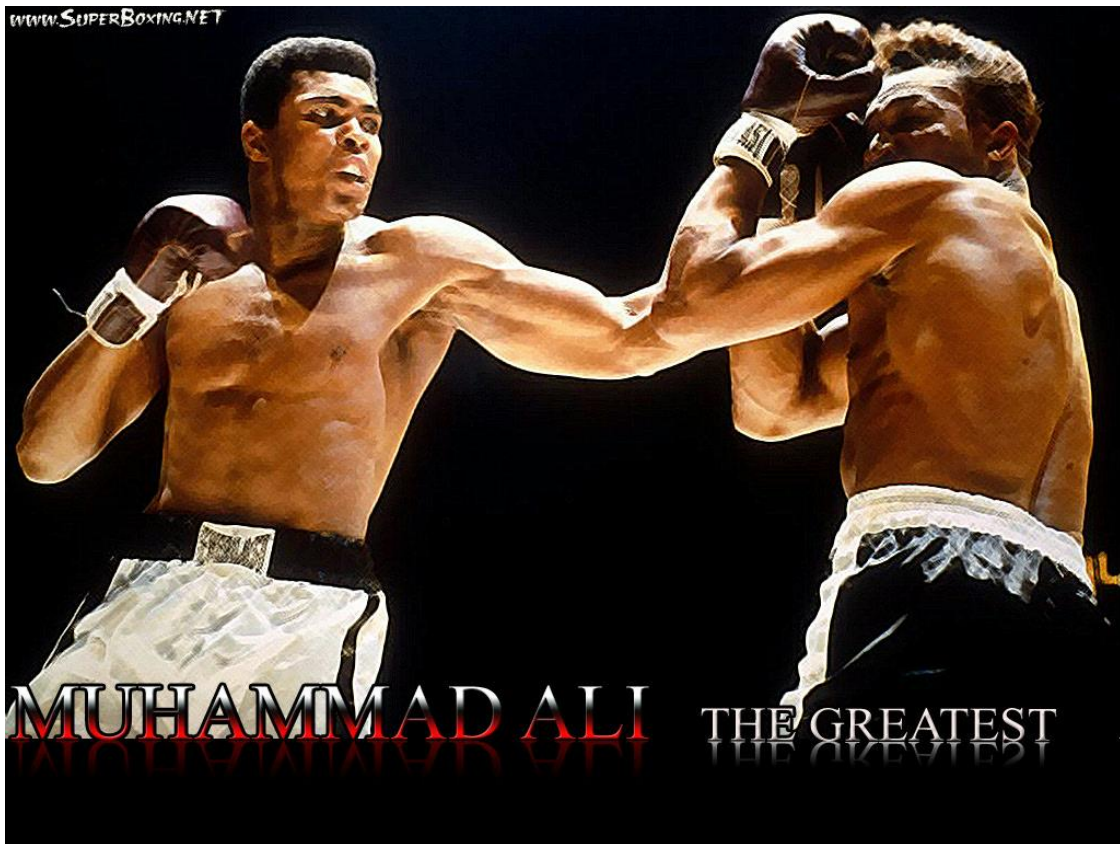


# The Greatest of All Time

The Life and Career of Muhammad Ali

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HIS 236

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### The Greatest of All Time

July 19, 1996 was a warm, albeit, wet evening in Atlanta, GA as a crowd of 83,000 watched gold medal swimmer Janet Evans carry the Olympic torch around the track of what would become Turner Field, home of the Atlanta Braves.<sup>1</sup> The eyes of the world watched as the Summer Olympics kicked off in the United States for the first time in twelve years.<sup>2</sup> As Evans ascended the 140 foot high scaffold to light the Olympic torch, she was met by another Olympic icon who had come to symbolize grace, courage and above all: humility. Yet, Muhammad Ali had never been a humble man.

Most boxing experts describe Muhammad Ali as the greatest technical fighter of all time.<sup>3</sup> At six feet, three inches tall, weighing two hundred and twenty pounds and possessing an eighty inch reach, he was built like the prototypical heavyweight.<sup>4</sup> But, he moved like a middleweight. Ali was faster than any heavyweight in history.<sup>5</sup> He'd dance around the ring, bobbing and weaving his opponents into half-erect blobs of sweat, pain, and disappointment.

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<sup>1</sup> Newman, Harvey K. "Olympic Games in 1996." GeorgiaEncyclopedia.org. Georgia Humanities Council, 08 Sept. 2004. Web. 4 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/sports-outdoor-recreation/olympic-games-1996>>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Cohen, Ben. "Was Muhammad Ali Really the Greatest?" TrueSlant.com. True Slant, 7 June 2010. Web. 4 Feb. 2014. <<http://trueslant.com/bencohen/2010/06/07/was-muhammed-ali-really-the-greatest/>>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

Then, with one powerful right jab, their night was over.<sup>6</sup> He employed this strategy to defeat a proverbial who's-who of boxing legends: Sonny Liston, Floyd Patterson, Cleveland "Big Cat" Williams, Ernie Terrell, George Foreman and, of course, "Smokin'" Joe Frazier, all fell, often in embarrassing fashion, at the hand of Muhammad Ali.<sup>7</sup> However, Ali's greatest fight didn't come in the ring. It came in the courtroom.

Muhammad Ali is perhaps the most iconic man in the world. While many know him simply as a boxer, it was his choice to refuse induction into the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War and his personal struggle with Parkinson's disease that turned the self-proclaimed, "greatest of all time" into the personification of peace, bravery and resilience.

Cassius Marcellus Clay was born January 17, 1942 in Louisville, KY to Marcellus and Odessa Clay.<sup>8</sup> He was the older of two boys raised in the one bed, one bath home at 3302 Grand St. in western Louisville.<sup>9</sup> His brother Rudy was born eighteen months later than Cassius and the two boys often struggled for the attention of their parents.<sup>10</sup> In particular, the boys fought for the respect of their father, a muralist who painted signs for a living and abused alcohol like his oldest son would one day abuse fellow heavyweights.<sup>11</sup> Yet, his alcoholism never stopped the elder Clay from supporting his son. Muhammad wrote of his father in his autobiography, *The Greatest: My Story*, "My Father's loud, dramatic encouragement spurred me on. He attended

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<sup>6</sup> Cohen, Ben. "Was Muhammad Ali Really the Greatest?"

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali." About.com. About.com, 17 Nov. 2008. Web. 4 Feb. 2014. <<http://history1900s.about.com/od/people/a/muhammadali.htm>>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

almost every fight I had in Louisville, only missing the ones that were out of town because he couldn't afford the travel expense."<sup>12</sup> Although his parents worked hard to provide a stable, albeit simple home for their children, Cassius was born with a short temper.

In the summer of 1954, Cassius and a friend rode their bikes to the Columbia Auditorium in Downtown Louisville to partake in the free hot dogs and popcorn that was available to visitors of the annual Home and Garden Show.<sup>13</sup> On the way out of the building, Cassius discovered that his brand new bike, a Schwinn with red lights and chrome trim that his father had given him for Christmas, had been stolen.<sup>14</sup> The twelve year old Clay, now without his most prized possession, went to nearby Police Officer Joe Martin to report the crime, "I told him that I was going to find the person who stole my bike and, by god, I was going to beat him up myself."<sup>15</sup> Ofc. Martin, who was also a boxing coach at the Columbia gym, told the future heavyweight champ that, "You'd better learn to hit first." Two days later, twelve year old Cassius Clay walked into Martin's gym and told the off duty cop that he was ready to fight.<sup>16</sup>

For six years, Clay trained tirelessly. Six days a week he would work to improve his strength, conditioning and technical fighting skills; only taking off Sundays to attend Church with his family.<sup>17</sup> Even at a young age, Clay was unlike any fighter that his first trainer, the off duty cop Joe Martin, had ever seen, "He was so damn fast. He never had to dodge punches, like

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<sup>12</sup> Durham, Richard. "My Early Days." *The Greatest: My Story. By Muhammad Ali*. New York, NY: Random House, 1975. 40. Print

<sup>13</sup> Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali."

<sup>14</sup> Durham, Richard. "My Early Days." *The Greatest: My Story. By Muhammad Ali*. New York, NY: Random House, 1975.45. Print

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali."

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

most heavyweights. He just leaned away from them. It was almost effortless for him, even when he was only thirteen, fourteen, fifteen years old; I knew right away, he was something special.”<sup>18</sup> By 1959, Clay had already won multiple amateur tournaments, including two national “Golden Gloves” championships.<sup>19</sup> With his amateur success in mind, he was selected by the U.S. Olympic organizing committee to box in the light heavyweight division for the United States during the Rome Olympics in the summer of 1960.<sup>20</sup> In his first fight at Rome, he destroyed Belarusian Yvon Becot, who only lasted eighteen seconds into the second round.<sup>21</sup> In his quarterfinal fight, Clay stepped directly into the Cold War for the first time, battling Soviet Gennadiy Shatkov to a clear victory in a unanimous decision.<sup>22</sup> In the semi-finals, Cassius won another unanimous decision against Australian Anthony Madigan, setting up a gold medal bout with Polish amateur strong man Zbigniew “Ziggy” Pietrzykowski.<sup>23</sup> The fight went the distance, but British sportswriter John Cottrell described the fight, the third round in particular as, “A battle between a swan and a tree. Clay was so graceful. At the final bell; Pietrzykowski was slumped helplessly against the ropes.”<sup>24</sup> Cassius Clay was the greatest amateur boxer in the world there was no disputing that as the poor, short tempered eighteen year old from Louisville, KY stared at the gold medal wrapped around his neck as the Star Spangled Banner filled the room. Clay had done all he could do at the amateur level and while many viewed his professional prospects as promising, no one attending that medal ceremony in Rome, Italy in the summer of

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<sup>18</sup> Cohen, Ben. "Was Muhammad Ali Really the Greatest?"

