

Sports

How 'Thrilla in Manila' changed Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier forever

'It's gonna be a thrilla, and a chilla, and a killa, when I get the gorilla in Manila'

MANILA: When Muhammad Ali survived 14 brutal rounds with Joe Frazier in the 'Thrilla in Manila' 45 years ago, it wrote a page in boxing folklore but left both men forever diminished.

Fought in the Philippines' stifling daytime heat, with barely functioning air conditioning, Frazier was beaten nearly blind and Ali was on the verge of surrender. In the end, it was Frazier's trainer who threw in the towel to hand Ali victory on October 1, 1975, settling their head-to-head 2-1. But the fight came at a cost to both men.

"Ali and Frazier would never be the same again, after pouring and spending practically all their power and durability in Manila," said Recah Trinidad, a Philippine boxing columnist.

Ali, who had beaten George Foreman in the 'Rumble in the Jungle' in Zaire a year earlier, came into the fight at 33, his best years well behind him.

They battled inside the 25,000-seat Araneta Coliseum with such ferocity that spectators including Imelda Marcos, wife of then-Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos, were spattered with blood.

"It was like death. Closest thing to dyin' that I know of," Ali later said of the bout. Ali set an acrimonious tone in the weeks leading to the fight, enraging Frazier, 31, by likening him to a giant ape.

"It's gonna be a thrilla, and a chilla, and a killa, when I get the gorilla in Manila," Ali boasted, coining the nickname that still resonates today.

On fight day the momentum swung back and

forth between the men, who were in their third and final match-up. One Frazier punch sent Ali's mouthpiece flying into the fifth row, but neither fighter fell.

The fight in the tropics was staged in the daytime to suit US television audiences, but the crowd and TV lights overwhelmed the air-conditioning. "At 125 degrees — we were fighting each other (as well as) against the heat," Frazier said in the 2008 documentary "Thrilla in Manila".

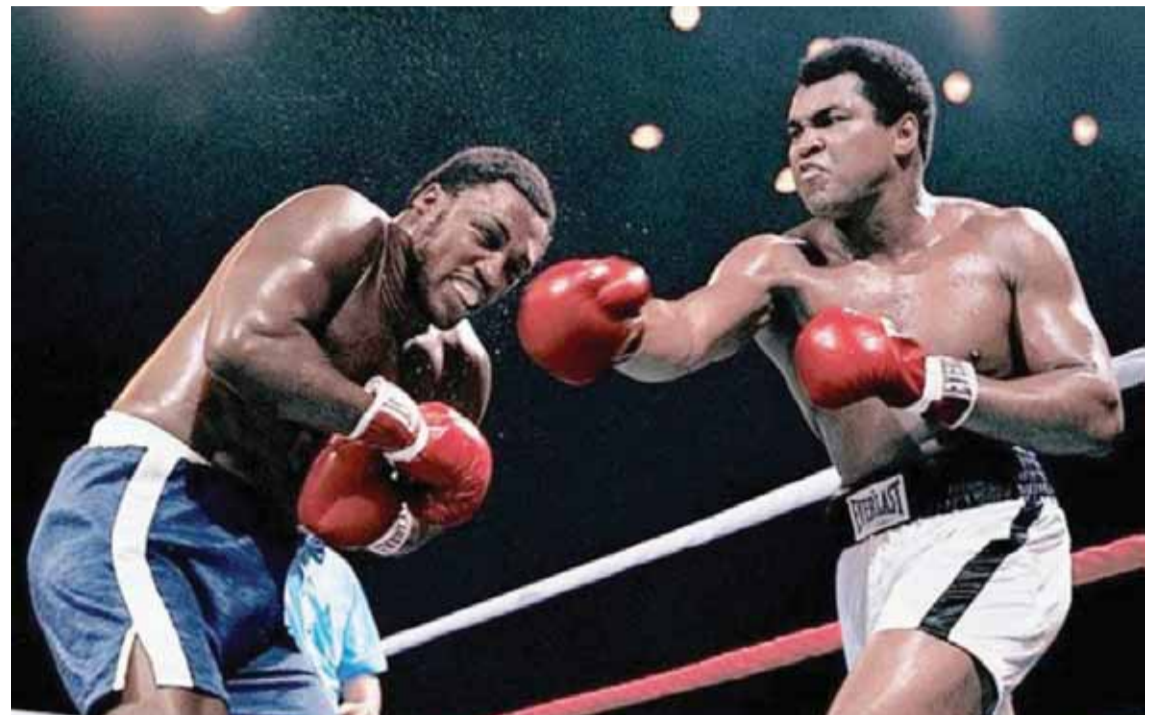
Ali's blows had swollen Frazier's right eye nearly shut, and he was nearly blind in his left due to a training injury. His face soaked in blood, Frazier argued with his trainer Eddie Futch to let him come out for the 15th round, but Futch stopped the fight.

