

Tim Noonan

Why Thrilla in Manila was the equivalent in its day of handing the World Cup to Qatar

The legendary Ali-Frazier bout in Manila 40 years ago was more about propping up the Marcos regime than a sporting contest

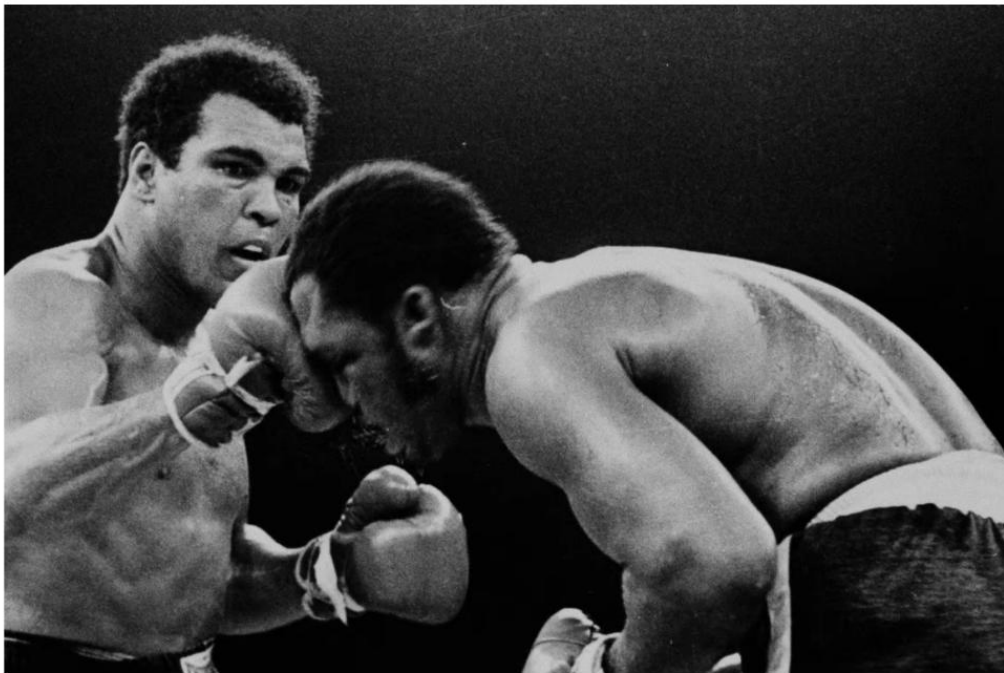


Tim Noonan

[+ FOLLOW](#)

Published: 8:00pm, 3 Oct, 2015

[Why you can trust SCMP](#)



Muhammad Ali throws a right at Joe Frazier in the 13th round of their fight. Photos: AP

It was never about sport, at least not in the beginning. The most significant sporting event ever held on this continent turned 40 last week and amidst the endless gushing over the "Thrilla in Manila" it's important to remember just why this fight, the rubber match between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier, actually took place in Asia.



Imagine the reaction over 40 years ago when the venue for the culmination of the greatest rivalry in sports was announced



In 1975, there was significant push-back to Philippines dictator Ferdinand Marcos' brutal and oppressive rule. Despite his imposing martial law three years earlier, opposition critics were relentless and defiant.

But Marcos stifled the media while repeatedly destroying or ostracising most of his opponents in an endless purge and was actively in pursuit of high-profile distractions. At the time, there was no bigger name anywhere than Muhammad Ali, the single most famous person in the world.

There is much talk today of the ludicrous decision by Fifa to award Qatar the rights to host the 2022 World Cup. But imagine the reaction over 40 years ago when the venue for the culmination of the greatest rivalry in sports was announced.



Muhammad Ali lands a right to the head of Joe Frazier in one of the sports most brutal showdowns.

The first Ali-Frazier bout in 1971 was dubbed the Fight of the Century, but it was actually more than that. It was the sporting event of the century and fittingly it was held in New York's storied Madison Square Garden, a global hub where the world's media could basically take a cab to the fight.

The rematch almost three years later was also held at the Garden and while much had changed in the ring before the third fight, with both the 33-year-old Ali and the 31-year-old Frazier past their prime, it was still a marquee match-up. And you are going to hold it where? Manila? But Marcos money would not be deterred.

EVERY SATURDAY

SCMP Global Impact Newsletter

By submitting, you consent to receiving marketing emails from SCMP. If you don't want these, tick here ☐



By registering, you agree to our [T&C](#) and [Privacy Policy](#).

Long before the likes of Fifa honcho Sepp Blatter and Formula One oligarch Bernie Ecclestone began extorting billions from pariah states to host events, there was Don King.



Muhammad Ali grimaces in pain as Joe Frazier has him backed against the ropes during the fight.

The indefatigable boxing promoter wrote the book on unholy sporting alliances. One year before the Thrilla in Manila he had secured a US\$10 million deal from Zaire President Mobutu Sese Seko for Ali to fight then world champion George Foreman in Kinshasha, the country's capital. Mobutu had allegedly rounded up 1,000 criminals and held them in rooms under the stadium before executing 100 of them to ensure no one got out of line.

King would be on familiar turf with Marcos and much like Mobutu before him the Philippine strongman went to great lengths to show the world, and in particular his allies in the US government, just what a beautiful and harmonious society the Philippines was under him.





Joe Frazier was never the same after suffering the beating at the hands of Muhammad Ali.

Thousands of squatter huts and shanties were boarded up and their residents evicted as Marcos wallpapered Manila in advance of the media circus and no detail or expense was spared.

"The 10-day trip to Manila was fascinating," wrote legendary American sports pundit Dick Schaap. "It was a dizzying blend of curfews, cockfights and custom-rolled contraband joints served at formal receptions on silver platters."

Despite the imposition of martial law, Marcos was generous enough to grant international journalists special dispensation to go out after midnight and tag along on Ali's forays to badger Frazier in his suite high above Rojas Boulevard.

By this stage in his career, Ali was an endless distraction well worth the US\$4 million Marcos had spent. By the time Ali and Frazier got in the ring at Araneta Coliseum on Sunday morning, October 1, it was finally about boxing and it was, by any measure, one of the most brutal bouts in the history of the sport.

Ali and Frazier unleashed a career of animosity and a barrage of punishing blows. After 14 rounds Frazier, his face swollen beyond recognition, was not allowed to continue. Ali would later comment it was the closest he ever came to death and neither man would ever be the same.

Marcos would be deposed by People Power some 10 years later and die shortly after.



Phillippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos didn't last long after "People's Power" gripped the country.

Last week Marcos' son, Senator Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jnr, admitted he is still contemplating running for president next year while saying that all surveys still show his father was the best president the country ever had. He often cites the pride Filipinos felt in hosting world-class events. However, if the Thrilla in Manila truly has any sort of meaningful legacy in this country, hopefully it will be the legacy of the Marcos family's wanton hubris and endless excess.

History is no use to us if we don't learn from it.

This article appeared in the South China Morning Post print edition as: The evil motive behind Thrilla

CONVERSATIONS



Tim Noonan

[+ FOLLOW](#)

Tim Noonan has been crafting uniquely provocative columns for the SCMP and SMP for more than a decade. A native of Canada, he has over 20 years' experience in Asia and has been a regular contributor to a number of prominent publications, including Time magazine, Forbes, The New York Times, The International Herald Tribune and The Independent.