<sup>19</sup> Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali."

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> Fanning, Evan. "50 Stunning Olympic Moments; Number 17: Cassius Clay Wins Gold." Theguardian.com. The Guardian, 7 Mar. 2012. Web. 5 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.theguardian.com/sport/london-2012-olympics-blog/2012/mar/07/stunning-olympic-moments-cassius-clay>>.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

1960 could know, fifteen years later, the skinny American kid they were watching claim gold would be the most recognizable man in the world.

Cassius Clay's first professional fight came on the night of October 29, 1960.<sup>25</sup> The slim eighteen year old fought thirty year old West Virginia police Chief Tunney Hunsaker at the Freedom State Hall State Fairground in Downtown Louisville for \$800. Clay used his speed to control the fight throughout, claiming a fairly easy unanimous decision. After the fight, Hunsaker, who was nursing a badly bruised left eye, said of Clay, "He's awfully good for an eighteen year old. He's faster than most middleweights."<sup>26</sup> From that first pro fight on, Clay set his sights on a singular goal: the world heavyweight title. To get there, he knew he'd need to give himself an edge. Clay was smaller than most heavyweight fighters and recognized that as he got older, he'd lose much of that famous speed. He needed to find a way to beat heavyweights both physically *and mentally*.

Following the Hunsaker fight, ten Louisville businessmen gathered together \$180,000 (\$1,416,630.41 in today's money)<sup>27</sup> to invest in Cassius Clay.<sup>28</sup> Their first order of business was to hire a trainer to develop the incredibly talented, but still raw and narcissistic young fighter. They found their man in thirty nine year old Philadelphia native Angelo Dundee.<sup>29</sup> Dundee

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<sup>25</sup> "Muhammad Ali vs. Tunney Hunsaker." BoxRec.com. The Box Rec Boxing Encyclopedia, 6 Aug. 2012. Web. 8 Feb. 2014. <[http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Muhammad\\_Ali\\_vs.\\_Tunney\\_Hunsaker](http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Muhammad_Ali_vs._Tunney_Hunsaker)>.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> "CPI Inflation Calculator." CPI Inflation Calculator. CPI, n.d. Web. 10 Feb. 2014. <<http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl?cost1=180%2C000&year1=1960&year2=2013>>.

<sup>28</sup> "Muhammad Ali vs. Tunney Hunsaker." BoxRec.com

<sup>29</sup> McKenzie, Clinton. "Ali Wasn't Born a Champion, Dundee Made Him One by Knowing How to Manage Him." DailyMail.co.uk, 2 Feb. 2012. Web. 10 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/boxing/article-2095572/Angelo-Dundee-turned-Muhammad-Ali-champion--Clinton-McKenzie.html>>.

recognized that Clay's biggest weakness wasn't a physical one, it was mental. He had an ego that could eventually get him into trouble in the ring. Dundee tempered that ego by feeding it, not fighting it. He once said in an interview:

I left him alone, I just smoothed out a lot of stuff. I made him feel like he innovated it. If I was the guy who gave him directions, he'd say, "Hey, who's this midget to tell me what to do?" No, I never gave him a direct order. The only time I ever told him what to do was in the ring [on fight night].<sup>30</sup>

Clay still needed to create a mental edge that could last well into his career. To do that, Dundee hired former Sugar Ray Robinson cornerman Drew Brown.<sup>31</sup> Brown described himself as a, "Illiterate Black Jew addicted to liquor and white women. I may be able to quit the liquor, but I can't promise anything about the white women."<sup>32</sup> He called himself "Bundini" (pronounced "Boondini"), and his job on Clay's team was to be the motivator. "Drew charged his battery," Angelo once explained, "He knew Muhammad, he was great for Muhammad."<sup>33</sup> One of the more famous tools Brown used to motivate Clay was poetry. Cassius had an electric personality and Bundini capitalized on it by coming up with rhymes that he could use in front of the camera to get inside his opponent's head.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps their most famous rhyme debuted during the weigh in for Clay's number one contender fight with British boxer Henry Cooper in June of 1963, "Cooper is good, but I'm better and I'm going to prove it! I'll start with a left. Then, I'll

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<sup>30</sup> McKenzie, Clinton. "Ali Wasn't Born a Champion, Dundee Made Him One by Knowing How to Manage Him."

<sup>31</sup> Andersen, Dave. "Sports of the Times; Float Like a Bundini." *NewYorkTimes.com*. The New York Times, 29 Sept. 1987. Web. 10 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1987/09/29/sports/sports-of-the-times-float-like-a-bundini.html>>.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid

<sup>33</sup> Ibid

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

swing with the right. The next thing you know, he'll be out of sight! It'll be the fifth round, when that limey does fall! After that, he might need a prayer shawl! I'm going to float like a butterfly and sting like a bee! Because, his hands can't hit what his eyes can't see!"<sup>35</sup> Bundini chimed in, "Rumble, young man, Rumble!" And, at that weigh in, not only did Clay claim that he would beat Cooper; he called the round. And, declared, for the first time, that he was, "The greatest of all time."<sup>36</sup> Cassius Clay did indeed beat Henry Cooper. He even predicted the round correctly, beating Cooper with a fifth round TKO that left the Brit, who would one day be knighted by Queen Elizabeth, with severe bruising and a three inch cut on his left eye.<sup>37</sup> That victory paved the way for Cassius to have a shot at the ultimate prize in professional sports in the middle of the twentieth century: the heavyweight championship of the world. To get there, the twenty two year old, fast talking Kentuckian would have to defeat a fighter most analysts viewed as an invincible. Cassius Clay simply called him, "The Big Ugly Bear."<sup>38</sup>

In 1964, Sonny Liston was an imposing figure in boxing. He'd knocked out legendary fighter Floyd Patterson in just two minutes and five seconds to claim the Heavyweight Championship of the World.<sup>39</sup> Four months later, he defended his title by knocking out Patterson again; this time in two minutes and nine seconds.<sup>40</sup> Cassius Clay was smaller and weaker than Liston. Nearly every major boxing expert didn't give him a chance. Clay was a seven to one

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<sup>35</sup> Andersen, Dave. "Sports of the Times; Float Like a Bundini

<sup>36</sup> Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali."

<sup>37</sup> "Muhammad Ali vs. Henry Cooper." BoxRec.com. Boxing Records Inc., 15 Jan. 2014. Web. 10 Feb. 2014. <[http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Muhammad\\_Ali\\_vs.\\_Henry\\_Cooper\\_\(1st\\_meeting\)](http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Muhammad_Ali_vs._Henry_Cooper_(1st_meeting))>.

<sup>38</sup> "Sonny Liston vs. Cassius Clay (1st Meeting)." BoxRec.com. Boxing Records Inc., 15 Jan. 2014. Web. 10 Feb. 2014. <[http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Sonny\\_Liston\\_vs.\\_Cassius\\_Clay\\_\(1st\\_meeting\)](http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Sonny_Liston_vs._Cassius_Clay_(1st_meeting))>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> Ibid



underdog and in a survey of forty six sportswriters, forty three concluded that Liston would win.<sup>41</sup> The only person who consistently believed Cassius Clay would beat Sonny Liston was...Cassius Clay. Clay taunted Liston relentlessly, claiming that he would beat him with an eighth round knockout.<sup>42</sup> However, that was only the beginning of Clay's ferocious taunting. He went as far as to purchase a bus and have, "Sonny Liston Will Go Down in Eight" painted on the side.<sup>43</sup> One night leading up to the fight, Clay and his corner team (excluding Dundee) drove the bus to Liston's home at three o'clock in the morning. They blared the horn, shouting, "Come on out, Sonny! Come on out you big ugly bear!"<sup>44</sup> In an interview leading up to the fight, Clay showed off his latest piece of poetry:

Now Clay swings with his a right. What a beautiful swing! It raises the bear right out of the ring! Liston is rising and the ref wears a frown; for he can't start counting till Liston goes down. Now Liston disappears from view. The crowd is getting frantic! But, our radar stations have picked him up somewhere over the Atlantic! Who would have thought when they came to the fight, that they'd witness the launching of a human satellite? Yes, the crowd did not dream when they laid down their money, that they'd witness a total eclipse of Sonny.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> "Sonny Liston vs. Cassius Clay (1st Meeting)." BoxRec.com.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

<sup>45</sup> Reporter, Sportsmail. "Float Like a Butterfly, Sting Like a Bee; Ali's Most Memorable Quotes." DailyMail.co.uk. The Daily Mail, 15 Jan. 2012. Web. 10 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/boxing/article-2086953/Muhammad-Ali-70-Most-memorable-quotes.html>>

Meanwhile, Liston refused to talk back; claiming only that he would knock Clay out in the second round.<sup>46</sup> At the official weigh in, Clay shouted out his rhymes in Liston's face and when asked why Liston wasn't deserving of the heavyweight title, Clay shouted back at the reporter:

Because he's too damn ugly to be the world's champ! The champ needs to be pretty like me! It'll be round eight when I prove I'm great and if Sonny Liston whips me; I'll kiss his feet in the ring, crawl out of the ring on my knees, tell him he's the greatest and catch the next jet out of the country. But, that ain't gonna happen. 'Cause I'm the greatest of all time!<sup>47</sup>

Attorney, ABC news sports reporter and radio announcer Howard Cosell, with whom Clay would develop a long and fascinating friendship commented, "Clay is either confident or crazy. This reporter tends to believe the latter."<sup>48</sup> When his vitals were taken at the weigh-in as he shouted obscenities at Liston, Clay's heart rate measured one hundred and twenty beats per minute and his blood pressure was an astonishingly high two hundred over one hundred.<sup>49</sup> The doctor who took those measurements claimed that Clay must be, "scared to death of Mr. Liston and using this sideshow to compensate for that fear."<sup>50</sup> It would be decided in the ring and Cassius Clay couldn't wait to get there.