Later, it was revealed that Ali himself wanted to quit. His biographer Thomas Hauser told the 2008 documentary that at the end of the round an

Ali cornerman heard the champion telling trainer Angelo Dundee to "cut 'em (gloves) off".

"Round 14 was the closest I've seen somebody come to killing somebody," Ali's fight doctor Ferdie Pacheco told the documentary makers. But after the Thrilla, "both men were never the same again", said Nick Giongco, a sports analyst at the Manila Bulletin.

He said that although Ali would defend his world title a further six times, and regain it in a rematch after losing to Leon Spinks in 1978, the self-styled "Greatest of All Time" never fully recovered from the "brutal beatdown" Frazier had inflicted.



Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier in the 'Thrilla in Manila' 45 years ago.

Ali would finally hang up his gloves in 1981 aged 39, following consecutive losses to Larry Holmes and Trevor Berbick. He retired with a win-loss record of 56-5. The "Louisville Lip" died nearly four years ago after a long battle with Parkinson's disease.

"Smokin' Joe" (32-4-1) fought only twice more after the Manila epic, being stopped by Foreman for a second time in 1976 before coming out of retirement five years later to draw with the unheralded Floyd Cummings over 10 rounds. Frazier died in 2011. — AFP

Pietersen concerned about England pace duo

MUMBAI: Kevin Pietersen is concerned about England's Test bowling resources when the long-serving pace duo of James Anderson and Stuart Broad call time on their careers, the former captain has told Reuters.

The experienced new ball pair, both in their 30s, have recently said they were aiming to be part of England's bid to reclaim the Ashes in Australia next year and would subsequently consider retirement.

"I am worried about England's test team, when Broad and Anderson go. They are on their last legs at the moment," Pietersen told Reuters in an interview. "If Broad and Anderson go, there's going to be a big, big gap to fill. Do they have the bowlers?"

"Mark Wood is very good, however he's full of injuries. And Jofra Archer, he's also had that elbow injury during that South African series, so he hardly played. "So

it will be about how quickly England can fill that gap because ... if you can't take 20 wickets in the test match you really are behind the eight ball."

Anderson, 37, is test cricket's most prolific fast bowler with 584 victims but has not played since January when he suffered a rib injury in South Africa. Broad, who is second on England's list with 485 wickets, is four years younger but does not see his playing career continuing as long as Anderson's.

Pietersen was more confident about the leadership of the team, though admitted he was among those who had reservations about Joe Root's captaincy before the 3-1 test series triumph in South Africa earlier this year.

"I think that he came away from that tour a much better leader, a much better captain, and with a lot more respect from a lot of people that had reservations about him leading into that test tour in South Africa," he said.

England held Australia to a 2-2 draw in last year's home Ashes series but even then needed Ben Stokes's brilliant unbeaten 135 to win the third test in thrilling fashion at Headingley.

The New Zealand-born all-rounder also played a spectacular leading role in England's 50-overs World Cup triumph in 2019 and was Player of the Series in South Africa.

"He's been absolutely sensational over the last few years," said Pietersen. "We all knew he had cricketing talent, we all knew he had the ability to turn the game on its head."

"But for him to consistently do it, and for him to prepare the way that he continues to prepare, and to play the way that he plays, he is a huge asset to that England team."

Despite his appreciation for Stokes's abilities, Pietersen said it was too soon to compare the 28-year-old with England great Ian Botham. "Comparing people, I think you can only do at the end of a career," said Pietersen, who scored more than 8,000 runs for England in 104 tests.

"In terms of match winning they're right up there with each other. They both win games, single-handedly, so the comparisons I think are quite unfair while a guy is still playing."

