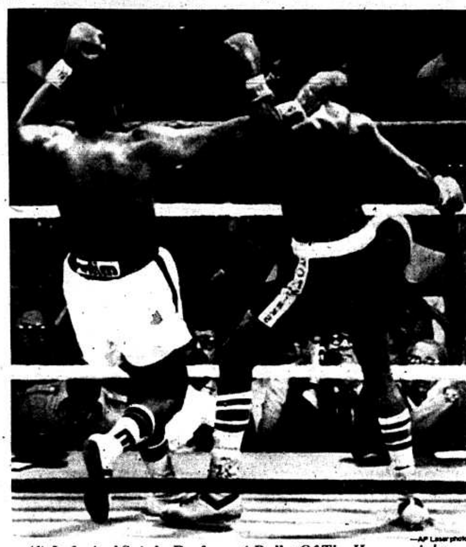
'Ali! Ali! Ali!'

Muhammad Ali Regains Title Third Time



—AP Laserphoto

Ali, Left, And Spinks Perform A Ballet Of The Heavyweights

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — There was one more dance left in the old man's legs. The butterfly of another spring sprouted new wings and Muhammad Ali carved a golden wreath around the most fabulous era in boxing.

It was the "Muhammad Ali Era" — 18 exciting, explosive years — and it ended in a historic setting in the giant Superdome Friday night with 70,000 idolatrous fans screaming wildly: "Ali! Ali! Ali!"

What now?

"Thank God it's over — that's it."

Such were the first words to emerge from Ali's unmarked lips after he had scored a unanimous 15-round decision over 25-year-old Leon Spinks — the raw, unskilled street fighter who had wrested the title from him seven months ago.

But the master of showmanship refused, under probing pressure, to say positively.

"This title — it's too good to give away so soon," he said after further thought. "I will sit on it for six months, maybe eight months, and then I'll decide."

It was typical puckishness, but the thought stunned a world that hoped the gallant old warrior — perpetrator of one miracle after another — certainly would not atempt to go to the well another time.

It's obvious time is running out.

Those who know Muhammad Ali best realize that he loves the limelight. He delights in having a public forum. Its jewel, now regained, he will not easily forfeit again.

But he gives every indication that he will never pull on gloves in anger again.

"I will retire as the first man ever to win the heavyweight title three times and as the first black champion," he said.

So he will savor his glory for a while and let challengers and promoters stew over the problem of determining an undisputed champion.

Right now there are two claimants — Ali, recognized by the World Boxing Association, and unbeaten Larry Holmes, a strapping 28-year-old battler out of Easton, Pa., who won the World Boxing Council version by beating Ken Norton.

Spinks, beaten but not disgraced, has to be ranked a formidable contender. Holmes, with a 28-0 record and a style similar to that of Ali, demands respect.

Assuming that Ali, after a respectable waiting period, ultimately will turn his talents to new and broader directions, it's reasonable that the ideal championship matchup would be Spinks-Holmes.

But to reach that plateau, it would be necessary to resolve a bitter promotional war involving Bob Arum, the Harvard-educated lawyer who pulled off the successful "Battle of New Orleans," and Don King, the convicted murderer who brought the heavyweight boxing show to the obscure corners of the world. He controls Holmes.

Ali's 15-round decision, which sent the huge crowd at the Superdome into wild roaring frenzy, was a monument to a man's fierce pride and motivation.

"You didn't see me dance 15 rounds, you know you didn't," the champion chided the huge international press corps an hour after his victory. "You said I was an old man over the hill.

"That couldn't have been me out there dancing 15 rounds. No 36-year-old man could outdance a 25-year-old man, now could he?"

It was a moment the champion relished.

Indeed, this was not the same flabby, uninspired Ali who was beaten by the ex-Marine from St. Louis last Feb. 15 at Caesar's Palace.

At 221 pounds, five pounds lighter than he was in their first encounter, he was almost the dancing master of old. He bounced around the 20-foot square on ballet dancer's feet, stabbing, jabbing, occasionally rocking his frustrated foe.

Spinks, at 201, was four pounds heavier than at Las Vegas, but a shadow of the man who won the crown in his eighth professional fight.

Though he started fiercely and aggressively and got in a few good shots in the early rounds, he soon was converted to an awkward amateur by the more experienced Ali.

"I wasn't frustrated, I was disappointed," Spinks said afterward. "He wasn't no more tougher than he was in the first fight, I just didn't have it in my heart to win.

