

Anatomy of a knockout— **HOW IT FEELS TO BE K.O'd**

By **MICHAEL BENTT**

on for Mr. Turner. *Shiiiiit*, I had a major score to settle with him that night at Madison Square Garden's Felt Forum.

But revenge or no, that big *Maphucka* put that same damn overhand right upside my head in the second round. I can still remember lying on my back, unaware of where I was, asking myself, "Lights?... Aren't lights supposed to be on the ceiling... If they are, why am I lookin' at 'em?... And why the hell do I hear someone countin'?"


If you're a masochist and have the urge to experience the lowest degree of humiliation and self-pity, git you' ass knocked out. I defy anyone to find a quicker route to Humble Pie Blvd.

Now, come with me as I take you back down that long, winding road called history, to the Muhammad Ali-George Foreman "Rumble in the Jungle." And, further, for the purpose of illustrating exactly what I'm talking about, allow me to somehow, someway magically make you the party of the second part, George Foreman.

As defending champion, you have destroyed every man who has ever given your aging opponent difficulty. Ken Norton: you paralyzed him with your malevolent glare and crunching punch in two. Joe Frazier: against one of the greatest ring warriors of all time, you never gave the always-forward-moving "Smokin' Joe" a chance, hitting him hard enough to knock a Brotha through a brick wall and smoke him in two.

That fool Ali can do all the talkin' he wants and can pray to Allah, Buddha, Jehovah and Yahweh as much as he wants, but you—and all the experts—know he doesn't have a damned prayer.

And all the while he's training at his fabled Deer Lake, Pennsylvania training facility and muttering his mantra, "To win, all I have to do is suffer," you're training just as diligently. But the months you spend steeling and fortifying yourself with an insuperable physical, psychological and emotional resolve would soon be in tatters. For you would be no match for the monkey that would ride your back and damn near drive you to the mad house, the result of Ali's masterful psyche campaign, one which lasted from the time the fight was announced up to, and including, the fateful seventh round. That was the round



George Foreman has his worst day ever on the job: October 30, 1974 in Zaire.

A few months ago, Bert suggested my next assignment for *FIGHT GAME*: an exhaustive exploration into the world of the knockout.

Now, I doubt any fighter worthy of his mouthpiece would have a problem telling you about his most brilliant knockout performance. He'll enthusiastically provide you with an account worthy of Don Dunphy, Howard Cosell and Jim Lampley, combined, taking you through it, blow-by-blow, up to the very second he scored the knockout.

However, when it comes to describing the time he was the victim of the knockout, Mr. Enthusiasm's tongue isn't as liberal with the details. For obvious reasons this is hardly a topic any fighter is comfortable with. And yours truly is no exception. Especially when asked to do so in print.

Call me a coward if you will, but I had less than no interest in reliving my frightening knockout loss to Herbie Hide. Nor in the box hidden on the top shelf of my living room closet containing a VHS copy of my darkest hour. It held personal torment for me.

Understand, it was not so much the subject matter as the reluctance to bare the very essence of vulnerability in a profession where vulnerability is masked and denied. And being a former boxer doesn't exempt me from those emotions. In fact, it makes me all the more qualified to address them.

Fighters fight to knock other fighters down; and, if they're good enough, to knock them out. Conversely, the law of averages almost guarantees that if a fighter fights long enough—or, for that matter, for too long—he, too, will be the victim of the single most humbling and devastating experience an athlete can ever face, that of being knocked out.

So, as much as I'd like to avoid the subject, allow me, dear reader, to be your qualified Dante as I escort you through the many levels of boxing Hell that beset a fighter who has been knocked out.

I was a 17-year-old heavyweight fighting in the semi-finals of the 1983 New York City Golden Gloves and the only thing that stood between me and the most coveted amateur boxing prize this side of an Olympic gold medal was Ronald Turner.

Only the previous week, Mr. Turner had clobbered my older brother, Winston, with an overhand right. Now it became my duty to avenge the honor of the Brothers Bent—then spelled with only one "T."

Not only was I smaller than my brother, but at 185 pounds, I was also substantially smaller than Mr. Turner, who in those days before the Golden Gloves broke the heavyweight division into heavy-weight and super heavy, weighed in at a robust and menacing 225.

But size made no never mind to me, I had a hard-



On March 19, 1994, the author (right) was knocked out in Round Seven by Herbie Hide in a soccer stadium in Millwall, England. Bentt spent more than three days in a coma.

your body language signified what we all knew...that you were toast, ready to be glazed and buttered. And the whole world saw it.

Back to the present... Take a moment and picture the worst day you've ever had at your job. Then factor in that it is all being monitored and broadcast throughout your workplace, à la the movie, *The Truman Show*. Not a very pleasant picture, is it? And you don't even get your ass kicked! Put them all together and that's what it's like to get knocked out—humiliating and deflating, a moment of emotional, spiritual and psychological bankruptcy.