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<sup>46</sup> "Sonny Liston vs. Cassius Clay (1st Meeting)." BoxRec.com.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> "Howard Cosell Quotes." Wikiquote.com. Wikiquote, 28 Nov. 2013. Web. 11 Feb. 2014.  
<[http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Howard\\_Cosell](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Howard_Cosell)>.

<sup>49</sup> "Sonny Liston vs. Cassius Clay (1st Meeting)." BoxRec.com.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid

Cassius Clay fought for the heavyweight championship of the world for the first time against the “Big Ugly Bear” Sonny Liston in Miami Beach, Florida on February 25, 1964.<sup>51</sup> Clay came out firing. He showed quick movement, dodging and weaving as the heavier, slower, Liston attempted to land his big left hand; while, at the same time, Clay countered with his quick right jab to head.<sup>52</sup> In the third round, Clay turned up his intensity. He hit Liston with a number of intense combinations that left a bruise under Liston’s right eye and a bad cut under his left.<sup>53</sup> In the fourth round, Liston landed a hard right hand to Clay’s eyes that left the challenger stunned. He stumbled around the ring through the rest of the round, struggling to his corner as the bell signaled its end.<sup>54</sup> When he sat on the stool he whispered to Angelo Dundee, “Angie, my eyes are burning! I can’t see. I don’t why, something’s in my eyes. I can’t see a thing out there.”<sup>55</sup> Liston’s cornerman Joe Pollino later confessed to reporter Jack McKinney that after the third round Liston had ordered him to rub an astringent ointment on his gloves.<sup>56</sup> Dundee rinsed a wet washcloth out over Clay’s eyes, pushed him off the stool and said, “No matter what you do, stay away from him. Do the best you can to avoid him until your eyes get clean.”<sup>57</sup> Clay did just that, surviving the fifth round by dancing his way around the ring, cutting off Liston as best he could and then turning back the other way.<sup>58</sup> By the sixth round, Clay’s eyes were clean and he regained total control of the fight, working over Liston with a series of combinations.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> "Sonny Liston vs. Cassius Clay (1st Meeting)." BoxRec.com.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid

<sup>53</sup> Ibid

<sup>54</sup> Ibid

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid

<sup>57</sup> Ibid

<sup>58</sup> Ibid

<sup>59</sup> Ibid

Following the sixth round, Liston went to his corner complaining of an intense pain in his right shoulder.<sup>60</sup> He told his team that he couldn't continue, spit out his mouthpiece and refused to answer the bell for the seventh round.<sup>61</sup> Howard Cosell called the action, shouting out at the top of his lungs, "Wait a minute! Wait a minute! Sonny Liston's not coming out! Sonny Liston's not coming out! He's out! The winner and new heavyweight champion of the world is Cassius Clay!"<sup>62</sup> Clay threw his hands in the air as reporters and photographers from around the globe rushed into the ring. The newly crowned heavyweight champion of the world rose himself above the throngs of media; climbed up onto the ropes, pointed down at the crowd and proclaimed, "Eat your words! Eat your damn words! I told you all! I told you I was the greatest! I shook up the world! I told you I was the greatest of all time!"<sup>63</sup> In the end, it had all been an act. The shouting, the bus, the blood pressure, all of it was an effort to get inside Liston's head. Clay later wrote of his antics in the build up to the fight, "I knew Sonny Liston wouldn't be afraid of a poor, skinny twenty two year old from Louisville But, he would be afraid of someone who didn't fear anything. He would be afraid of a nut."<sup>64</sup> Clay had accomplished the only goal he'd ever set for himself. He was heavyweight champion of the world. However, it would be the personal transformation that he'd go through in the next several years that would truly define the life of Cassius Marcellus Clay.

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<sup>60</sup> "Sonny Liston vs. Cassius Clay (1st Meeting)." BoxRec.com.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid

<sup>62</sup> "Howard Cosell Quotes." Wikiquote.com

<sup>63</sup> "Sonny Liston vs. Cassius Clay (1st Meeting)." BoxRec.com.

<sup>64</sup> Durham, Richard. "My Early Days." *The Greatest: My Story*. By Muhammad Ali. New York, NY: Random House, 1975. 105. Print

Malcom X was a man with a mission. Born Malcom Little in Omaha, NE on May 19, 1925, he was one of eight siblings.<sup>65</sup> His father was an outspoken Baptist minister and avid supporter of Black Nationalist leader Marcus Garvey.<sup>66</sup> Malcolm was a smart, focused student. He graduated from junior high at the top of his class. However, when a favorite teacher told Malcolm his dream of becoming a lawyer was "no realistic goal for a nigger," Malcolm lost interest in school. He dropped out, spent some time in Boston, Massachusetts working various odd jobs, and then traveled to Harlem, New York where he committed petty crimes. By 1942, Malcolm was coordinating various narcotics, prostitution and gambling rings.<sup>67</sup> In 1946, he was convicted of burglary and sentenced to ten years in prison.<sup>68</sup> There, he began to practice political activism. When his brother Reginald converted to Islam, Malcom began to take an interest in the teachings of Dr. Elijah Muhammad, the founder of the black Islamic radical group; The Nation of Islam (NOI).<sup>69</sup> Elijah Muhammad and the NOI taught their followers that white society actively worked to keep African-Americans from empowering themselves and achieving political, economic and social success.<sup>70</sup> Among other goals, the NOI fought for a state of their own, separate from one inhabited by white people.<sup>71</sup> By the time he left prison on parole in 1952, Malcom Little had become a devout believer in the man his followers referred to as "The Honorable" Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam.<sup>72</sup> He had changed his name to Malcom

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<sup>65</sup> "Biography of Malcom X." MalcomX.com. The Estate of Malcom X, 13 Aug. 2013. Web. 11 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.malcolmx.com/about/bio.html>>.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid

<sup>67</sup> Ibid

<sup>68</sup> Ibid

<sup>69</sup> Ibid

<sup>70</sup> Ibid

<sup>71</sup> Ibid

<sup>72</sup> Ibid

“X,” believing that “Little” was a slave name used to oppress himself and his family. “X” was his tribal name.<sup>73</sup> Over the next decade, Malcom X toured the country spreading the teachings of Elijah Muhammad throughout black neighborhoods all over the United States.<sup>74</sup> Malcom became the NOI’s most well-known messenger. By 1964, Malcom’s fame had surpassed that of Elijah Muhammad. Yet, he was still employed by the Nation, who only used him for their most important events and organizational tasks.<sup>75</sup> The night of Cassius Clay’s heavyweight title fight against Sonny Liston, Malcom X was in Miami Beach, FL waiting for the newly crowned heavyweight champ to return to his dressing room.<sup>76</sup> He was tasked with trying to gain the trust and, ultimately, the allegiance of the naive twenty two year old Cassius Clay. Yet, prior to Clay’s Liston fight, the NOI had viewed boxing as a “filthy” sport wherein white promoters and gamblers exploited black fighters for their own financial gain.<sup>77</sup> But, Elijah Muhammad needed a new, young face that black teenagers admired and would associate with the Nation. Elijah Muhammad needed Cassius Clay.<sup>78</sup>

As the door swung open to Cassius Clay’s dressing room in Miami Beach, the young champion exuberantly threw down his gloves and celebrated with his cornerman, trainer and family.<sup>79</sup> Malcom X stood in the corner of the room, waiting to get his chance to congratulate the

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<sup>73</sup> "Biography of Malcom X." MalcomX.com

<sup>74</sup> Ibid

<sup>75</sup> Tinsley, J. "If Ali Could Do It Over Again." [Http://smokingsection.uproxx.com/](http://smokingsection.uproxx.com/). UPROXX, 21 July 2013. Web. 11 Feb. 2014. <<http://smokingsection.uproxx.com/TSS/2013/07/muhammad-ali-malcolm-x-fallout>>.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid

<sup>77</sup> Ibid

<sup>78</sup> Ibid

<sup>79</sup> Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali."

champ.<sup>80</sup> It was his job to not just befriend Clay, but to convert him to the Nation of Islam. Malcom had been working with Cassius for months. X was the middle man in a very public courtship between Cassius Clay and the Elijah Muhammad.<sup>81</sup> In somewhat the same manner sports teams openly woo franchise-altering caliber free agents in today's world, the Nation of Islam desperately yearned to make Cassius Clay their poster child.<sup>82</sup> Malcom knew his job was close to being done. The day after the fight, February 26, 1964 while walking the streets of New York City with Malcom X, Cassius Clay was stopped by a group of reporters.<sup>83</sup> They asked the newly crowned champion flat out what he was doing with Malcom X and if he was a "Black Muslim Radical."<sup>84</sup> Clay responded by saying, "I believe in the religion of Islam. I believe in Allah and peace. I am not a Christian anymore."<sup>85</sup> He began calling himself "Cassius X," following in the belief of most NOI members that their surnames are the names of their ancestor's owners and are used to remind themselves of their own oppression.<sup>86</sup> Two weeks after Cassius' announcement, during the radio broadcast of an address Elijah Muhammad was delivering at New York University, Muhammad declared that Cassius would be accepted as a minister in the Nation of Islam and he granted the twenty two year old heavyweight champion of the world a new name: Muhammad Ali.<sup>87</sup> The next day, when a reporter referred to Ali as "Cassius" the champ responded, "Hold it right there. Cassius Clay is a slave name. I didn't choose it and I don't want it. I am Muhammad Ali, a free name - it means beloved of God, and I

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<sup>80</sup> Tinsley, J. "If Ali Could Do It Over Again."