"I wasn't me. I don't know why. The championship brought me a lot of problems. I had it in myself to go out and win, but I just couldn't do it."

Spinks said Ali still was his idol and indicated he hoped the old champion would retire.

"I rushed over to his corner to congratulate him. I wanted to be the first to raise his hand," said the beaten champion. "I knew I lost. You seen it as well as I did. I wasn't ready."

They came in waves to see what would happen — the masses paid an estimated $6 million to watch history in the monstrous domed arena. They spent more on tickets than 104,943 paid at Soldier Field in Chicago, where Gene Tunney and Jack Dempsey fought a second time a half-century ago.

Spinks' pocket took no beating. The end of his 214-day tenure at the top of the heavyweight world filled his wallet with $3.75 million. Ali, a challenger for the first time in so long, pocketed $3.25 million.

Ali came out dancing at the bell — using his familiar "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee" technique — and, while everyone waited for him to tire, he never wavered.

He still was on his toes at the finish, flicking out at Spinks with his stinging left and occasionally jolting him with a straight right.

In the seventh round, Spinks began showing signs of weariness. His legs looked rubbery. He lost his composure. He began swinging wildly and setting himself up as a target for Ali's measured shots.

In the sixth, Spinks' valuable corner man, George Benton, deserted in a huff, saying: "There were just too many amateurs in there."

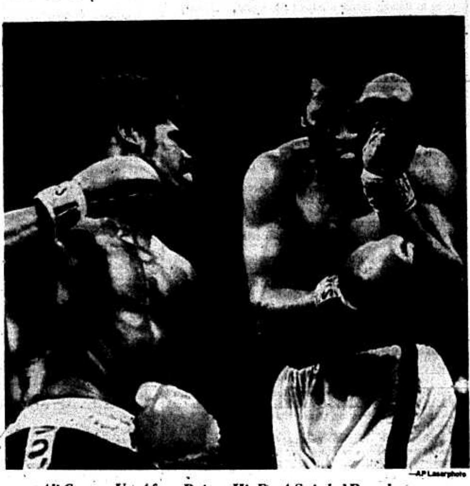
Spinks acknowledged Benton's departure, shrugging it off with, "Oh, I guess he just wanted to split."

Spinks managed to hold his own through the early rounds, pressing the fight but rarely landing on the evasive target. In the eighth round, Ali buried his right glove in Spinks' midsection and the St. Louis ghetto kid winced visibly, as if hurt.

Sensing victory, the crowd began to chant loudly: "Ali! Ali! Ali!"

Ali's corner came alive. Bundini Brown, the champ's court jester, began screaming and crying. Angelo Dundee, the faithful trainer of 18 years, poured wisdom in Ali's ear.

Muhammad responded. He was more resolute as he came out for round nine. Spinks looked tired and bewildered.



—AP Laserphoto

Ali Covers Up After Being Hit By A Spinks' Punch

Spinks' Loss May Mean Pause In His Troubles

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — If there can be any solace for Leon Spinks, it may well be that the end of his reign as heavyweight champion marks a pause in the troubles that accompanied the title.

In 214 days, from that February evening when he wrested the crown from Muhammad Ali's head, Spinks endured chaos in his camp, sparring matches with the law, and constant hounding for his time, for his attention, for his money.

That's over now. Ali repossessed the title with a unanimous decision Friday night, leaving Spinks a man with dilemmas to solve.

"I was ready for the fight," said the 25-year-old ex-Marine. "My legs were in it, and my body was in it, but my mind wasn't in it.

"Maybe the things about being a heavyweight champion hurt me. There were a lot of problems, and maybe I didn't know how to deal with them — who knows?"

He didn't have to say what those problems were. The public knows about his brushes with the law over driving without a license, knows about the arrest for alleged possession of a small amoút of cocaine, knows about the constant power struggles in his own entourage.

His earnings have been tied up by a former Marine Corps compatriot who claims a verbal agreement to be Spinks' manager.

Valdosta Knocks Off T'ville In A Thriller

By MIKE CHASON

When it was over, a man walked up to Valdosta Coach Nick Hyder and folded some money into his hand. He said what had just taken place on Cleveland Field was worth more than the price of admission.

It was that kind of football game.

Like two bull elephants who never get enough of fighting, Valdosta and Thomasville squared up here Friday night

YARDSTICK

	Valdosta	T'ville
First Downs	15	5
Yards Rushing	163	111
Yards Passing	123	9
Passes	10-24	1-2
Passes Inct. By	0	1
Fumbles Lost	0	0
Punting	5-34.4	9-28.8
Penalties	2-20	2-10

for the sixty-second renewal of one of the oldest prep football rivalries in the state.

