



EATING CHERRIES WITH THE CHAMP

Thirty-four years after his legendary violent final fight with Muhammad Ali in Manila, Joe Frazier has come to appreciate that life is more than just the pits

WORDS: MARK KRAM JNR MAIN PHOTO: AL BELLO

Set out on the dining room table is a bowl of cherries, which Joe Frazier picks at casually as he remembers his old R&B group, 'Smokin' Joe and The Knockouts'. In occasional gigs back in the '70s, during which he terrorised the heavyweight division with his lethal left hook, Joe was the lead vocalist for the 'The Knockouts' and even had a contract with Capitol Records. While the fortunes of the ensemble more or less fizzled, the songbird in Joe is still apt to soar with unbidden spontaneity, given the presence of even an audience of one.

The Champ croons:

'And now, the time is near

'To domineer ...'

'Remember that one – "My Way?"' says Joe with a gravelly chuckle. 'Paul Anka rewrote some of the words to it just for me.'

Joe is 65 years old now, full of easy cheer that belies the public profile he has carved out as the unforgiving soul so incapable of letting go of the seething anger he has harboured for Muhammad Ali. That Joe is elsewhere today, even if he does get a few jabs at his old arch-rival between forays into the cherry bowl. Generally, Joe is in a contented mood, happy with his new crib on the 20th floor of a downtown Philadelphia hotel even if it has caused him some upheaval. For years he used to live on the top floor of his old gym on North Broad Street, a hideaway he had to abandon in

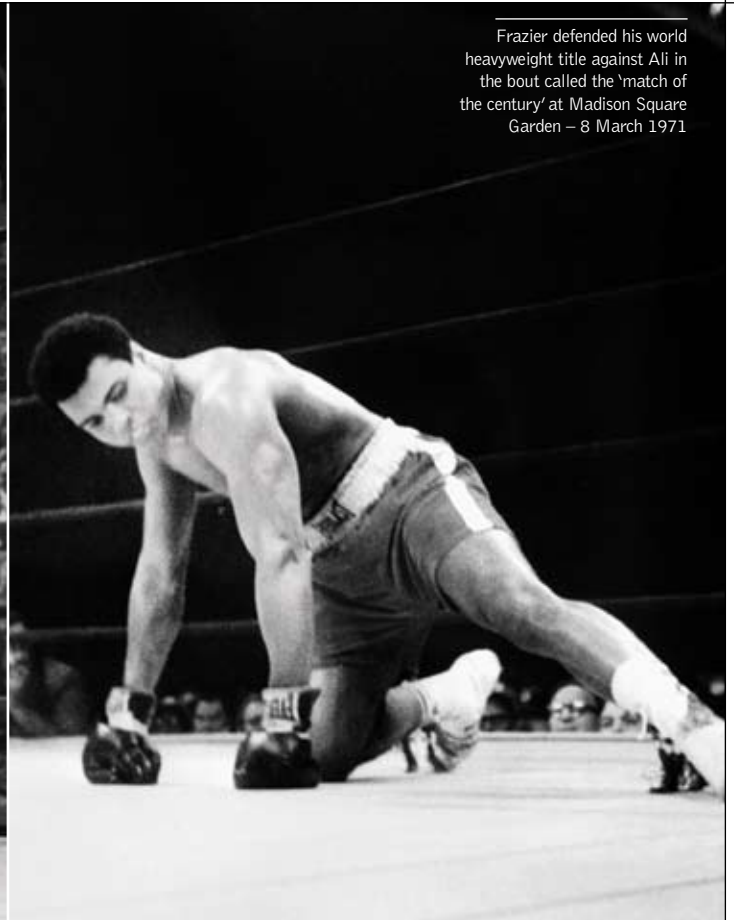
the wake of six operations he has had since a 2002 car wreck left him unable to climb the stairs. With the property up for sale now, the gym has stood empty for close to a year, except for when Joe himself unlocks the door, dons an old boxing robe and taps out a few rounds on the speed bag.

Seeing Joe again reminds me of just how hard it is to unlink him from Ali, who used him as a verbal battering ram during their epic trilogy in the ring back in the '70s. Of their three fights, Joe won one of them – the first by decision, a chilling duel at Madison Square Garden in March 1971 that saw Frazier send Ali sprawling to the canvas in the 15th round. Four years later in January 1975, Ali avenged that loss with an uneventful 12-round decision in New York, a bout during which Ali leaned on Frazier as if he were a light pole. Act III in October 1975 in Manila ended when the battered Frazier was stopped by his corner from coming out for the 15th round. No rivalry between individuals has ever surpassed it. Well beyond the pedal-to-the-floor action they gave us, it is the personal feud that has simmered between them that has elevated it to an operatic pitch. Vile utterances that Ali looked upon as showmanship designed to build the gate stung Frazier, even if Joe understood why Ali went off the way he did.