<sup>81</sup> Ibid

<sup>82</sup> Ibid

<sup>83</sup> Ibid

<sup>84</sup> Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali."

<sup>85</sup> "Cassius Clay Becomes Muhammad Ali." Blackfacts.com. Black Facts, n.d. Web. 11 Feb. 2014.  
<<http://www.blackfacts.com/fact/64c91e3b-b7c5-4d6c-b82a-f8e4d5b9a6c2>>.

<sup>86</sup> Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali."

<sup>87</sup> Ibid

insist people use it when people speak to me and of me.”<sup>88</sup> Cassius Clay, the energetic, poor Kentucky boy who fought his way through the amateur ranks all the way to Olympic gold and ultimately the heavyweight championship of the world was dead. In his place was a man many in white America viewed as an angry, black radical. He may have held the heavyweight belt, but, he was far from being the people’s champion.

1966 was the prime of Muhammad Ali’s boxing career. He was young, fast and strong. Yet, he had become an experienced enough fighter to know how to stay out of trouble in the ring. His best fight came against Cleveland, “Big Cat” Williams in a title defense in Houston, TX on November 14, 1966.<sup>89</sup> Malcom X had been dead for nearly two years. He’d been shot by a group of NOI members for calling Elijah Muhammad a hypocrite after he’d impregnated and slept with a number of secretaries.<sup>90</sup> Throughout the feud between Elijah Muhammad and Malcom X, Ali had held his allegiance to Elijah Muhammad. It was a decision he’d regret later in his life:

Turning my back on Malcolm was one of the mistakes that I regret most in my life. I wish I’d been able to tell Malcolm I was sorry, that he was right about so many things. But he was killed before I got the chance. He was a visionary ahead of us all. I might never have become a Muslim if it hadn’t been for Malcolm. If I could go back and do it over again, I would never have turned my back on him.<sup>91</sup>

Malcom’s death only helped to reinforce the negative reputation of the NOI. The Nation of Islam (and, by association, Muhammad Ali) was viewed by most of the white population in America as

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<sup>88</sup> Reporter, Sportsmail. "Float Like a Butterfly, Sting Like a Bee; Ali's Most Memorable Quotes."

<sup>89</sup> Cohen, Ben. "Was Muhammad Ali Really the Greatest?"

<sup>90</sup> Tinsley, J. "If Ali Could Do It Over Again."

<sup>91</sup> Ibid



an organization made up of violent religious radicals hell bent on destroying the very fabric of the United States. However, Ali was seen in the African-American community as a hero for black pride.<sup>92</sup> Nonetheless, security at Ali's fights following the assassination of Malcom X was extreme.<sup>93</sup> Those fights immediately following X's death were sparsely attended for fear of a potential terrorist attack.<sup>94</sup> Yet, when he fought Cleveland Williams in the fall of 1966, it was clear that even though Ali may have been misunderstood by the public, there was no doubt that he was the greatest fighter in the world. He absolutely demolished the top-heavy Williams, finishing the job midway through the second round.<sup>95</sup> The challenger's face was a mess of blood, sweat and swollen flesh. The champ hadn't been touched.<sup>96</sup> He'd danced around the ring, utilizing a new move he called the "Ali shuffle" where he'd move his feet so quickly that his opponent quite literally couldn't see them. Then, he'd follow it up with a hard, quick right jab.<sup>97</sup> Boxing expert Ben Cohen described the move as, "The original moonwalk."<sup>98</sup> Ali had reached the apex of his career. He had an undefeated career record as a professional and had defended the heavyweight championship seven times.<sup>99</sup> Yet, his greatest fight was yet to come. And, it wouldn't come in the ring. It would come in the courtroom.

On August 7, 1964, Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution authorizing President Lyndon Johnson to, "take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against forces of the

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<sup>92</sup> Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali."

<sup>93</sup> Tinsley, J. "If Ali Could Do It Over Again."

<sup>94</sup> Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali."

<sup>95</sup> Cohen, Ben. "Was Muhammad Ali Really the Greatest?"

<sup>96</sup> Ibid

<sup>97</sup> Ibid

<sup>98</sup> Ibid

<sup>99</sup> "Muhammad Ali's Ring Record." Espn.go.com. ESPN, 19 Nov. 2003. Web. 11 Feb. 2014.  
<[http://espn.go.com/classic/s/Ali\\_record.html](http://espn.go.com/classic/s/Ali_record.html)>.

United States and to prevent further aggression" against communist fighters in Southeast Asia.<sup>100</sup> Thus began the Johnson administration's escalation of the conflict that would become the Vietnam War. The war was an extension of the American government's enforcement of Truman Doctrine, which sought to contain communism where it existed and keep it from spreading into capitalist parts of the world.<sup>101</sup> Johnson viewed stopping the spread of communism in Southeast Asia as his top foreign policy objective. And, following the passage of the Tonkin resolution, he had the authority to use all necessary force against the rebel fighters, known as "Vietcong."<sup>102</sup> By 1965, troop levels in Vietnam had topped 200,000 soldiers.<sup>103</sup> In order to meet this demand for troops, the U.S. armed forces utilized a draft that many believed unfairly targeted black men. The draft did pose a major concern. Selective Service regulations offered deferments for college attendance and a variety of essential civilian occupations that favored middle and upper class whites.<sup>104</sup> The vast majority of draftees were poor, undereducated, and urban; blue-collar workers or the unemployed. This reality struck hard in the African American community. Furthermore, African Americans were woefully underrepresented on local draft boards; in 1966 blacks accounted for slightly more than 1 percent of all draft board members, and seven state boards had no black representation at all.<sup>105</sup> As a result, The Vietnam War saw the highest proportion of blacks ever to serve in an American war. During the height of the U.S. involvement, 1965-69, blacks, who formed 11 percent of the American population, made up 12.6

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<sup>100</sup> Roark, James L., Micheal P. Johnson, Patricia Cline Cohen, Sarah Stage, Alan Lawson, and Susan M. Hartman. *The American Promise; A Compact History*. 4th ed. Vol. II. Boston, MA: Bedford St. Martin's, 2010. Print.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid

<sup>102</sup> Ibid

<sup>103</sup> Ibid

<sup>104</sup> Coffey, David. "African Americans in the Vietnam War." *English.Illinois.edu*. University of Illinois, 14 Mar. 1998. Web. 11 Feb. 2014. <[http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s\\_z/stevens/africanamer.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s_z/stevens/africanamer.htm)>.

<sup>105</sup> Coffey, David. "African Americans in the Vietnam War."

percent of the soldiers in Vietnam.<sup>106</sup> The majority of these were in the infantry, and although authorities differ on the figures, the percentage of black combat fatalities in that period was a staggering 14.9 percent, a proportion that subsequently declined.<sup>107</sup> Volunteers and draftees included many frustrated blacks whose impatience with the war and the delays in racial progress in America led to race riots on a number of ships and military bases.<sup>108</sup> Muhammad Ali knew these things. He also knew that his draft number was about to come up.

In 1964, Cassius Clay had taken, and failed, the U.S. Armed Forces qualifying test because his spelling and reading scores were sub-standard.<sup>109</sup> Clay had dropped out of school at the age of fifteen to pursue boxing full time.<sup>110</sup> He had barely a seventh grade education.<sup>111</sup> However, when the war escalated following the Tonkin resolution, test standards were lowered and Cassius Marcellus Clay was labeled as a 1-A draft prospect, the highest possible classification.<sup>112</sup> Muhammad Ali had a decision to make. Due to his celebrity, Ali could have received a deferment and simply gone overseas to entertain troops with the U.S.O.<sup>113</sup> Instead, he chose to let his number come up. He would refuse induction into the United States Army on the basis of being a conscientious objector to the war in Vietnam due to his Islamic religious

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid

<sup>107</sup> Ibid

<sup>108</sup> Ibid

<sup>109</sup> Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali."

<sup>110</sup> Ibid

<sup>111</sup> Ibid

<sup>112</sup> Ibid

<sup>113</sup> Tinsley, J. "If Ali Could Do It Over Again."

beliefs.<sup>114</sup> He called it a, “White man’s war.”<sup>115</sup> But, Ali would go further than that. The champ explained his decision in another interview with ABC sports’ Howard Cosell:

Howard, this is an unjust war. Any war is an unjust war. War is against the teachings of the holy Qur’an. I’m not trying to dodge the draft. We Muslims are not supposed to take part in no wars unless declared by Allah or the messenger. We don’t take part in Christian wars, or any wars of non-believers.<sup>116</sup>

Finally, he set the tone for his opposition to the war in Vietnam, “I don’t want to go over there and kill no Vietcong. I ain’t got no quarrel with no Vietcong. Ain’t no Vietcong ever called me nigger.”<sup>117</sup>

While Ali may have thought of himself as a fighter for religious equality, in the beginning of his battle against the U.S. Government, most simply viewed him as a draft dodger. Those critics included fellow heavyweight Ernie Terrell. Terrell fought Ali for his heavyweight title on February 6, 1967 in Houston, TX.<sup>118</sup> Ali was incredibly unpopular by this fight and Terrell wanted to capitalize on that unpopularity by becoming what somewhat of an “Anti-Ali.”<sup>119</sup> At the weigh in, Terrell refused to call Ali by his chosen name. The champ didn’t take kindly to that gesture and the exchange that followed would set the tone for what was going to take place in the ring:

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<sup>114</sup> Roark, James L., Micheal P. Johnson, Patricia Cline Cohen, Sarah Stage, Alan Lawson, and Susan M. Hartman. *The American Promise; A Compact History*.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid

<sup>116</sup> Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali."

