

# The history of boxing and the role of muhammad ali



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“ Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee!” These were the famous words said by Muhammad Ali after his first title fight against Sonny Liston ( Rummel 57 ). Muhammad Ali was one of the greatest boxers known today. Although Ali was a great boxer, he had to overcome many obstacles to get to where he wanted to be, like segregation, racism, the selective service, and being a Muslim.

Cassius clay was born on January 17, 1942 in a working class family in Louisville, Kentucky. His father, Cassius Clay Sr worked as a sign painter and his mother, Odessa Clay was a house cleaner ( Tessitore 62 ). The black workers were never paid very much, but his father always kept food on the table. The extended Clay family was a big one, and at family gatherings Cassius was the beautiful child, always laughing, making jokes, demanding, and winning everyone’s attention ( Remnick 34 ). “ He always was a talker,” Odessa Clay said. “ He tried to talk so hard when he was a baby. He would talk so fast like lightning.”

As a child Cassius grew up where segregation was a big and important issue ( Remnick 45). Everywhere he went he saw bus drivers, drugstore men, and grocery store cashiers were all white, and he was confused of this. He would often ask his mother why there were so many white people running the businesses, and not any blacks.

On an afternoon in 1954, when Cassius was only twelve, Cassius had been riding his bicycle, which had been given to him by his father for Christmas ( Rummel 37 ). Cassius stopped at the Columbine auditorium, there had been a show going on and he went in to watch. When he went to leave he

noticed that his bike had been stolen. He looked for his bike, but could not find it, and that's when he ran into a policeman named Joe Martin, who ran a boxing program. He told the cop what happened and said he was going to beat up whoever took it. The cop told young Cassius he had to learn to fight before he started going out and beating up people. Cassius later sign up at the auditorium to learn how to box ( Rummel 44 ).

Just before he was 13 Cassius began his boxing career as a skinny one hundred and twelve pound novice( Rummel 46 ). He put himself on a strict schedule. From eight to two he went to school, then he worked at Nazareth college until six in the evening. Next he would train at martin ' s gym until eight, last he would fine tune his skills at Stoner's gym until midnight.

Cassius practically lived in the gym, he never smoked and never drank. He was a nutritious nut. He carried around a bottle of water with garlic in it, a solution , he said, that would keep his blood pressure down and his health perfect.

When Cassius's graduation came, some teachers thought Cassius shouldn't graduate because his grades weren't qualified (Remnick 52 ). They thought by letting him finish would send the wrong signal to the coaches. The coaches would think that I the failing athletes should get special treatment also. One night at a faculty meeting, Wilson the principal stood up and said " One day our greatest claim to fame is going to be that we knew Cassius Clay or taught him.... Do you think I'm going to be the principal of the school that failed Cassius Clay. Why in one year he'll make more money than in our lifetimes."

By 1960, Cassius had just turned 18 and he was fighting in the Olympic games in Rome. The championship bout at the Olympics was fought between Cassius and a Polish man named Zbigniew Pietrzyskowski, a veteran of 230 fights. Cassius had trouble at first, ended up defeating the Poland to win the gold medal. This was the first great achievement by Cassius.

Cassius's first shot at the heavyweight title was against Sonny Liston. The weigh in for the Liston fight was at the Miami beach convention hall, it was very intense. Cassius wore a shirt with " Bear Huntin" wrote in red on the back. He ran around the room screaming " I'll eat you alive." They had to restrain him in the middle of the weigh in. Clay's way to find recognition for himself worked. The more he bragged, strutted, and shouted his poetry, the more he stirred up the boxing world.

Before the fight with Liston Clay rented a bus and decorated it with big posters saying: Sonny Liston will go in eight. The world's most colorful fighter. He drove the bus to Denver, Colorado, and parked outside Liston's home. He sat outside of Liston's house until one in the morning, then the police came and made him leave ( Denenberg 70).

The match with Liston was set for February 25, 1964 in Miami, Florida. Sonny Liston being a veteran boxer, had a lot more experience than Clay, but Clay would give him more than just a fight. They went seven rounds in the ring together with Clay dominating the whole time and in the end Clay takes the heavyweight championship for the first time. Later that night Clay announced that he changed his religion to Muslim and he changed his name to Muhammad Ali.

By May 25, 1965 Liston scheduled a rematch with Ali in Lewiston, Maine. This fight did not last long, Ali knocked out the former champion in the first round with what looked like a weak punch (Rummel).

