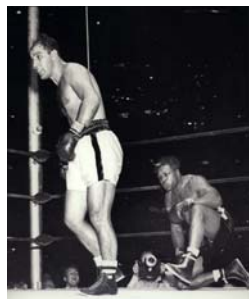


Hand Speed among the Big Fellows

boxing
by don cogswell

A significant hand speed advantage often spells a long night for the slower fighter. Of course the slower contestant can, and often does, negate this advantage with other strengths of his own. The decision to follow a dogged tactical plan of wearing down the opposition's speed advantage is one that, in the words of Father Egan, takes no lack of bottom. Lower weights face these questions frequently. Less so among the big fellows.

The iconic figure of heavyweight hand speed, Muhammad Ali, in his first title reign, presented such a speed disparity between contestants as to appear supernatural. The flurry that dropped a befuddled Brian London in the 3rd frame, the right that stopped an earnest Zora Folley in the 7th, together with the right that immediately preceded it, (seen by Angelo Dundee and few others), suggested Ali was operating in another time zone. Few heavyweights possess this speed of hand.



Variations by the big fellows on the raw speed noted above have left indelible memories, as is the want of heavyweights, on our collective nobs. Joe Louis' combination punching, especially with an opponent in trouble, is a memorable blend of hand speed and power, of economy and purpose. Perhaps the definitive finisher among his peers.

An argument can be made that Rocky Marciano fought with his own unique brand of hand speed. With apologies to Herr Hegel, Rocky's seemed to be a clear case of quantity piling up into the Rock's own unique brand of swiftness of hand. Hidden beneath the surface of its crashing onslaught was Marciano's ability to power punch from positions so distant from the classic as to be deemed harmful to a novice's eyes. Akin to Ali's sin of fighting with his hands down, Marciano's extreme awkwardness was left intact, as was the case with Ali's unconventionality, by both fighter's trainer's *extraordinaire*.

"I have often looked at green kids who thought they could become fighters but I'll eat my derby if I ever saw anyone cruder than Rocky," said Professor Goldman. The noted dean of higher pugilism modestly adding, "Some fighters have unusual styles to start with. What you'd call 'unorthodox.' Like Harry Greb, Al Moore and Maxie Rosenbloom. They became great fighters because nobody tinkered with their natural styles, and they were allowed to develop normally."

When Marciano, in full bloom, favored an opponent with his peculiar brand of hand speed, the other fighter often resembled a man attempting to lather up under a waterfall, many never seeing the bar of soap that laid them low.

Dr. Freddie Brown, in the manner of a man with less than a minute to do his work, kept it neat. Fighting Marciano was "not like football. Rocky never gave you the ball."

When Rocky fought Archie Moore in his final title defense, noted by the great scribbler Liebling as an Eganesque *Encounter of Two Heroes*, he faced an opponent of infinite guile, experience and fortitude. When Rocky strayed from the tried and true, throwing a lead right followed by a hook, Archie smartly countered, dropping the Rock for a 2 count in the second. Watching the film of that fight today, Marciano rallies, inexorably increasing his punching rhythms in the course of the fight to a tempo that negates Moore's guile, bankrupts his bank of experience, and drains Archie of his fortitude. The punches, in the end, never stop coming.

In the words of Mr. Liebling, "(Goldman) had taught Rocky in the four years since I had first seen him fight to shorten the arc of most of his blows without losing power thereby, and always to follow one hard blow with another-*for insurance*- delivered with the other hand, instead of recoiling to watch the victim fall."

At the stoppage, Moore resembled an unwilling tent post being driven through a tree, as Rocky closed the show locked in the cold temperament of a self-possessed hurricane.

The estimable Sam Langford once told Liebling that "whatever that other man wants to do, don't let him do it." A.J. added, "by moving in all the time and punching continually, Marciano achieved the same strategic effect that Langford gained by finesse." In essence, speed by another name.

George Foreman, in contests that demanded he pay close attention to the work at hand, exhibited Marciano-like speed in the *fluidity* of his combination punching. A fighter known for his well-documented power displays, I was fortunate to witness Big George's Zaire preparations in Pleasanton, California, before his departure into boxing's mythology. The 'anywhere punch', cranked up and let fly into a sparing partner pinned against the ropes. The set piece heavy bag displays. None of these hinted at the surprising flow of punches Foreman was capable of, none of which were evident in the debacle in Africa. The example most vivid in my memory of George in full flood was his finishing off of Ken Norton in Caracas. The under, over and out of Foreman's combination punching stands in stark contrast to the normal battering down of lesser opponents he generally employed.



A Marciano moment for Foreman, casting onto boxing's collective memory another variant of hand speed, found among the Big Fellows.