<sup>117</sup> Reporter, Sportsmail. "Float Like a Butterfly, Sting Like a Bee; Ali's Most Memorable Quotes."

<sup>118</sup> "Muhammad Ali vs. Ernie Terrell." BoxRec.com. Boxing Records Inc., 11 Jan. 2014. Web. 11 Feb. 2014. <[http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Muhammad\\_Ali\\_vs.\\_Ernie\\_Terrell](http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Muhammad_Ali_vs._Ernie_Terrell)>.

<sup>119</sup> "Muhammad Ali vs. Ernie Terrell." BoxRec.com

Ali: "Why won't you call me by my name, man?"

Terrell: "Well, what's your name? You told me it was Cassius Clay."

Ali: "I never told you it was Cassius Clay! My name is Muhammad Ali and you will announce it right there in the center of that ring after the fight, if you don't do it now. You're acting like just another no good Uncle Tom, another Floyd Patterson! I'm gonna punish you!"

Terrell: "Your mamma named you Clay. Your Daddy's name is Clay. I'm calling you Clay."<sup>120</sup>

At that point, Ali lunged at Terrell. As his trainer and cornerman held him back, Ali shouted, "I hope everybody's watching! I don't care where you are, or what your doing! You need to have your televisions turned to this fight. It's gonna be a whoopin'! I tell you right now, I have never in my life wanted to whoop somebody so bad!"<sup>121</sup> That's exactly what Ali did. By the eighth round, the fight was all but over. Ali refused to let Terrell quit. From the eighth round on the champ taunted his defeated challenger by shouting, "What's my name? What's my damn name?" Then he proceeded to smack Terrell with his famous right jab.<sup>122</sup> Ali did this over and over again. Had he wanted to finish the job, he could have. Instead, Ali punished Terrell to a humiliatingly lopsided 148-137 unanimous decision.<sup>123</sup> The Champ would need to harness that same fire if was going to defeat the U.S. Government.

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid

<sup>121</sup> Ibid

<sup>122</sup> Muhammad Ali vs. Ernie Terrell." BoxRec.com

<sup>123</sup> Ibid

On April 28, 1967, Muhammad Ali walked into U.S. Army headquarters in Houston, TX to refuse induction into the Army.<sup>124</sup> The champ filed into the main hall of the recruiting center and waited for his name to be called. He heard it three times, “Cassius Clay...Cassius Marcellus Clay...Cassius Marcellus Clay” Ali refused to budge. He was warned that refusing induction into the U.S. Armed Forces was a felony offense, punishable by five years in prison and a fee of up to \$10,000. Again, Ali refused to budge.<sup>125</sup> He was immediately arrested.<sup>126</sup> Later that afternoon, the New York State Athletic Commission revoked his boxing license and the World Boxing Association took away the one thing that no one else could: they stripped him of his heavyweight title.<sup>127</sup>

The prime years of any fighter’s career are his twenty sixth, twenty seventh and twenty eighth years.<sup>128</sup> Muhammad Ali never got those years. He spent that time in exile from the sport of boxing, fighting a conviction for Draft Evasion instead. Ali watched from his couch as Joe Frazier, a powerful, if undersized, fighter from Philadelphia claimed the title that Muhammad believed was rightfully his.<sup>129</sup> Out on bond while his conviction was being appealed, and banned from boxing around the globe, Muhammad Ali was forced to lecture at Universities around the country and attach his name to fast food restaurants in order to make enough money to support his family.<sup>130</sup> By this point, Ali had been married twice; first, to a cocktail waitress

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<sup>124</sup> "April 28." History.com. The History Channel, 21 Sept. 2011. Web. 11 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/muhammad-ali-refuses-army-induction>>.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid

<sup>126</sup> Ibid

<sup>127</sup> Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali."

<sup>128</sup> Cohen, Ben. "Was Muhammad Ali Really the Greatest?"

<sup>129</sup> Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali."

<sup>130</sup> Ibid

named Sonji Roi whom Ali married about a month after meeting her in 1964.<sup>131</sup> They divorced two years later when she refused to adjust to more conservative, traditional Islamic standards; particularly those relating to dress.<sup>132</sup> He married his second wife, actress and model Belinda Boyd in 1967.<sup>133</sup> After the wedding, at Muhammad's persistence, she converted to Islam; changing her name to Khalilah Ali.<sup>134</sup> They would have four children, including Ali's first son, Muhammad Ali, Jr.<sup>135</sup> The champ's focus, however, was on returning to heavyweight glory, not changing diapers. For three and a half of his prime years, Muhammad Ali didn't step in the ring. While most boxing experts do believe Ali to be the greatest boxer of all time, many wonder just how great his career could have been had he been able to fight during those years.<sup>136</sup> "Ali is the great unanswerable question in pro boxing. It's tough not to wonder what kind of record he would have had if he'd been able to fight in the late sixties" boxing expert Ben Cohen said of Ali.<sup>137</sup> Thankfully, the popular opinion of the war in Vietnam was changing and Muhammad Ali was about to get his shot to reclaim what he'd never really lost.

On February 28, 1968, Walter Cronkite, the most trusted man in America and the anchor of the CBS Evening News declared on live television that, "For it seems now more certain than ever, that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate."<sup>138</sup> Here was the most trusted man in America, telling the American people that the War they'd been fighting for almost

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<sup>131</sup> Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali."

<sup>132</sup> Ibid

<sup>133</sup> Ibid

<sup>134</sup> Ibid

<sup>135</sup> Ibid

<sup>136</sup> Cohen, Ben. "Was Muhammad Ali Really the Greatest?"

<sup>137</sup> Ibid

<sup>138</sup> "Final Words: Cronkite's Vietnam Commentary." NPR.org. National Public Radio, 18 July 2009. Web. 11 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=106775685>>.

a decade, the War that had cost them more than 35,000 lives and would eventually cost them more than 45,000 lives was essentially unwinnable.<sup>139</sup> This declaration accompanied a growing anti-war counter culture that was sprouting up at Universities across the country.<sup>140</sup> For many, Muhammad Ali was the face of that counter culture. And, as the popularity of the War continued to plummet, an Ali return to boxing began to seem more and more likely.

The State of Georgia doesn't have a State Boxing Commission.<sup>141</sup> That means any fighter who wishes to compete in that state can do so, as long as their able to attract an audience. Muhammad Ali wanted a shot at "Smokin'" Joe Frazier, the man who held Ali's heavyweight championship. Frazier agreed to give Ali a title shot if he was able to defeat number one contender Jerry Quarry.<sup>142</sup> Ali still hadn't gotten his license to fight back from most of the major boxing commissions and was forced to stage the fight in the one major city where he didn't need a license: Atlanta, Georgia.<sup>143</sup> Georgia State Senator and boxing enthusiast Leroy Johnson was brought in by Ali and his crew to help promote and arrange the fight with Quarry in Atlanta.<sup>144</sup> Ali spent almost eight months working himself back into fighting shape.<sup>145</sup> By fight night, October 26, 1970, Ali was ready to compete. Although he was admittedly slower than he had been prior to his suspension, his age had given him a certain level of toughness that he hadn't before. Angelo Dundee described him as, "A guy who had been emotionally beaten and had to work himself back. He wasn't the same guy and we had to teach him how to use his chin instead

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<sup>139</sup> "Final Words: Cronkite's Vietnam Commentary." NPR.org

<sup>140</sup> Roark, James L., Micheal P. Johnson, Patricia Cline Cohen, Sarah Stage, Alan Lawson, and Susan M. Hartman.

<sup>141</sup> Cohen, Ben. "Was Muhammad Ali Really the Greatest?"

<sup>142</sup> Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali."

<sup>143</sup> Ibid

<sup>144</sup> "Muhammad Ali vs. Jerry Quarry (1st Meeting)." BoxRec.com. Boxing Records Inc., 15 Jan. 2014. Web. 11 Feb. 2014. <[http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Muhammad\\_Ali\\_vs.\\_Jerry\\_Quarry\\_\(1st\\_meeting\)](http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Muhammad_Ali_vs._Jerry_Quarry_(1st_meeting))>.

<sup>145</sup> Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali."



of his speed.”<sup>146</sup> Ali took his training to heart, defeating Quarry with a third round right jab that opened up a massive cut above his left eye forcing Referee Tony Perez to stop the fight and eventually requiring fifteen stitches to heal.<sup>147</sup> With another tune up fight against Oscar Bonavena that December, Ali was ready to take on Joe Frazier for the World Heavyweight Title.<sup>148</sup>

They called it the “Fight of the Century.”<sup>149</sup> And, as media tend to do, the fight was hyped as something bigger than mere boxing. Ali became a symbol of the Anti-War movement. Meanwhile, Frazier came to represent the more traditional viewpoint of most conservative Americans. Who won mattered.<sup>150</sup> The fight would be broadcast in fifty countries and twelve languages. Almost three hundred million people watched. It was the largest television audience ever.<sup>151</sup> Ali had been given back his license to fight by the New York Boxing Association and New York City’s Madison Square Garden turned into a circus on March 8, 1971, as more than eighteen thousand sports fans piled into the arena.<sup>152</sup> When the two fighters met in the ring, Ali, always the showman, told Frazier, “You know, you’re in here with God tonight?” Frazier replied, “If you’re god, I think you’re in the wrong place.”<sup>153</sup> The bell sounded and what ensued exceeded even the most optimistic promoter’s wildest dreams. Ali dominated the first three rounds, peppering the shorter Frazier with rapier-like jabs that raised welts on the

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<sup>146</sup> McKenzie, Clinton. "Ali Wasn't Born a Champion, Dundee Made Him One by Knowing How to Manage Him."

