

# Did our country really gain from Ali vs Frazier?

Manila Bulletin · 10 Jun 2016 · 14 · Muhammad Ali unleashes a right against George Frazier during their Thrilla in Manila duel. (File photo)

My colleague, Jullie Yap Daza, wondered in her column why, in Marcos's time, the country could host the huge heavyweight Ali-Frazier fight when it could not, in the past decade, host one single megafight of Manny Pacquiao as the Filipino fought his way successfully to eight international boxing division titles. Well, the answer is Martial Law. Ferdinand Marcos, who began as President and systematically made himself Dictator, purloined the country's money for a one-time sporting event that was never meant to give anything back to the people.



Instead, the event was engineered to promote the reign of the Marcoses, assert their international presence, sell the illusion of a robust economy, and make the world forget that, under their watch, the Philippines had junked democracy for dictatorship.

Mounting the “Thrilla in Manila” in 1975 was in the same class as hosting the Miss Universe Pageant in 1974. The Marcoses did both. In a country broken by poverty, theirs was the classic gambit of distracting the restive mass with bread and circus.

No one knows to this day how much money was paid to Ali, to Frazier, and to the fight's promoters. But a heavyweight contest such as this, coveted by every country with television, could not have come cheap. No way could private enterprise have swung this; only a government guarantee could.

Sure, the fight put the Philippines on the world map — but, alas, only too briefly. When the world talks about the Ali-Frazier fight today, it doesn't talk about the Philippines, it talks about Ali and Frazier going for the kill in a contest so brutal it has gone down in boxing history as a fight for the

ages.

At around the same time Ali and Frazier were going about entertaining us, government soldiers were scouring the cities and the countryside for antimartial law activists, continuing with the killing and the torture of hundreds, and the incarceration of thousands.

As a sportswriter who covered Ali's pre-fight preparation, martial law and its abuses were far from my mind — as it was far from the minds of others earning a living — even as several personal friends from college were out there, on the front lines in the fight against martial law.

Muhammad Ali was a perfect distraction. He was mesmerizing, awesome, larger than life. For these reasons, the best of America's writers, in sports and literature, trailed him all the way to Manila. One of the most notable was Norman Mailer, author of the "The Fight," a book about Ali's bout with George Foreman in Zaire in 1974. He was in Manila for the "Thrilla." Ali worked out at the Folk Arts Center, located within the Cultural Center complex by the sea. His actual boxing regimen was closed to the public, witnessed only by his trainers and his large entourage.

But after sweating it out, Ali would perform for the gallery. This would become a regular show. He would play with reporters gathered below the ring, from where they threw their questions, which he lapped up.

Oftentimes, his answers included unsolicited insults against Joe Frazier, who was holding his own prefight training in the same facility but at a different time, and where he had merely a fraction of the press that crowded Ali.

The reason was simple enough. Ali was excellent press material. His statements were outrageous, even hilarious, and he was fearless about whom he hit. Besides, there were always side shows around Ali, such as the time his wife arrived from the US unannounced and confronted him about his affair. Unfortunately, Ali was trapped. He had indeed brought his mistress with him to Manila.

Ali would also drop by Frazier's training camp and hotel unannounced and deliver