I came out of the 1988 Olympic Trials as one of those "can't-miss" prospects, having placed second to the eventual Gold Medal winner, Ray Mercer, and with a string of amateur titles that goes on for two pages. One of those who saw my potential was the legendary Emanuel Steward, who took me out to Detroit to fight under the fabled Kronk banner.

My pro debut was set for sometime in early January '89. However, a few weeks prior to the scheduled fight, playing with a Who's Who of Kronk boxers—including Thomas Hearns, Michael Moorer, Gerald McClellan, Dennis Andries and Frankie Miles among others—I severely strained my right Achilles tendon. I don't recall whose foot I came down on while going up for a rebound, but whoever's

it was, they pulled it out from under me and I came down hard. I have never experienced the kind of searing pain that gripped me on that high school gym floor that evening. And I hope I never do. But, as excruciating as the pain was, I would gladly endure it to avoid the emotional and psychological torment that followed my first pro fight.

It would be several more weeks before my foot finally healed and the most-accomplished-amateur-boxer-self was ready to finally make his pro debut. It was scheduled on a card billed as "The Night of Kronk" out of Detroit and televised nationally on ESPN.

When the first couple of Kronk fighters on the card experienced more than some difficulty in their opening bouts, I should have known that this wouldn't be Kronk's night and that the stars weren't correctly aligned in Kronk's favor.

But here I was, being introduced by Emanuel as the only man on the horizon who possessed the boxing skills, temperament and athleticism to defeat the-then current champion Mike Tyson. A tall order indeed, but given the proper timeframe, feasible. On this night of nights, however, I was more concerned with dispatching my opponent and acquitting all the hype than with Mr. Tyson.

But something funny happened on my way to sure stardom—funny, odd; not funny, ha-ha. First, somebody, in their infinite non-wisdom, forgot to

share my build-up with my opponent, Gerry Jones, and tell him that this was *my* night, *my* coming-out party. Second, I just plain did not take into account the fact that this Brotha would, and could, punch back.

I don't know if that look in his eyes of dismay and trepidation during the pre-fight introductions was a ruse to lull me into a false sense of security or not, but if it was, that shit worked. Big time!

As Round One began, I made a little mental note that Mr. Jones seemed to be switching from southpaw to orthodox stance depending upon which hand I led with—a clear violation of the Bentt Night rules. Roughly 30 seconds into the fight I trapped him in a corner and proceeded to land a couple of scorching left hooks downstairs. But then I committed one of boxing's cardinal rules: leading with a left hook to the body. Next thing I knew, I had started to experience the very unfamiliar sensation of what I can describe only as surreal sweetness. Refusing to realize, or accept, that I had been hurt and never having experienced that kind of sensation before, I sustained even more punches and was close to being rendered unconscious while still upright. At some point, I was knocked down and lost all control of my motor skills en route to a first-round knockout loss.

Cus D'Amato always maintained that fighters who are knocked out somehow sense the impending

doom and welcome the relief of being saved from further humiliation. Another way of saying the same thing is that a fighter being thoroughly out-classed and subjected to severe punishment might welcome a stoppage. Take, for instance, the fight between Vinnie Pazienza and that half-man, half-amazin' Roy Jones Jr. A case could be made that somewhere deep down in the core of his being, Vinnie hoped that the public slaughter would be ended sooner rather than later.

Looking back, although I was becoming aware of the fact that I was hurt, I was so impaired I had absolutely no idea of how close I was to being stopped. What I was certain of was that I was not in control of my motor skills by any stretch of my altered imagination. And that, when the fight was stopped, more than anything else perhaps I longed for the suffocating feelings of vulnerability and embarrassment to end by virtue of a clean knockout or via the intervention of the referee. I welcomed that stoppage, even if it was at 2:59 of the round. Hell, the one-minute's rest period wouldn't have helped.

Oftimes what determines whether or not a fighter is reduced to what the great Sonny Liston described as "a man reaching for the alarm clock while he's still asleep" depends upon how much respect you give your opponent. As much trash-talking and ying-yanging as Mike Tyson directed at Razor Ruddock prior to their two donnybrooks, the little Brotha from Brownsville was not stupid enough to throw caution to the proverbial wind and try to walk the power-punching Jamaican down. Because, in the back of his mind lurked the real possibility of being hurt. And the fear of being knocked on his ass kept him alert.

In my first professional fight the thought of being hurt was not even a consideration, so how could I respond to it once it occurred? Now, I'm not advocating a fighter spend his entire time preparing for a fight totally concerned with how to react when he's shaken up. But I am saying that a balance between perfecting your offensive repertoire and thinking about how to employ defensive postures—such as parrying, movement or clinching, should the occasion call for such actions—might be a wise thing to come equipped with once the fighter steps into the ring.