Joe chuckles as he expels a cherry pit into his hand. 'The "Butterfly" did that stuff whenever he was afraid,' Frazier says of Ali, who assailed Frazier as 'ugly', 'ignorant' and an 'Uncle ►



Frazier defended his world heavyweight title against Ali in the bout called the 'match of the century' at Madison Square Garden – 8 March 1971



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Tom' in the days leading up to 'Thrilla in Manila'. 'He did it to get himself revved up. Remember, he did it with Sonny Liston before and some of those other cats. He knew I would put a whipping on his ass.'

Catch him under the spell of a foul wind and chances are Joe will be less charitable. Example: When the trembling Ali lit the Olympic flame in Atlanta in 1996, Frazier said he would have pushed him into the engulfing fire if he had the chance. Give it up, Joe – the press scolded. Even his old friends winced. But there is a part of Frazier that remains anchored in 1975, even as he sits at his dining room table 34 years later with the aroma of ribs baking in the oven and counts the blessings that have been bestowed on him: 11 children, 25 grandchildren and six great-grandchildren. While he has not seen Ali for years now – and gets few updates on how he is doing – he remembers how Ali once leaned in close and told him in a hoarse whisper: 'Joe Frazier, we were baaaaaad scam boogies'.

Joe sucks on another cherry and says, 'He said once I would have been nothing without him. But what would he have been without me?'

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The sun has set on the Philadelphia skyline as Joe Frazier shuffles in to the apartment with a pack of paper towels large enough

to clean up an oil spill. He hands them off to his friend, Denise Menz, who explains that Joe still thinks he is living back in the vast building that housed his gym. Space in his current dwelling is scarce, but that does not stop Joe from bringing in four cases of soda or whatever else happens to look like a deal during his peregrinations through the city. Denise says, 'Sometimes a hand truck follows him off the elevator. And I say to him, "Joe, what are you going to do with this stuff?"'

The grip of his handshake is still firm, scarcely the greeting of a man in declining health. But he has battled diabetes and high blood pressure for years and has very poor vision despite the fact that he has had surgery performed on his eyes. (He revealed in his autobiography that he was blind in one eye during his career.) Four operations have been performed on his back and he has had two more on his neck since the car accident. Concerned that he could take a spill and perhaps break a hip, doctors have told him that he should walk with a cane. Cognitively, he still seems to be doing fairly well, despite the fact that his speech is slurred and that he can be apt to wander off point. Grinning, Joe says: 'Conditioning helps out. Gotta keep your timing together. Cause you never know when somebody is going to try to push you around.' ►

But the gravitational pull of ageing has not kept Joe from living an active life. While Ali at age 67 has scaled back his public appearances due to his ordeal with Parkinson's disease, Frazier has become a hot property, according to his adviser, Les Wolff. In fact, just two days after I chatted with him at his apartment, Joe was scheduled to hop on a plane and fly to the United Kingdom for a series of appearances. It was a trip that he was at once looking forward to and dreading, the latter due to the fact that Frazier is a confirmed white-knuckled flyer. Planes have spooked him ever since 14 American amateur boxers died in a crash in Poland in 1980. One of them could have been his son Marvis, then an aspiring Olympic heavyweight who had been scheduled to be on the trip.

'I told him not to go,' says Frazier. 'Two weeks before that plane crash, I had a dream of a big fire. My whole family was burned up. All of them – gone. It was a house, not a plane, but I just had a bad feeling.'

Sheepishly, he says of his impending journey to the UK: 'If there was only a way I could just snap my fingers and be there'.

How Frazier has re-emerged in the public eye can be traced to the publication of the 2001 book, *Ghosts of Manila*. Authored by my late father, Mark Kram, the former *Sports Illustrated*

boxing writer who covered each of the Ali-Frazier bouts, the book waged a vigorous defence of Frazier, who had been devalued in the elevation of Ali to sainthood by 'an increasingly uninformed generation of media that was barely born at the height of his career'. While *Ghosts of Manila* was assailed by a certain quarter of that media as an anti-Ali polemic, a piece of angry writing that aimed to settle old scores with influential figures of the day such as Norman Mailer, Howard Cosell and others, the more discerning understood it as an incisive deconstruction of the myth in which Ali had been embedded. While my father yielded to no one in his admiration for Ali as a fighter (and spoke privately of him with warmth), he just could not accept the fact that Ali was of profound social significance, given in part to his lockstep adherence to the racially separatist agenda of the Black Muslims. My father wrote in the introduction of the book: 'Ali was no more of a social force than Frank Sinatra'.

Whatever you happen to think of that statement, and there were more than a few people who howled at it, even ardent Ali supporters began to look upon Frazier with a degree of pity: yeah, Ali had been brutal on him. The book spawned a renewed interest in Joe that eventually led to a documentary ▶

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PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES/GALLO IMAGES

this year by a British filmmaker called *Thrilla in Manila*, which cribbed the thesis of *Ghosts of Manila* without even a cursory acknowledgement. But whatever the filmmaker lacked in manners, he did assemble some compelling footage of the period and included an interview with former Ali aide Dr Ferdie Pacheco that betrayed even a loose definition of the word decency. The inexpressibly graceless 'Fight Doctor' looked the camera in the eye and called Joe Frazier dumb.