<sup>147</sup> "Muhammad Ali vs. Jerry Quarry (1st Meeting)." BoxRec.com

<sup>148</sup> "Muhammad Ali Vs. Oscar Natalio Bonavena." BoxRec.com. Boxing Records Inc., 14 Jan. 2014. Web. 11 Feb. 2014. <[http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Muhammad\\_Ali\\_vs.\\_Oscar\\_Natalio\\_Bonavena](http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Muhammad_Ali_vs._Oscar_Natalio_Bonavena)>

<sup>149</sup> "Muhammad Ali vs. Joe Frazier (1st Meeting)." BoxRec.com. Boxing Records Inc., 14 Jan. 2014. Web. 11 Feb. 2014. <[http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Joe\\_Frazier\\_vs.\\_Muhammad\\_Ali\\_\(1st\\_meeting\)](http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Joe_Frazier_vs._Muhammad_Ali_(1st_meeting))>.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid

<sup>151</sup> Ibid

<sup>152</sup> Ibid

<sup>153</sup> Ibid

champion's face. Frazier began to dominate in the 4th round, catching Ali with several of his famed left hooks and pinning him against the ropes to deliver tremendous body blows.<sup>154</sup> The fight was about even until late in round 11, when Frazier caught Ali, backed into a corner, with a crushing left hook that almost floored him. Ali was clearly rusty. Fighting Jerry Quarry was one thing, battling Joe Frazier was another; Frazier was a powerful technician who could utilize both his hands to strike down his opponents.<sup>155</sup> Ali had always relied on his speed to get him out of trouble. Now, at nearly thirty years old, much of that teenage quickness and conditioning was gone. He was visibly tired after the 6th round, and though he put together some flurries of punches after that round, he was unable to keep the pace he had set in the first third of the fight.<sup>156</sup> To survive, Ali leaned back against the ropes and put his hands in front of his face to protect himself.<sup>157</sup> This technique became known as the “rope-a-dope” and would become Ali’s signature technique during the second half of his career.<sup>158</sup> At the end of round 14, Frazier held a lead on the three scorecards. Early in round 15, he landed a spectacular left hook that put Ali on his back for only the third time in his career. Ali, his right jaw swollen grotesquely, got up from the blow quickly and managed to stay on his feet for the rest of the round despite several terrific blows from Frazier. A few minutes later, the judges made it official: Frazier had retained the title with a unanimous decision, dealing Muhammad Ali his first professional loss.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> "Muhammad Ali vs. Joe Frazier (1st Meeting)."

<sup>155</sup> Ibid

<sup>156</sup> Ibid

<sup>157</sup> Ibid

<sup>158</sup> Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali."

<sup>159</sup> Ibid

For a man who'd never dealt with defeat on that scale, Muhammad handled the loss quite well. He was helped by the announcement on June 28, 1971 that the United States Supreme Court had made a final ruling in his draft evasion case.<sup>160</sup> In *Clay v. United States*, the court overturned his draft evasion conviction with a unanimous eight to nothing vote.<sup>161</sup> While the reasoning behind the court's ruling amounted to essentially a technical error over how one of the appeal boards who processed Ali's appeal application, for many it still meant that Ali had been vindicated.<sup>162</sup> "Ali was right all along, this really is an unjust war," Howard Cosell proclaimed.<sup>163</sup> Now, Ali could turn his full attention to getting back into the ring with Joe Frazier and reclaiming his heavyweight belt. George Foreman had other ideas.

Before he was selling grills on cable TV at two o'clock in the morning, George Foreman was the scariest man in professional sports. Born in Texas in 1949, Foreman stood 6'3" tall and with an 82 inch reach, he was all muscle.<sup>164</sup> Foreman would later say of himself, "I thought I was the greatest heavyweight that had ever lived. I was one tough s.o.b."<sup>165</sup> Like Ali, Foreman had been an Olympic gold medalist. He won gold in the heavyweight division at the 1968 games in Mexico City.<sup>166</sup> Like Ali, Foreman wanted a shot at Joe Frazier. He got it on January 22, 1973 in Kingston, Jamaica.<sup>167</sup> Foreman demolished the heavyweight champ who had defeated

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<sup>160</sup> Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali."

<sup>161</sup> Ibid

<sup>162</sup> Ibid

<sup>163</sup> "Howard Cosell Quotes." Wikiquote.com

<sup>164</sup> "George Foreman Biography." Bio.com. Biography, 22 Dec. 2010. Web. 11 Feb. 2014.  
<<http://www.thebiographychannel.co.uk/biographies/george-foreman.html>>.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid

<sup>166</sup> Ibid

<sup>167</sup> Ibid

Muhammad Ali. Frazier was knocked down three times in the first round. A few of Foreman's punches were so hard that they actually lifted Frazier off the mat.<sup>168</sup> When Foreman landed the deciding left hook, Howard Cosell famously called, "Down goes Frazier! Down Goes Frazier!"<sup>169</sup> Foreman claimed the heavyweight belt that Muhammad Ali so desired. While Ali genuinely believed he was a better fighter than Joe Frazier, George Foreman was another monster entirely. It would take a fight in a distant land, on the biggest stage, to decide whether Muhammad Ali would ever get his hands on the heavyweight title again.

Boxing promoter Don King called it, "The Rumble in the Jungle."<sup>170</sup> It would be fifteen rounds of heavyweight boxing between champion George Foreman and former champ Muhammad Ali.<sup>171</sup> The fight would take place in the cradle of civilization in Kinshasa, Zaïre, Africa (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo).<sup>172</sup> Ali had avenged his loss to Joe Frazier in a thrilling number one contender bout at Madison Square Garden that ended in a unanimous decision in favor of Ali.<sup>173</sup> That win had helped endure Ali to people around the world. He was beginning to become a global icon. This point was made shockingly clear when Ali arrived in Zaïre for the "Rumble." George Foreman had arrived two days prior to Ali.<sup>174</sup> Foreman had

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<sup>168</sup> "George Foreman Biography." Bio.com.

<sup>169</sup> "Howard Cosell Quotes." Wikiquote.com

<sup>170</sup> "George Foreman vs. Muhammad Ali." BoxRec.com. Boxing Records Inc., 11 Jan. 2014. Web. 11 Feb. 2014. <[http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/George\\_Foreman\\_vs.\\_Muhammad\\_Ali](http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/George_Foreman_vs._Muhammad_Ali)>.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid

<sup>172</sup> Ibid

<sup>173</sup> "Muhammad Ali vs. Joe Frazier (2nd Meeting)." BoxRec.com. Boxing Records Inc., 4 Aug. 2012. Web. 11 Feb. 2014. <[http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Muhammad\\_Ali\\_vs.\\_Joe\\_Frazier\\_\(2nd\\_meeting\)](http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Muhammad_Ali_vs._Joe_Frazier_(2nd_meeting))>.

<sup>174</sup> "George Foreman vs. Muhammad Ali." BoxRec.com.

brought along his dog, a German Shepard, for companionship during what would be a long training process.<sup>175</sup> When Foreman and his dog stepped off the plane the throngs of people who had gathered at the airport to see the heavyweight champ were shocked. The people of Zaïre had seen images of African-Americans being attacked with the very same kinds of dog during the American civil rights movement of the fifties and sixties. To them, Foreman's ownership of the dog showed a lack of common sense.<sup>176</sup> Seeing the dog, combined with his tough guy image, turned Foreman the enemy to the people of Zaïre. Meanwhile, they viewed Muhammad Ali as a champion of black pride in America; a man of intense devotion to his faith and a fighter for peace.<sup>177</sup> Thousands turned out at the airport to welcome his plane.<sup>178</sup> Ali, always the shrewd showman, had learned how to say "kill him" in Congolese.<sup>179</sup> When he got off the plane, Ali began shouting, "Ali Bumaye! Ali Bumaye!" which literally meant "Ali, kill him."<sup>180</sup>

Throughout the summer of 1974, which Foreman and Ali spent training in Zaïre and getting their bodies used to the weather in the tropical African country, whenever Ali would appear in public, crowds would gather around him and chant, "Ali Bumaye."<sup>181</sup> The fight was originally scheduled for September 24; but, when Foreman cut his eye during training, it was postponed until October 30<sup>th</sup> in order to give the champ time to heal.<sup>182</sup> This also gave Ali added time to try and get inside his opponent's head. In a pre-fight press conference with Don King, Ali showed off yet another speech:

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<sup>175</sup> "George Foreman vs. Muhammad Ali." BoxRec.com

<sup>176</sup> Ibid

<sup>177</sup> Ibid

<sup>178</sup> Ibid

<sup>179</sup> Ibid

<sup>180</sup> Ibid

<sup>181</sup> Ibid

<sup>182</sup> Ibid

It's fitting that I should leave the game the same way I came in. By beating a big, bad monster who knocks out everybody and no one can whoop him. That's when that little Cassius Clay from Louisville, KY beat Sonny Liston, the man who had annihilated Floyd Patterson twice. He was gonna kill me! And, he hit harder than George. His reach was longer than George's, he was a better boxer than George. And, I'm better now than I was when you saw that twenty two year old undeveloped kid running' from Sonny Liston. I'm experienced. I'm a professional; jaws been broke, been knocked down a couple times. I'm bad! I've been chopping trees! I've done something new for this fight. I done wrestled with an alligator, I done tussled with a whale! Hand cuffed lightning, threw thunder in jail. Only last week; I murdered a rock, injured a stone and hospitalized a brick! I'm so mean I make medicine sick. I'm bad! I'm fast! I'm so fast; I went bed to last night, hit the switch on the light in my bedroom and was in the bed before the room was dark. You, George Foreman, all of you chumps are gonna bow when I whoop him! [To King] I know you got him, I know you got him picked. But, the man's in trouble. I'm gonna show you how great I am!<sup>183</sup>

The night of the fight, George Foreman and his corner team prayed. They didn't pray for a victory. They prayed to God, asking him to keep George from killing Ali.<sup>184</sup> Foreman was a heavy favorite.<sup>185</sup> And, although he would never admit it, for the first time in his career, Ali was

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<sup>183</sup>Muhammad Ali Speech. Adapt. Frank Lampard. Perf. Muhammad Ali. Youtube.com. Google, 14 May 2010. Web. 12 Feb. 2014. <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-5\\_8af3TiY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-5_8af3TiY)>.