The end result was predictable but it wasn't easy to come by.

Valdosta needed a 4-yard touchdown run by quarterback John Lastinger with just 1:41 showing on the end zone clock to clinch a 16-7 win over a Thomasville team it has beaten 42 times since 1914.

Before that piece of fancy footwork by the senior signal-caller, Thomasville looked very capable of picking up its 16th win in the series, which has also produced five ties.

"I'm not at all surprised, nor am I disappointed," Hyder said long after the crowd of 9,800 had left the near legendary confines of "Death Valley." "Our people had to learn poise in the fourth quarter. Thomasville is a sound football team.

"I think we learned a lot of real good lessons from the game. Patience is a lesson. You have to learn that."

Valdosta fans were anything but patient with the clock ticking away and the prospect of two 5-minute overtime periods becoming more of a reality every second.

"I was prepared for overtime," Hyder said. "We were ready if it came to that."

But it didn't.

Lastinger, who had problems throwing the ball consistently was one of the main reasons why VHS sewed up its third straight win of the year in regulation play.

With 3:02 to play, he engineered a 56-yard, 4-play drive. First, he ran 18 yards on a weaving, broken field pattern and then he threw 28 yards to Robert Smith on the Thomasville side of the field.

"That pass to Robert kind of broke their back," Lastinger said.

Flashy halfback Ernest King then followed offensive guard Fomby Hardin for seven yards up to the Thomasville 4-yard line. Lastinger then wheeled to his right and dived into the end zone for the sweetest six of his career.

"If we don't score, I'm leaving town," Lastinger said he was thinking of the final drive. I would have been looking for the nearest exit."

The touchdown touched off mass hysteria on the home side. Lastinger could only feel relief.

"I'm finally here," he said he thought.

Hyder said tight end Sam Fletcher, tackle Scott Griffin and guard Andy Chapman opened the way for the score.

Earlier, the veteran Valdosta line had some problems containing the aggressive Bulldog defense.

"They were beating us off the ball," Lastinger said. "But our offensive line got together on the sideline and talked it over. They started holding them out."

For the night, Lastinger connected on 10 of 23 passes for 123 yards. He had one interception.

"I felt like John was rushing his passing a little bit," Hyder said. "But they were rushing him with two or three tall people who kept their hands up.

You can't throw out of a well. He had to see to throw."

Keyed by a 16-yard gallop by King, who had 59 yards rushing in nine carries, Valdosta pushed down to within 12 yards of the goal line the first time it touched the ball.

But Irwin Roe couldn't shake free on a fourth down run, and the ball went over.

Three minutes later, Roe stepped into the spotlight again. This time, he danced 14 yards to paydirt after Lastinger had set up the play with two passes to Fredrick Blair.

David Reaves kicked the first of two extra points in the game and the Wildcats were on the board with 3:16 left in the opening period.

VHS middle guard James Conaway, who had 10 individual tackles, and cornerback Troy Thomas, who had eight, were helping to bog down the Thomasville offense completely.

The Bulldogs didn't even get a first down the first quarter and wound up with only five for the almost penalty-free game.

"We've got to get our offense to be as efficient as our defense," Thomasville Coach Jim Hughes said. "I felt like our defense would have to keep us in the game. . .and it did.

"But we couldn't get anything going offensively. We only had that one offensive drive."

That 80-yard march in four plays was a beauty.

Fullback Cary Clark ripped off a 46-yard run en route to his 71-yard rushing performance and put a move on VHS safety Nathaniel Caesar he won't soon forget.

Clark was thinking six all the way but Carl Roe ran him down at the 3-yard line.

Fullback Larry Stringer took it in on the next play. Thomasville quarterback Johnny Chastain signaled the touchdown before Stringer even crossed the line.

Steve Strickland hit the extra point kick with 6:29 left in the first half.

VHS defensive coordinator Jack Rudolph must have spotted his team's mistake because Thomasville never was any threat to score again.

Valdosta got within the Bulldog 23-yard line twice more, once turning the ball over on downs and once missing a 37-yard field goal by Reaves.

Hughes, a Woody Hayes disciple all the way, went to his air game only two times. Chastain completed one of the two.

"Field position dictates how much we throw," Hughes said. "And if you'll remember, we didn't have any kind of field position."

