

## Decades later, the thrill remains

**One of boxing's most electrifying fights,** the 1975 "Thrilla in Manila" between Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali, began officially at 10:45 a.m. on Oct. 1 in Quezon City, near the capital of the Philippines. But there are those who believe the event's real glory was held in suspension until later, with the opening bell of the 12th round. It was then that a reeling Ali, fatigued and wounded after absorbing punishing blows from Frazier for six consecutive rounds, seemed to summon a final measure of will. Out of nowhere, Ali leveled a furious assault against his opponent for the next three rounds, stunning an exhausted Frazier with combinations whose sharpness and zip belied the fatigue of the previous rounds. When the bell sounded again to start the 15th round, Frazier failed to stir from the corner of the ring where he sat in a stupefied daze, his eyes swollen shut. Eddie Futch, Frazier's trainer, knew the fight was over, and threw in the towel, signifying a technical knockout, and an Ali victory. It had been a riveting contest between the two best heavyweights of a generation, aging warriors toward the end of glorious careers, doing battle one final time. "I hit him with punches that would have knocked a building down," Frazier would later famously declare. "He's a great champion."

Having at least some appreciation for the historic match is all but a prerequisite for understanding the modern cable television industry, because the "Thrilla" played an enormous role in producing an enduring model for the way television programs find their way across the industry's infrastructure and into customers' homes.

The charismatic and adroit boxing promoter, Don King, had arranged to have the fight televised into U.S. movie theaters using a novel transmission medium: a network of communications satellites that only recently had been rigged to support television signals. More important, in addition to beaming the fight into the closed-circuit venues, King had negotiated with the nascent pay-TV service, Home Box Office, to televise the fight to HBO's U.S. customers. Importing a live event from halfway across the world into the living rooms of cable television customers constituted a thrilling event in its own right, at least for an industry that had been looking for ways to attract subscribers by doing something more than offering better reception of over-the-air TV signals.

Among those watching the fight with a keen interest in the autumn of 1975 was Sidney Topol, the president of a company with the odd name of Scientific-Atlanta. Topol was an



**By Stewart Schley**

*Media & technology  
writer, Englewood, Colo.*

[ss\\_edit@comcast.net](mailto:ss_edit@comcast.net)

**The 'Thrilla in  
Manila'  
proved the  
legitimacy of  
the satellite  
network as  
an enabler for  
a new era of  
television**

instinctive businessman who realized the onset of television-via-satellite could open up a huge business for ground reception equipment—the hulking “earth stations” cable companies would need to collect signals from the sky. Although known more recently as a provider of cable set-top terminals and corresponding headend technology, Scientific-Atlanta's formative heyday was very much rooted in the satellite sector, and in the transformation of the modern cable system into a last-mile conduit for signals that rained down from satellites. The 'Thrilla in Manila' proved to Topol and others the legitimacy of the satellite network as an enabler for a new era of television, and it provoked a flurry of cable channels like Ted Turner's super-station WTBS, which was quick to follow as a full-time, satellite-fed cable channel in 1976.

Recalling the riveting 1975 boxing match seems meaningful these days as a reminder that some aspects of modern television haven't changed all that much. The industry's reliance on a constellation of geosynchronous orbiting satellites remains nearly absolute. There was a stark reminder of that fact last month when a rocket that was set to launch a Dutch communications satellite exploded during its liftoff at sea. The rocket's failure could have a sort of domino effect that delays DirecTV's timing in getting one of two new satellites operational for a new slate of high-definition TV channels. The incident illustrates that more than 30 years after Ali outslugged Frazier in an historic boxing match, the television industry still hasn't come up with a better, more efficient, more workmanlike way to get TV channels and programs from one place to another than to rely on satellites hovering in space. Muhammad Ali left the boxing ring long ago, and Scientific Atlanta, which has been acquired by the Internet technology colossus Cisco Systems Inc., no longer sells earth stations. But for a moment in time, the two were paired in a seminal event, and that year, both ended up winning.