<sup>184</sup>"George Foreman vs. Muhammad Ali." BoxRec.com

scared of his opponent. He wrote of the fight in his autobiography, “George was so tough and so quiet. That scared me. That silence was intimidating. I needed him to fear me. He didn’t.”<sup>186</sup> As the crowd, clearly on Ali’s side, chanted, “Bumaye! Bumaye!” the bell tolled.<sup>187</sup> Ali came out dancing in the first. While his speed wasn’t what it had once been, he knew how to control the ring.<sup>188</sup> At the end of the first round, Foreman began landing his heavy strikes, “I’d never been hit so hard in my life,” Ali would later write.<sup>189</sup> In the second, Ali went to the ropes and covered up; the now famous “rope-a-dope.”<sup>190</sup> “Get away from the ropes!” Angelo Dundee shouted, “Get off the damn ropes!”<sup>191</sup> “When he went to the ropes, I felt sick” Dundee said.<sup>192</sup> At the end of the second round, Dundee implored Ali to stay off the ropes. Ali waved him away and said, “I know what I’m doing.”<sup>193</sup> He hadn’t planned this strategy, but, as Ali later wrote, “When a fighter gets in the ring, he has to adjust according to the conditions he faces. Against George, the ring was slow. Dancing all night, my legs would have got tired. George was following me too close, cutting off the ring. In the first round, I used more energy staying away from him than he used chasing me. So between rounds, I decided to do what I did in training when I got tired.”<sup>194</sup> Ali spent the next seven rounds lying against the ropes. Taking all the punishment the mighty

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<sup>185</sup> George Foreman vs. Muhammad Ali." BoxRec.com

<sup>186</sup> Durham, Richard. "Making a Comeback." *The Greatest: My Story*. By Muhammad Ali. New York, NY: Random House, 1975. 189. Print

<sup>187</sup> "George Foreman vs. Muhammad Ali." BoxRec.com

<sup>188</sup> Ibid

<sup>189</sup> Durham, Richard. "Making a Comeback." *The Greatest: My Story*. By Muhammad Ali. New York, NY: Random House, 1975. 189. Print

<sup>190</sup> "George Foreman vs. Muhammad Ali." BoxRec.com

<sup>191</sup> Ibid

<sup>192</sup> Ibid

<sup>193</sup> Ibid

<sup>194</sup> Durham, Richard. "Making a Comeback." *The Greatest: My Story*. By Muhammad Ali. New York, NY: Random House, 1975. 189. Print

George Foreman could dish out.<sup>195</sup> The strategy worked. By the eighth round, George was totally and completely out of gas.<sup>196</sup> Ali, in his typical fashion, shouted, "Come on George! Is that all you've got? Hit me harder, dammit! Hit me harder!"<sup>197</sup> Then, he finished it. Ali launched a fierce combination. A left hook brought Foreman's head into position for the final blow. Ali's famous right jab landed square on Foreman's temple and the man Muhammad had taken to calling, "The Mummy" came tumbling down.<sup>198</sup> Ten years after upsetting the "Big Ugly Bear" Sonny Liston, Muhammad Ali had reclaimed the heavyweight title; becoming only the second man in history to ever do so.<sup>199</sup> Describing the defeat in his later years, George Foreman would remark, "They called it the rope-a-dope. That night, I was the dope."<sup>200</sup>

Ali would defend his title successfully ten times from 1974 until 1977.<sup>201</sup> Those title defenses included a third bout with Joe Frazier. Also promoted by Don King and fought in the Philippines, it was called, "The Thrilla in Manilla."<sup>202</sup> Many consider it the greatest fight of all time.<sup>203</sup> It was absolutely brutal. Both fighters were injured, but it was when Frazier's eyes had swollen completely shut and his trainer refused to let him go back in for the fifteenth round that Muhammad Ali was declared the winner.<sup>204</sup> Howard Cosell, who called the match, said after the

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<sup>195</sup> "George Foreman vs. Muhammad Ali." BoxRec.com

<sup>196</sup> Ibid

<sup>197</sup> Ibid

<sup>198</sup> "George Foreman vs. Muhammad Ali." BoxRec.com

<sup>199</sup> Ibid

<sup>200</sup> Ibid

<sup>201</sup> "Muhammad Ali's Ring Record." Espn.go.com

<sup>202</sup> Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali."

<sup>203</sup> Cohen, Ben. "Was Muhammad Ali Really the Greatest?"

<sup>204</sup> Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali."



fight that, “This was not boxing. This was a war. Both men left a piece of their soul in that ring. Who knows if they’ll ever truly recover.”<sup>205</sup>

Ali was ready to call it a career. His speed was progressively decreasing and he found it harder and harder to get motivated for training.<sup>206</sup> In 1975, Muhammad Ali announced his retirement from the sport of boxing, “I’ve done all I can do and given all that have” Ali remarked during the announcement.<sup>207</sup> But, Muhammad had only ever made money one way: boxing. And, the opportunity to make five or ten million dollars a fight, Ali’s going rate at the time, was simply too good an opportunity to pass up.<sup>208</sup> So, like most great fighters, Ali developed a fatal flaw; he didn’t know when or how to hang up the gloves. He’d defend his title successfully six more times following the “Thrilla in Manilla.”<sup>209</sup> Then, Ali scheduled a fight against an unknown and undersized heavyweight from St. Louis, MO named Leon Spinks.<sup>210</sup> Muhammad had held the heavyweight title for a total of five years.<sup>211</sup> He had become widely regarded as the greatest boxer of all time.<sup>212</sup> Ali had no reason to fear Leon Spinks. Or, so he thought.

Muhammad Ali’s bout with Leon Spinks in Las Vegas on February 15, 1978 was supposed to be just another routine title defense for the two time heavyweight champion of the world.<sup>213</sup> Ali, who was now thirty six years old, had officially become a slow fighter.<sup>214</sup> Yet,

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<sup>205</sup> "Howard Cosell Quotes." Wikiquote.com

<sup>206</sup> Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali."

<sup>207</sup> Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali."

<sup>208</sup> Ibid

<sup>209</sup> Ibid

<sup>210</sup> "Muhammad Ali vs. Leon Spinks (1st Meeting)." BoxRec.com. Boxing Records Inc., 10 Jan. 2014. Web. 11 Feb. 2014. <[http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Muhammad\\_Ali\\_vs.\\_Leon\\_Spinks\\_\(1st\\_meeting\)](http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Muhammad_Ali_vs._Leon_Spinks_(1st_meeting))>.

<sup>211</sup> "Muhammad Ali's Ring Record." Espn.go.com

<sup>212</sup> Cohen, Ben. "Was Muhammad Ali Really the Greatest?"

<sup>213</sup> "Muhammad Ali vs. Leon Spinks (1st Meeting)."

he'd taught himself how to cover up his diminished skills by fighting smart; using efficient technical strikes and solid defense to win fights, as opposed to the pure speed and physical prowess he'd relied on in his younger years.<sup>215</sup> Spinks, who was nine years younger than Ali, had gotten his title shot by defeating Italian champion Alfio Rigueti by unanimous decision.<sup>216</sup> However, he was far from being a number one contender. Spinks had an impressive amateur record, having claimed a gold medal in the one hundred and seventy eight pound weight class at the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal.<sup>217</sup> However, he'd only fought in seven professional fights and he'd already lost once.<sup>218</sup> The experts believed Spinks didn't stand a chance against the mighty Muhammad Ali. When the bell sounded, he proved all the experts wrong. Leon Spinks took Ali the distance and claimed a shocking split decision victory, winning by a single point.<sup>219</sup> Muhammad Ali had lost his heavyweight title to a man no one had ever heard of. The boxing world was shocked. Muhammad Ali wasn't. Ali knew that he'd simply looked past Spinks, something that a thirty six year old couldn't do. "I let him rob my house while I was out to lunch," Ali said of the match.<sup>220</sup> "I didn't train the way I wanted to, I didn't prepare the way I wanted to."<sup>221</sup> Yet, to most, losing the title didn't affect Ali's legacy. Leon Spinks said himself after the fight, "I am the latest, but he is the greatest."<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali."

<sup>215</sup> Cohen, Ben. "Was Muhammad Ali Really the Greatest?"

<sup>216</sup> "Muhammad Ali vs. Leon Spinks (1st Meeting)."

<sup>217</sup> "Leon Spinks." BoxRec.com. Boxing Records Inc., 6 Aug. 2013. Web. 11 Feb. 2014.  
<<http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Human:262>>.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid

<sup>219</sup> "Muhammad Ali vs. Leon Spinks (1st Meeting)."