Because, eventually your grey matter will be altered. And then what are you going to do?

The way to prevent an express trip to Bucklesville is to establish a mental balance in your preparation—one which involves preparing yourself mentally for the very real possibility that you may be hurt and how to overcome that possibility.

Now I had a healthy respect for the vaunted punching power of one Tommy Morrison when we met on that Halloween night back in 1993. I mean, you don't have to be a Rhodes Scholar to know that someone weighing in excess of 225 pounds has the potential to hand out a



Michael Bentt KO'd Tommy Morrison in Round One of their bout on October 29, 1993 to win the WBO title.

severe case of lockjaw and a migraine worthy of being Excedrine case #46. And while I'm no Rhodes Scholar, I quickly became a scholar of the roads to winning, studying up on everything Morrison. I studied every tape of that boy I could. Took copious notes, too. And while doing so, unearthed a few golden nuggets.

Numero Uno, when Tommy had an opponent in trouble, he appeared to take a deep breath and hold it. He did it in his fight against Carl Williams. And, again, against Joe Hipp.

Numero Dos, when he held his breath he actually made himself as rigid and stiff as a board. Here, I recalled something I had once heard in an old Chinese flick where the old master of the *Shaolin* style imparted his wisdom to his students, telling them that the keys to power were fluidity and flexibility, using the bamboo stick as an example. According to that philosophy, I could only think that if Tommy were holding his breath, he was at his stiffest. And courting disaster.

I also suspected something else: that Mr. Morrison, coming off his win over George Foreman for the WBO heavyweight championship, had less than a healthy respect for yours truly. It was an arrogance I could identify with, having entered the ring for my first professional fight with as much the same haughtiness. And paying the price.

I'm certain the furthest thing from Morrison's mind when he stepped into the ring with me on that fateful night would be trying to explain to Larry Merchant what the hell happened in the 93 seconds our fight lasted.

On the other hand, my respect for Mr. Morrison and his trade had prepared me for the bout's action-packed start. After he hurt me in those opening seconds, driving me into the ropes with one of his REM-inducing left hooks that had somehow managed to sneak through my guard, I remained calm, moving, clinching and parrying as he punched away in a frenzy.

It was at that point that a voice from somewhere inside me called out, "Shit man, we ain't get hit! Why should we get embarrassed 'cause you can't take an ass whuppin'?" Responding with a "Point well taken," I righted myself from my uncomfortable position against the ropes and began parrying Mr. Morrison's rain of blows thinking he wouldn't be able to go on punching forever. And that when he paused to take a breath, he would offer me an open-

ing. Because even though parrying places you in your opponent's line of fire, it also enables you to counterpunch because of your close proximity to your tormentor.

And counterpunch I did, taking full advantage not only of Mr. Morrison's inability to control his rampage but also because when he unleashed his combinations he never once moved his head. As a result he never saw the right hand that beat his left hook to the punch.

Here I must note that the punches that do the most damage are those not picked up on the fighter's radar, never seen nor anticipated—that is, unless you're an Ali (circa 1966), Pernell Whitaker (circa 1993), or the current version of Roy Jones Jr. And it was one Mr. Morrison never saw nor anticipated.

Adversity, it has been said, introduces a man to himself. And many's a fighter who has been introduced to himself by having to absorb the kind of adversity and humiliation that can only come with a knockout loss, enveloping him in a feeling that is worse than a slow death; a feeling that challenges his very self-worth.

I, too, would be enveloped by those feelings following my knockout losses. And pray after each that the torment and anguish that seemed to follow me everywhere would be washed away, drowned in my ocean of sorrow.

As I write this it is approximately 52,060 hours, or some six years, since I was severely beaten within a minute fragment of my life by Herbie Hide. What distinguishes this devastating loss from my previous knockout losses, both as a pro and as an amateur, is that I have no recollection of that career-ending fight nor of the 96-hour coma I would lapse into following it.

Both my lack of memory of the fight itself and the subsequent coma can be attributed to a subdural hematoma, one I'm certain I sustained four weeks prior to the fight in a spirited sparring session. During my recovery after the fight, I was told by various neurologists and psychologists that what sometimes happens is that the subject's subconscious mind tends to suppress all images of an extremely violent and traumatic occurrence, both those preceding it and the event itself. Which is exactly what happened to me, the hours preceding the fight and my crashing thunderously face-first to the canvas in a *danse macabre* recounted to me afterward, but not remembered.

Please do not ask how my blood ran cold and my voice choked with fear at the thought of baring my soul in this article. But I did so, and by doing so emerged from my own personal Hell to slay the tormenting demons that still lurk in the uppermost right-hand corner of my living room closet. Very still, now.

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