"I hated being compared to people. I just wanted to play and be me." South African-born Pietersen has continued to be himself after retiring from cricket in 2018, becoming deeply involved in animal conservation and highlighting the plight of the rhinoceros. His charity, Save our Rhino Africa/India (SORAI), will be relaunched towards the end of June. — Reuters

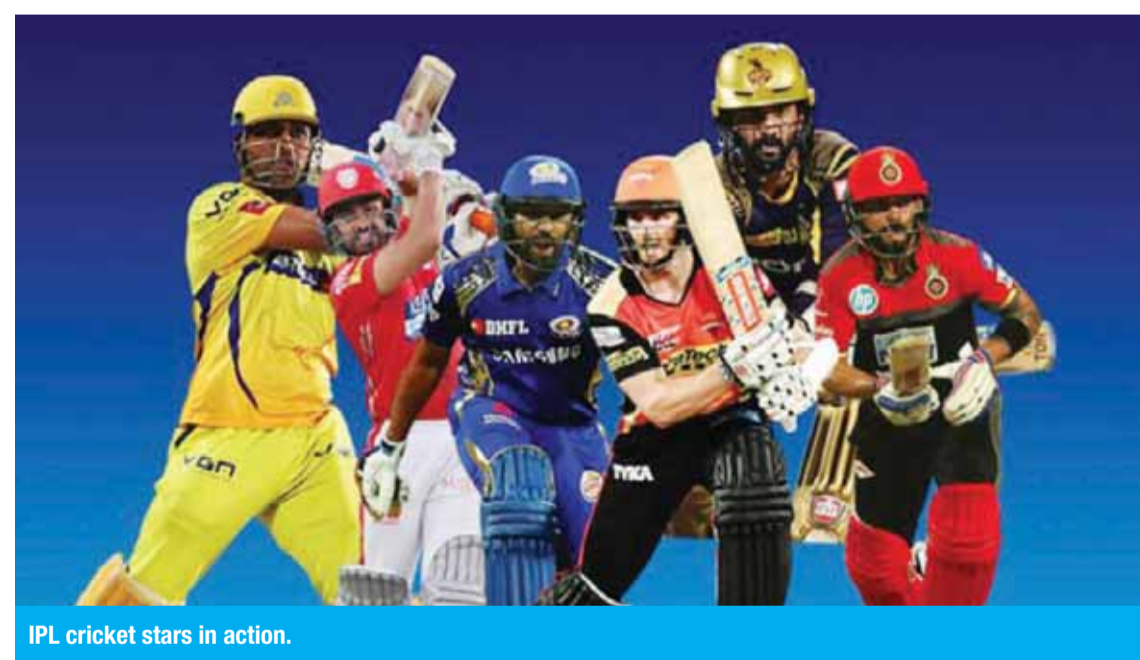
IPL cancellation could cost Indian cricket half a billion dollars

NEW DELHI: Scrapping the money-spinning Indian Premier League this year because of the coronavirus pandemic would cost more than half a billion dollars, but cutting players' pay was not yet being considered, a top official has told AFP.

The world's richest Twenty20 tournament is staring at a first wipeout in its 12-year history after the original March 29 start date was postponed repeatedly. Cancellation of the IPL for 2020 would mean a huge financial hit. "The BCCI is looking at a big revenue loss. In case the IPL does not take place, the loss would be close to 40 billion rupees (\$530 million), or even more," said Board of Control for Cricket in India treasurer Arun Dhumal. India, like other cricket nations, is anxious to see a return to competitive international sport, but has to follow government orders and advice. "We are not sure whether we will be able to have it this year," he admitted. A one-day international series against South Africa in March has already been cancelled but it is the IPL, which began in 2008, that generates the bulk of BCCI revenue and is thought to be worth more than \$11 billion a year to the Indian economy.

"We will only be able to figure out the exact revenue loss once we are sure of how many games we have lost," said Dhumal. The IPL brand value was estimated at \$6.7 billion last year by the Duff and Phelps financial consultancy. Indian broadcaster Star Sports paid more than \$220 million for five years of TV rights up to 2022. But it was reportedly targeting \$400 million of revenue in 2020 alone.

Gripped by an international lockdown, many national boards have been forced into cost-cutting. Cricket Australia has laid off most of its staff while the England and



IPL cricket stars in action.

Wales Cricket Board has announced pay cuts.

Other top sports, such as football's English Premier League and Spain's La Liga, have also seen players accept wage cuts. But Dhumal, who joined the BCCI leadership last year alongside president Sourav Ganguly and secretary Jay Shah, said that it was hoped to avoid pay cuts for players.