"I thought they would (throw more)," Hyder said. "But my feeling about Jim is that he'll throw, but he doesn't like to. I was proud of our defense. It responded when it had to."

After Valdosta scored the second time, Chastain did start sniffing for the TD bomb but got bombed in his own end zone for a safety by a gang of Wildcats which included Carrol Johnson, James Harris and Conaway.

Thomasville recovered the resulting free kick but the clock ran out of ticks for the Bulldogs' [illegible] loss in three games this year.

Score by Quarters

Valdosta	7	[illegible]	[illegible]	[illegible]—16
Thomasville	0	7	0	0—7

Scoring

Val. - I. Roe 14 run (Reaves kick).
Tho. - Stringer 3 run (Strickland kick);
Val. - Lastinger 4 run (Reaves kick);
Val. - safety.

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

Rushing: Valdosta - King 9-59, Gaskin 7-48, I. Roe 8-34, Lastinger 7-31, Johnson 1-[illegible], Fletcher 1 minus 3; Thomasville-Clark 14-71, Kevouklis 11-36, Duncan 1-19, Stringer 2-3, Wheeler 1 minus 1, Chastain 13 minus 27.

Passing: Valdosta - Lastinger 10-23-1-123, Gaskin 0-1-0-0; Thomasville - Chastain 1-3-0-9.

Pass Receiving: Valdosta - Blair 4-52, Bond 2-24, Smith 3-46, King 1-1; Thomasville - Clark 1-9.

Punt Returns: Valdosta - Thomas 4-9; Thomasville - None.

Kickoff Returns: Valdosta - I. Roe 3-32; Thomasville - R. Wheeler 3-22.

Defense (Number of Tackles); Valdosta - Thomas 8, Conaway 10, Branen 6, Roberts 3, Beaufort 2, C. Roe 2; Thomasville - Wilson 7, Mash 6, Arrington 6, C. Wheeler 4, Mitchell 3, Howell 3, Bates 3, Strickland 3, Horton 2.

—Times [illegible] Photo by Mike Dowse

Valdosta's Rodney Gordon (12) Waits On Bulldogs' Cary Clark To Come His Way

Sports Hot Line

By Mickey Herskowitz And Steve Perkins

Q. Because Howard Cosell makes so many deep technical comments that are wrong, I wonder about his actual participation in sports. Please give us a detailed background of Howard as an athlete. — W.C. Regan, Port Lavaca, Texas.

A. This will be a short answer. Cosell says he lettered in track as a broad jumper, and Howard always tells it like it is. There is also some ill-defined talk about a career as a sandlot touch-football player. We suspect Howard owned the ball.

Howard's expertise in sports is due to his total recall of anything he reads or anything said to him. Even when it's wrong, Howard remembers it.

Q. After all that has been written about the Billy Martin firing and dramatic rehiring, do you fellows have an opinion about what really happened behind the scenes? — Randy Koenig, Louisville.

A. We don't think it's all that complex. One of George Steinbrenner's closest friends explained it to us simply: "George couldn't stand it that in the end he was wearing the black hat, so he rehired Billy."

Hughes, Hyder See Two Sides

By Times Staff Writer

For Jim Hughes, it was "an advertisement for high school football." For Nick Hyder, it was a "cat and dog fight."

Hughes, the Thomasville High School football coach, marveled at the quality of the product Valdosta and his Bulldogs staged before 9,800 fans at Cleveland Field here Friday night.

"This is a great advertisement for high school football," Hughes said. "This was a great setting for two good football teams."

Hughes' team, which dropped a 16-7 decision, has now lost to Valdosta six straight times. The last time Thomasville won was in a 40-0 rout of the Wildcats at Cleveland Field in 1974.

"I was here in '74," Hyder, the Valdosta coach, said. "We were fighting to even make a first down that night."

Valdosta finished 3-7 that season, Hyder's first. Since then, the Wildcats have won 34 games and lost only six, including a spotless 3-0 record and the Associated Press' number one ranking this season.

"It's nice to win in this region in any way, shape or fashion," Hyder said. "This is a black-and-blue region. That was a cat and dog fight out there tonight."

Neither coach would offer a prediction as to what the chances were of their teams meeting again in the Region 1-AAAA playoffs. Thomasville is in the south subregion, and Valdosta is in the north.

"That's pure speculation," Hughes said. "I'll leave that to you guys (sportswriters)."

Thomasville hosts Bainbridge Friday, and Valdosta meets Albany here.