By 1967, Ali had been the undisputed champion for three years, and had become a media celebrity. Ali spoke about his upcoming fight with Patterson then he read some of his poetry. It read:

It all started twenty years past

The greatest of them all has born at last.

The very first words from his Louisville lips,

“ I’m as pretty as a picture and there’s no one

I can’t whip.”

In these past few years Ali had been receiving notices from the selective service board, but he had been ignoring them every time (Rummel). He didn’t want to go because it would stop his fighting for 2 years. He knew that eventually he would have to go into the draft because the large amounts of money he made was enough to support his family if he left. Also, his Islamic beliefs kept him from going. They thought was just wasn’t the answer.

One day in 1967, the military made him take the selective service test. Ali failed the written part by not answering enough questions. Ali claims he didn’t know the answers, but sceptics believe he did it on purpose (Rummel). They later held a trial with an all white jury on Ali’s draft evasion and he was

found guilty and sentenced to five years in jail and stripped of the heavyweight title. He was out on bail until his appeal.

Soon after he was stripped of the title, Ali had nothing to do since he couldn't box. So, Ali decided to go on the road to Africa to meet his fans out there. He wanted to see what he called his ancestral land. Few athletes ever go visit their fans outside of the country. Ali wanted to reach out to the poor, undeveloped countries.

By 1971, Ali finally got his boxing license back and was able to fight again. He sorted out fighting low ranked boxers and worked his way back to the top (Biography). After a while, Ali had got himself back in top shape and ready to fight the number one contender.

Ali's first title fight since he had been back was against Joe Frazier in Madison Square Garden on March 8, 1971. Ali lost this fight and it was his first defeat as a professional boxer. After this fight many people thought he couldn't be the champ again (Biography).

Ali was a strong hearted man and he didn't let the loss get to him. In 1974, Ali avenged his loss to Frazier, but it wasn't for the title. George Foreman had stripped Joe Frazier for the title before Ali's match with Frazier. The fight was a long and intense fight in which Frazier was favored to win. Ali shut the critics up by defeating Frazier in the final round of the bout.

Later that year, Ali set up a fight with George Foreman for the Heavyweight Title. Foreman was favored to win because he was bigger, younger, stronger, and considered the hardest hitter in boxing. This fight was called the Rumble

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in the jungle. It was fought in Zaire, Africa. Ali formed a strategy called the rope a dope where he would rest on the ropes waiting for Foreman to get tired. Then he would come back with a series of combinations eventually beating Foreman and regaining the title (Biography).

In September of 1975, Ali fought Frazier for the third time. The fight was called the Thrilla in Manila. This was Ali's last truly great fight, the match was wild with one man taking control, then the other (Rummel). It was much like the other two fights between the two athletes. When it was all over, Ali knew he had fought the toughest fight. Although Ali had won the fight, he may have damaged himself in the process. After the fight, he commented, " You may have seen the last of Ali. I want to get out, I'm tired and on top. What you saw tonight was next to death. He's the toughest man in the world."

Ali fought a few more smaller fights over the next few years. By June 26, 1979 at the age of 37, Ali retired as the champion with a professional record of fifty nine wins and three defeats. Because of Ali's lifestyle, he was in need of money. In 1980, he returned to the ring to fight Larry Holmes for the World Boxing Council Title. It was a guaranteed eight million dollars. This was a fight that Ali never should have even thought about fighting. Ali was in the worst shape of his life. Ali only threw a couple of punches throughout the whole fight and the ones he did throw weren't strong enough to hurt a child. The fight lasted eleven rounds until Ali's trainer stopped it. After this fight Ali would throw in the towel for good. He finally realized that he was too old and too out of shape to fight anymore.

After losing the fight to Holmes, Ali's health got really bad. He was very sluggish and weak in his motor skills. Doctors diagnosed Ali with Parkinson's syndrome in 1982. Doctors said the reason for this disease was all of the blows he took to the head.

Today, Muhammad Ali is still fighting Parkinson's syndrome. He is now married to Yolanda Williams. They live on an eighty eight acre farm in Berrigan Springs, Michigan. You can find Ali almost anywhere today still giving out autographs or just doing charity benefits. In many ways Muhammad Ali was a hero and some ways he showed a stubborn side to him, but he will always be remembered in our hearts as the people's champ. Muhammad Ali is still the most written about person today. He led a life that was full of possibilities and he had a personality to go along with it. All in all he is a hero to all of us in some kind of way.