"That would be the last thing that we would want to do at our end," said Dhumal. "That is why we are working (on) how much is the loss finally we have to pay. "So once we are able to assess that then we might consider it, but it will be the last thing on our agenda."

Dhumal said India's tour of Sri Lanka, scheduled to begin in June, would only go ahead if the pandemic eases. "The safety and health of our cricketers is paramount and any shred of doubt, we will not shy away from

"I think we should scrap the season. Everybody go home, get healthy, come back next year. Just scrap the season. Just scrap it," O'Neal told the newspaper.

"To try and come back now and do a rush playoffs as a player? Any team that wins this year, there's an asterisk. They're not going to get the respect."

"What if a team that's not really in the mix of things all of a sudden wins with a new playoff format? Nobody is going to respect that. So, scrap it. Worry about the safety of the fans and the people. Come back next year." Dominating center O'Neal combined with the late Kobe Bryant and sparked the Los Angeles Lakers to NBA crowns from 2000 through 2002, being named the NBA Finals Most Valuable Player each time, then powered the Miami Heat to the 2006 title.

O'Neal, 48, retired in 2011 after a 19-season NBA

career and has been working as a television analyst.

Current Lakers star LeBron James, who had LA atop the Western Conference when the season went on hiatus, has said no one should be talking about canceling the season. The league has been working on plans to gather teams in a single city, test and house players in a secured area and stage games without fans in a controlled area, with Las Vegas and Orlando most often mentioned as possible sites for the "bubble" plan.

"I understand how players are feeling. I really do," O'Neal told the newspaper. "But any team that gets it done this year, there's going to be an asterisk on that championship." O'Neal doesn't want to see any resumption unless all involved — players, coaches, referees and the broadcast personnel — are safe from the deadly virus. — AFP

Serie A set for team training on May 18

MILAN: Serie A clubs can return to team training from May 18 if they make adjustments to medical protocols, the Italian government announced on Monday. The Italian Football Federation (FIGC) met with the government's technical scientific committee (CTS) last week to discuss details for a return to group training as the country emerges from a two-month coronavirus lockdown.

Italy's sports minister Vincenzo Spadafora and health minister Roberto Speranza said in a joint statement on Monday that the CTS had largely accepted the FIGC protocol for a resumption of group sessions.

"The opinion requested by the government from the Technical Scientific Committee confirms the line of prudence," the ministers' statement said. "The indications of the CTS, which are to be considered stringent and binding, will be sent to the Federation for the necessary adjustments of the protocol in order to allow for the safe resumption of team training starting from May 18."

Football has been suspended in Italy since March 9 amid the pandemic which has killed nearly 31,000 people in the country. The Italian government has allowed squads to return to individual training sessions in team facilities from May 4.

But there remain issues to be decided such as the quarantine of players in case of positive tests for coronavirus. Italian football bosses want to follow the example of Germany, which returns to action on May 16, and where only positive cases would be put into isolation.

But the CTS insists football must comply with the general rule of two weeks in isolation for those who have been in contact with positive cases. There are still 13 rounds of football to be played for some teams between mid-June, when the FIGC hopes to return to action, and August.

Since the return to training last week, Fiorentina and Sampdoria announced 10 positive tests. In addition, a Torino player tested positive. Spadafora later stressed the many tests that will need to be carried out on Serie A footballers would not be done "to the detriment of citizens".

"If these changes are made, there may be collective training from May 18," the sports minister told Italian television. "Whether the championship can resume, we will have to wait at least another week to see how the curve of contagion evolves and then be able to decide."

One by one players have returned to Italy, with Juventus forward Cristiano Ronaldo observing a two-week quarantine period and Swedish star Zlatan Ibrahimovic returning to AC Milan on Monday evening.

Italy on Monday reported fewer than 1,000 people in intensive care for COVID-19 for the first time since March 10 when the country went into confinement. — AFP

Shaq says scrap NBA season

LOS ANGELES: Retired four-time NBA champion Shaquille O'Neal says the league would be smart to call off the halted 2019-20 campaign and avoid crowning a champion that would carry an "asterisk."

O'Neal, in an interview with USA Today, said players should start to prepare for a 2020-21 season and set aside a campaign halted in March by the coronavirus pandemic with five weeks of regular-season games and two months of playoffs remaining.