THE NATIONAL

One hot morning in Manila: Ali, Frazier and a country on the ropes

When Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier clashed for a third and final time in the Thrilla in Manila, their rivalry had spiralled out of control and the Philippines was under martial law - 40 years on, the embers of that time still glow.

American boxing promoter Don King dances with first lady Imelda Marcos at a party in honour of the Ali-Frazier fight. AP Photo

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It was 1975 in the Philippines. Corruption and poverty were widespread, and strongman Ferdinand Marcos had introduced martial law to combat communist and Muslim rebellions in the countryside.

The regime's slogan of a "new society" was looking hollow and he needed a distraction.

Enter American heavyweight boxers Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier, who would meet for the third and final time on October 1 that year in Quezon City, Manila. The fighters were promised first-class accommodation and a multimillion-dollar purse – Ali was guaranteed US$4.5 million (Dh16.5m) and Frazier $2m – even as many people in the country were struggling to survive.

Forty years on, the embers of that fight still glow.

"I remember we were so poor that we didn't even have a TV then. I followed the fight [through the] paper," recalls Edwin Espejo, a sportswriter who now covers local boxing in Manila.

"It was used by Marcos to combat discontent. While the country wallowed in poverty, Marcos was setting up big events," says Espejo, who was a teenager in 1975.

Three years earlier, Marcos imposed martial law, supposedly to combat anti-government forces following an alleged assassination attempt on his defence minister by the communist movement. By doing so, the strongman gained control of the security forces, jailed political foes and stifled dissent. Thousands of activists were tortured, killed or simply went missing. In the country's south, fighting raged between troops and Muslims who wanted a separate homeland.

The bout and promotional circus (led by none other than Don King) that surrounded the fight would become legendary. It was dubbed the Thrilla in Manila, derived from Ali's jibe that it would be a "killa and a thrilla and a chilla, when I get that gorilla in Manila".

In the weeks before, Ali engaged in extreme taunting of his opponent, even by his standards. He and his team wore "gorilla" T-shirts to try to mess with Frazier's mind. And in one famous photograph before the event, a smiling Marcos could be seen applauding the fighters who were dressed in nationalist

Filipino shirts as Ali mocked Frazier, while Imelda Marcos – the president's wife, known for her extravagance – stood in the middle, looking innocent.

At about 10am local time on October 1, about 25,000 people crowded into the indoor Araneta Coliseum. Around 100 seats were taken by local and foreign media and Marcos himself was in attendance. While the arena was air-conditioned, it was extremely hot and sticky and temperatures reached toward 50°C. in the ring because of the lights.

"The Thrilla was supreme theatre," says veteran Filipino sportswriter Recah Trinidad, 71, who was ringside.

Trinidad, writing for the now defunct Daily Express and *Expressweek Magazine*, said he remembered the masses of people, the oppressive heat and the excitement.

The usually busy streets of Manila came to a standstill on the morning of the fight, with most people listening to the radio or glued to the television, he says.

"There was no one in the streets," agrees political analyst, Ramon Casiple, who was 19 at the time and a fledgling anti-Marcos activist.

"It seemed everyone watched. There were no mobile phones then, no internet, so we watched on our black-and-white TV screens."

Ali started better, dominating the early rounds. But Frazier fought back. Ali says to Frazier: "Joe, they told me you was all washed up"; Frazier growls back: "They told you wrong, pretty boy." By the later rounds, Ali began to dominate again, battering Frazier so ferociously that only a tiny slit of one eye remained open.

"Ali could have knocked Frazier out when he hurt him in round three but he backed off because he wanted to give the fans a treat. And he did at a rather heavy price, because both fighters were never the same after that," says Ronnie Nathanielsz, who Marcos had appointed to Ali's corner as special liaison officer and who was also ringside.

By the end of the 14th round, Frazier could barely see and his trainer, Eddie Futch, called off the fight. Frazier protested, but it was all over. Ali retained the belt but said that it was the closest he came to death.

Trinidad says that the fight did help suffering Filipinos forget their troubles but it was only for a moment.

“The fight only lulled them, but the suffering remained. There was a placebo effect.”

Marcos, claims Nathanielsz, did succeed in getting the world to notice the Philippines.

“The attention, both by Filipinos and fans around the world ... [went] to Manila. [This] is what President Marcos wanted and succeeded in achieving,” he says. “It was only in the later years that the fabric of martial rule began to unravel.”

For Casiple, now executive director of the Institute for Political and Electoral Reform, a think tank based in Manila, it was simply a temporary distraction. “Everybody was happy a world-class bout came, but it didn’t prevent Marcos from being overthrown. People just forgot for a short time the violence of his martial law, it did not disappear overnight.”

Casiple would later campaign for Marcos’s arch-rival Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino, in the 1978 parliamentary elections, which Marcos won amid reports of widespread cheating.

Aquino was assassinated in 1983, an event that unified the opposition against Marcos. Three years later, public discontent about the suppression of liberties, regime-controlled media and lack of opportunities snowballed into the “People Power Revolution”. The movement toppled Marcos and Aquino’s widow, Corazon, was made president. Marcos went into exile in Hawaii, where he died three years later.

The years that followed were not all smooth. There were multiple coup attempts, unemployment remained high and economic growth was sluggish. But the country has since made progress and is now considered one of Asia’s fastest growing economies.

“Of course, in broader terms, we’re better off now than in the 70s,” says Casiple, “no longer is the same political interest hindering our national growth.”

It also has native boxer Manny Pacquiao, a world champion who has translated his prowess in the ring to a political career as a congressman. His recent losing match against American Floyd Mayweather was dubbed the Thrilla in Manila II in the Philippines, with the Araneta showing the bout on a big screen.

When an earlier Filipino icon, Gabriel “Flash” Elorde, fought Carlos Ortiz 10 years before the Thrilla for the lightweight title, Elorde’s purse was $25,000. Pacquiao earned in the region of $150 million for the Mayweather fight.

“Quite honestly, it was Manny Pacquiao who inspired many youngsters from poor families to take up boxing,” says Nathanielsz.

“They did so in the hope they could emulate Manny and improve the quality of life for their families.

“Besides, they could identify with Manny because they were like him. They found it almost impossible to identify with such big men as Ali and Frazier.”

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FERDINAND MARCOS HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPIONSHIP OTHER SPORT MANILA

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