'He said that?' asks Frazier, his eyes lighting up with interest. 'Ah, they rip me so Muhammad can come out smelling like a rose. Guys who were on his payroll, they would be saying anything. And Muhammad, we were friends back in the beginning. When he was out of boxing for dodging the draft, I went down to see President Nixon to help him get his licence back. He said, "Smoke, we gonna cut up some money when I get back." I went along with him because he seemed sincere. But whenever a crowd was around, he would go off on me and shout: "Joe Frazier is no champion!"'

So what did Frazier think of the documentary?

He pauses and says with a shrug, 'Well, the truth is I never looked at it.'

Joe has been living with the spectre of Manila since it ended on his stool in capitulation. Had he come out for the 15th round and prevailed over Ali in that tropical heat, he would have beaten him in two of their three encounters. Chances are it would have changed to some extent how we look at Ali, even though he burnished his legend with victories over Sonny Liston, George Foreman and others, and has evolved into a cultural symbol for his evasion of the Vietnam War. In so far as Frazier is concerned, there would not have been this palpable sense of unfinished business that has pervaded him since his trainer Eddie Futch threw in the towel and told him: 'Sit down, son. No one will ever forget what you did here today'. For years Joe held a grudge against wise old Eddie, but years later he told me: 'Eddie stopped it out of love'.

I asked Joe 'what if ... ?'

'What if I had come out for the final round?' asks Frazier, whose eyes were swollen to the size of coin slots by the 15th round. Good question.

'What I have always wondered is if Ali would have come for that round. He was on his stool and he was going to stay there. But Ed was experienced and he thought I had enough.'

A photograph of a far better outcome hangs on the wall above the sofa, of Ali buckling to the canvas in the 15th round of their first bout. Joe looks up at it and says with a laugh, 'There he goes!' Of their second meeting, Frazier says: 'The referee let him mug me'. By the end of the third bout, Joe says, 'it was time for both of us to get out'. While Ali fought 10 more times, and in doing so absorbed some fierce beatings even in victory, Joe called it quits after two more fights and focused his attention on helping his son Marvis climb the heavyweight ladder to some handsome paydays. Of the relationship he has with Marvis, who checks in with him by telephone each day, Joe says: 'Every man should have a son like him'.

Joe yawns and says, 'Come on and stay for ribs'.

Cheerfully, he says his days are full, that the Lord has blessed him in abundance. Someone is always calling with an opportunity, such as the forthcoming Stephen King-John Mellencamp project *Ghost Brothers of Darkland County*. Says Denise: 'Joe plays a good spirit in it and does some singing'. Joe still enjoys belting out the old favourites and has even spoken of reuniting The Knockouts, which he says he would do in a second if he could get up on stage without fear of falling down. Somewhere packed away are copies of an old .45 he cut for Capitol.

He begins singing again:

'I faced the man'

'I had a plan'

'And I fought them my way ...'

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It remains unclear at this point what will happen to the gym.

Some have talked of tearing it down and building a hotel or a club. Joe is saddened by these possibilities, if only because the gym is so full of memories for him: Of his own days there in the days leading up to Ali-Frazier I, but also of aimless young men who came in off the dodgy North Philadelphia streets and learned how to box. Joe could see himself in them in the early arc of his own life, which began in the low country of South Carolina and included a period in New York where he 'borrowed cars without giving them back'. He came to Philadelphia, secured a job in a slaughterhouse and found a sanctuary under the wing of his old trainer Yank Durham, who would warn him in his grave baritone: 'I want to see you in that gym today!'

'I was born into animosity, bigotry, hatred and white-water/coloured-water,' says Frazier, who received word while in the UK that his 25-year-old step-grandson was gunned in a North Philadelphia bar. 'I look back on those days and think: "Well, you are a better man because of them". The world has changed to the point where we now have a black president. But young kids still have to have a place to go.'

Scattered across a napkin on the dining room table are a few cherry pits, which he arranges in a row as he speaks of how calls still come in from people asking if he gives boxing lessons. But the sport he so honoured is no longer the same as he remembers it, back when he and Ali stood astride a heavyweight division that included such stellar talents as Floyd Patterson, George Chuvalo, Jerry Quarry and an array of others. Heck, Joe says he was watching television not long ago and happened to catch a few rounds of 'Ultimate Fighting', which he says 'looked like two men having sex'. No, it is a far cry from how it used to be, so long ago when Ali and Joe were young, tough and 'two baaaaaad scam boogies'. ■

Kram is a multiple award-winning writer for *The Philadelphia Daily News* and the contributor of *Business Day Sport Monthly's American Read*.



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