

# THE PROS

by John Cairns

What a night it was on February 15, 1978! Boxing fans were treated to a fifteen round thriller. The result made it an evening that will go down in sporting history. It was one of those rare occasions when the world title changed hands.

Let's imagine the situation. In one corner was the champion, the ever-imposing Muhammad Ali, who supposedly floats like a butterfly and stings like a bee. He was in his fifty-eighth professional bout and his twenty-third title match. Only twice had he lost. The first defeat was to Joe Frazier and the second to Ken Norton. No one denied that he had slowed down in recent years, but he was an old pro, and his experience and wisdom always seemed to see him through.

The challenger was Leon Spinks, a mere novice in comparison to his opponent. His amateur credentials were impressive, but he had fought as a professional only seven times. Even those weren't all victories. He had knocked out five opponents, decisioned another, and had Scott Le Doux hold him to a draw. Only twice had he gone as far as ten rounds. The confrontation with Ali was scheduled for fifteen. Many observers doubted that he would last the distance.

Yes, Ali seemed a safe bet. His superiority appeared overwhelming. On top of his experience and the distance of the fight, he dominated the tale of the tape. He outweighed his challenger 224<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> to 197<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>, a difference of fully twenty seven pounds. He was also one and half inches taller and had an extra four inches in reach. Spinks' only important physical advantage was his twelve year edge in age.

Muhammed was such a unanimous favorite that no odds were even issued. As for himself, he seemed as confident as ever. That was evident despite his refusal to discuss the fight. When someone wished him luck, for instance, his reply was typically Ali: "Don't need no luck to beat a Duck," he snapped. Angel Angelo Dundee, his trainer, was equally

optimistic. He commented that, "I think Spinks is a well conditioned kid, but I think he'll run out of gas. Ali is in the best condition he's been in for seven years." After all, how could a challenger earning \$300,000 for the bout upset the champion whose fee was \$3.7 million? Such a possibility seemed ridiculous. Ali was considered, as the movie of his life is called, "The Greatest."

The fight itself was long and gruelling. Spinks started off surprisingly well, but by the eleventh round the champ seemed in command. Only later, when he was expected to be weakest, did the upstart

challenger clinch the victory. He did well in the thirteenth round and clearly won the fourteenth. The fifteenth though, was the one that truly settled the issue. Ali managed to connect with three good hooks and a right, but Spinks kept attacking. He outslugged the older man in the final thirty seconds and stung him badly with a powerful hook just as the bell rang. Young Leon had stolen the heavyweight crown and stunned the world of boxing.

One can only be pleased by Spinks' success. We love to occasionally see the underdog win, to watch the little guy batter the big guy. The

new titlist's modesty in victory makes him especially pleasing. That in itself is a refreshing contrast to the champion to whom we've grown accustomed.

Ali though, has been fighting so long, and has given fans so many thrill thrills, that we must also feel sorry for him. Why, oh why didn't he retire while on top? That's something we may never know. He says he'll regain his title, but let's not count on it. With Spinks in charge, and with Ken Norton and Jimmy Young also in the picture, it won't be easily available to anyone. Especially to a thirty-six year old.

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