye.

By contrast, Ali's next fight would fix him forever in the public imagination as an astonishing athlete and a master of showmanship: at the 'Rumble in the Jungle' in Zaire, the 32-year-old former

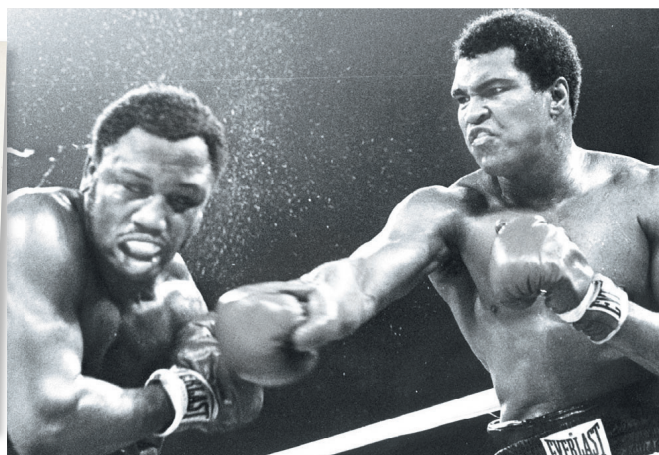
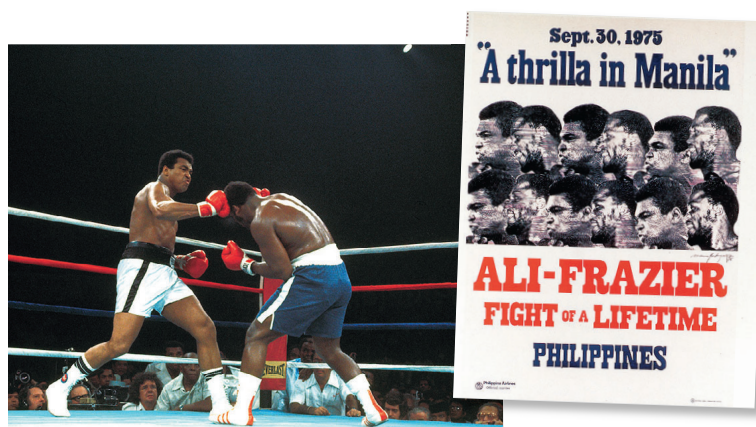
for 15 years, who was in his corner that morning. As the fight wore on, Frazier rained shuddering blows into Ali's body: the title seemed certain to be his. But both fighters, sagging with exhaustion, staggered on – until the 12th round, when suddenly Ali's combinations began repeatedly finding Frazier's head. In the 13th, Ali knocked Frazier's mouthpiece into the press row. The 14th remains one of the most savage rounds ever fought. With his entire face a deformed atlas of angry red contusions, Frazier's left eye began to close, but he continued to walk into a withering hail of blows, any one of which might have proved lethal. 'I was afraid that we were going to kill him,' says Pacheco. 'He was taking such punishment – and he had no defence. He couldn't see out of one eye and... everything that was thrown on that side landed.'

At the end of the 14th, before Frazier could go into the final three minutes of the fight, his trainer, Eddie Futch, decided to stop the fight. 'Sit

one prospect after another to the drugs and crime on the streets of Philadelphia – including his own son, Joe Junior.

Ferdie Pacheco told Ali that he should quit after Manila, but he wouldn't listen. Ali fought on, facing another 10 opponents – eventually losing and regaining the world title for a third time. Later, when the boxing-related symptoms of Parkinson's began to slowly rob him of movement and speech, he explicitly blamed his decline on blows to the head he took that day in the Philippines.

But Frazier had no sympathy for his former opponent. For decades he nursed a corrosive grudge over the way he had been treated – by Ali and by history. The depth of Frazier's loathing became public in 1996, when he published his autobiography, in which he referred to Ali by his 'slave name', Clay, throughout, and concluded: 'People ask me if I feel sorry for him. Nope. Fact is, I don't give a damn. They want me to love him,



Winners and losers
From left, Ali and Frazier get personal, 1970; on the cover of 'Life'; Frazier triumphant, 1971; in Manila, 1975 – Ali connects in the ninth

champion dropped the apparently invincible George Foreman in a sensational eighth-round knockout to win the world heavyweight title for the second time in his career. By the time he agreed to meet Frazier for a third fight, scheduled for 1 October, 1975, in the Philippines, Ali had become one of the most recognised and well-loved celebrities on Earth. And yet, today, the way he treated Frazier in the prelude to the 'Thrilla in Manila' – as presented in a new documentary directed by John Dower – is uncomfortable to watch, shot through with race hatred: Ali began saying that Frazier was no more than an ape, an ugly, lumbering idiot who brought shame on black Americans. For the benefit of television cameras, he produced a small rubber gorilla doll which he battered with his fist.

Attended by 28,000 people, the fight was scheduled at 10am for the benefit of a global audience viewing it live via satellite; the temperature inside the stadium reached more than 100F; heat of such energy-sapping ferocity that the boxers' gloves became waterlogged, sloshing with their own sweat. In the opening rounds, the champion dominated, hitting Frazier with sharp jabs to the head. But, grinning and snorting, Frazier kept coming back with the implacable persistence of a mechanical toy.

For four more rounds, Frazier had the better of Ali. 'It wasn't a boxing match, it was a slugging match,' says Dr Ferdie Pacheco, Ali's fight doctor

'Sit down, son,' his trainer told Frazier. 'It's over. No one will forget what you did here today'

down, son,' he famously told Frazier. 'It's over. No one will forget what you did here today.' In his corner, Ali looked up to see what was happening and then collapsed, shattered, to the canvas. The documentary claims that Ali himself had been on the verge of conceding, but Pacheco won't hear of it: 'It wasn't Ali that was taking a beating. Ali was in gear.' Frazier says he isn't sorry Futch threw in the towel. 'I could see, a little bit. I could see to get through the three minutes. But Eddie said no. He didn't want to take that chance... God bless him. He's gone on. All the good guys have gone, in the fight game.'

'We went to Manila as champions, Joe and me,' Ali would say years later, 'and we came back as old men.' Afterwards, Frazier would fight just twice more before he finally retired, in 1981. He toured the country with a band, performing in the Smokin' Joe Revue, and at one point even had a record contract; he started a limousine business and opened a restaurant. He bought the gym on North Broad Street and began training fighters, but lost

but I'll open up the graveyard and bury his ass when the Lord chooses to take him.' In an interview that same year, he cocked his left arm and announced that Ali was suffering from 'Joe Frazier-itis'; and when a trembling Ali reached out to light the flame at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, Frazier said that he wished Ali had lit the torch and then fallen in.

But over the years, Ali offered repeated apologies to Frazier in print and, in 2002, more than three decades after their first fight, the two men were seen sitting together at an NBA All-Star basketball game in Philadelphia. And when Ali had trouble standing up, Frazier supported him.

Today, Frazier himself suffers from diabetes and high blood pressure. He walks with difficulty, using a steel cane – the handle topped with a cast of a Chinese dragon – as a result of a car accident in 2003, in which he fractured his spine. But he still makes it to the gym a couple of times a week: 'I'm as strong as two bulls!' When I ask him if, finally, he has truly forgiven Ali, he's clear and enthusiastic. 'Oh yes, oh yes,' he says. 'I forgive him, sure.'

As to whether he still believes, as he certainly once did, that Ali's voice has been silenced in divine punishment for the things he once said, Smokin' Joe is more circumspect. 'Well... I'm not sure... God works in a mysterious way.'

'True Stories: Thriller in Manila' is on More4, Tuesday, 10pm