<sup>220</sup> Ibid

<sup>221</sup> Ibid

<sup>222</sup> Ibid

Muhammad Ali had nothing left to prove. He'd already been heavyweight champ twice. He'd won Olympic Gold. And, he'd become a global icon by refusing to be inducted into the Army during the Vietnam War. Yet, for the champ, losing to, "little Leon," as he called Spinks, was simply not an acceptable way to end his career.<sup>223</sup> He wanted a rematch. However, the World Boxing Commission had ranked Ken Norton, a lanky heavyweight who'd once broken Ali's jaw, as the number one contender to Spinks' title<sup>224</sup>. Not Muhammad Ali. If Leon granted Ali a rematch and won, the WBA assured him they'd strip Spinks of his title.<sup>225</sup> But, for Spinks, the chance to become the only man to defeat Ali twice was too good a chance to pass up. He granted Ali his rematch and the ex-champ had seven months to make "little Leon" regret that decision.

During training, Muhammad made a decision about his future. He decided that, win or lose, his rematch with Leon Spinks would be his last professional fight.<sup>226</sup> It had to be. He was slowing down; and not just in the ring. There began to be concerns about his health. Ali's speech had become slurred and his motion was noticeably slower when he wasn't fighting or training.<sup>227</sup> His family was worried. Ali was now married to his third wife, Veronica Porsche, an actress

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<sup>223</sup> "Muhammad Ali vs. Leon Spinks (1st Meeting)."

<sup>224</sup> Ibid

<sup>225</sup> Ibid

<sup>226</sup> "Leon Spinks vs. Muhammad Ali (2nd Meeting)." BoxRec.com. Boxing Records Inc., 11 Jan. 2014. Web. 12 Feb. 2014. <[http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Leon\\_Spinks\\_vs.\\_Muhammad\\_Ali\\_\(2nd\\_meeting\)](http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Leon_Spinks_vs._Muhammad_Ali_(2nd_meeting))>.

<sup>227</sup> Author, Department. "Ali V Holmes: The Fight That Should Not Have Been | Columbia Neurosurgery." ColumbiaNeurosurgery.org. Columbia University, 11 Jan. 2010. Web. 12 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.columbianeurosurgery.org/2010/01/ali-v-holmes-the-fight-that-should-not-have-been/>>.

whom he'd begun an affair with in 1975 while still married to his second wife, Khalilah.<sup>228</sup> Once Khalilah discovered the affair, the couple split. In 1977, Ali married Veronica.<sup>229</sup> By this time, Muhammad was the father of five children and Veronica was expecting his sixth; a daughter named Laila who'd one day have her own distinguished boxing career as a women's champion.<sup>230</sup> His growing family needed a healthy patriarch. Yet, Ali's pride couldn't let him go out as a loser. He wanted to be the first man in history to win the Heavyweight championship three times, "I know this will be my last fight. I'll be three times champion," he said.<sup>231</sup> So, on September 15, 1978 after seven grueling months of training, Muhammad Ali stepped into the ring for what many believed would be the last time.<sup>232</sup>

Fought at the Superdome in New Orleans in front of a crowd of 63,350 people (the most ever for an indoor boxing match), Spinks vs. Holmes II was broadcast by ABC, called by longtime Ali friend Howard Cosell, and watched by over ninety million people around the world.<sup>233</sup> Ali's strategy was simple. As Pat Putnam of Sports Illustrated explained:

Ali would jab, jab, throw a right and grab. When Spinks came flailing in, Ali would hook his left hand around the back of Spinks' head and pull him into an embrace, effectively limiting Spinks to one or two punches or pulling him off balance. And Ali would dance, `

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<sup>228</sup> Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali."

<sup>229</sup> Ibid

<sup>230</sup> Ibid

<sup>231</sup> "Leon Spinks vs. Muhammad Ali (2nd Meeting)." BoxRec.com

<sup>232</sup> Ibid

<sup>233</sup> Ibid

baby, dance. He would tie up Spinks and then dance away from him on the break, circling to the right, circling to the left.<sup>234</sup>

Ali looked as good as he had in years. And, his training and strategy had paid off. When the judge's scorecards were read, his hand was raised for the third time as the world's new heavyweight champion.<sup>235</sup> It was, and is, an unmatched achievement in the sport of boxing. Ali viewed it as the pinnacle of his career, "I killed myself to get ready for Spinks" he admitted after the fight, "I suffered and sacrificed more than I ever have. There's nothing left for me to gain by fighting." With that, on June 26, 1979 Muhammad Ali announced his retirement from the sport of boxing...again.<sup>236</sup> He spent the next two years living out his early retirement with his family back home in Kentucky.<sup>237</sup> But, as the saying goes, old habits die hard.

In the early years of his retirement, Ali's family watched the physical abnormalities that had developed in his later years as a fighter often become debilitating.<sup>238</sup> Ali's oldest daughter, May May, described what she saw during those first months after the second fight with Leon Spinks, "In early 1980, he lost his sense of smell. Then he had some really serious issues with constipation."<sup>239</sup> His speech was progressively getting worse and his motions were becoming

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<sup>234</sup> "Leon Spinks vs. Muhammad Ali (2nd Meeting)."

<sup>235</sup> Ibid

<sup>236</sup> Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali."

<sup>237</sup> Ibid

<sup>238</sup> Author, Department. "Ali V Holmes: The Fight That Should Not Have Been | Columbia Neurosurgery."

<sup>239</sup> Gray, Barbara B. "Ali's Daughter Champions Fight Against Parkinson's." HealthDay.Com. Health Day, 3 May 2013. Web. 12 Feb. 2014. <<http://consumer.healthday.com/diseases-and-conditions-information-37/misc-diseases-and-conditions-news-203/muhammad-ali-s-daughter-champions-fight-against-parkinson-s-disease-675935.html>>.

slower and more rigid.<sup>240</sup> It's not as if his physical problems weren't becoming a big enough concern, but Ali had other issues as well. He was beginning to run out of money.<sup>241</sup> Despite the conservative standards of his faith, he was an avid spender. In 1979, he bought a ranch outside of Louisville for \$1.8M.<sup>242</sup> He filled it with cars, animals and toys for his children.<sup>243</sup> So, while he certainly wasn't broke, Ali could use an extra few million dollars.<sup>244</sup> Meanwhile, the world had a new heavyweight champion.

Larry Holmes grew up in Pennsylvania idolizing Muhammad Ali.<sup>245</sup> Although he was only seven years younger than the three time heavyweight champ, Holmes had watched Ali's development into an icon of the twentieth century and admired him a great deal. "Ali is the greatest of all time, was the greatest of all time, and will always be the greatest time," Holmes once said.<sup>246</sup> Larry claimed Ali's heavyweight title in 1978, immediately following Muhammad's retirement.<sup>247</sup> His reign as heavyweight champ would last for seven years, second only to the reign of the great Joe Louis.<sup>248</sup> However, after Ali's retirement, many viewed the level of competition in the heavyweight division as weak.<sup>249</sup> By 1980, Holmes was struggling to

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<sup>240</sup> Author, Department. "Ali V Holmes: The Fight That Should Not Have Been | Columbia Neurosurgery."

<sup>241</sup> Ibid

<sup>242</sup> "Muhammad Ali Timeline." CourierJournal.com. The Louisville Courier Journal, n.d. Web. 12 Feb. 2014.  
<<http://www.courier-journal.com/section/ALI06/Muhammad-Ali-timeline>>.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid

<sup>244</sup> I Author, Department. "Ali V Holmes: The Fight That Should Not Have Been | Columbia Neurosurgery."

<sup>245</sup> "Larry Holmes." BoxRec.com. Boxing Records Inc., 6 Jan. 2014. Web. 12 Feb. 2014.  
<[http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Larry\\_Holmes](http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Larry_Holmes)>.

<sup>246</sup> "Muhammad Ali vs. Larry Holmes." YouTube. YouTube, 25 July 2006. Web. 12 Feb. 2014.  
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJtIDvKku50>>.

<sup>247</sup> "Larry Holmes." BoxRec.com

<sup>248</sup> Ibid

<sup>249</sup> Author, Department. "Ali V Holmes: The Fight That Should Not Have Been | Columbia Neurosurgery."

establish the legitimacy of his heavyweight title.<sup>250</sup> He needed a truly great challenger. And, if you're going to have a great challenger, why not have the greatest of all time.

Muhammad Ali needed money. And, the thought of winning the heavyweight belt for an astonishing fourth time was attractive to him.<sup>251</sup> Larry Holmes, the current heavyweight champ needed an opponent. It was a match made in heaven. So, at the age of thirty eight, Ali agreed to come out of retirement in return for eight million dollars and a fight with Larry Holmes for the heavyweight championship at Cesar's Palace in Las Vegas, NV on October 2, 1980.<sup>252</sup> Ali had to lose nearly fifty pounds to get back into fighting shape.<sup>253</sup> It was doomed from the start. When the bell finally tolled, it was clear that Muhammad Ali was not only no longer a fast fighter, he had no business being a professional boxer at all. Ali was slow and rigid.<sup>254</sup> Holmes, in the prime of his future hall of fame career, absolutely demolished his a weaker, older opponent.<sup>255</sup> The fight reminded many of when a young Cassius Clay had beaten the great champion Sonny Liston into submission sixteen years earlier. However, to those who saw it, Holmes vs. Ali was more than just a boxing match. It was the end of an era. As millions watched, an icon was being humiliated for the entire world to see. "This has to stop!" Howard Cosell called out during the broadcast as Holmes began to execute a fierce combination, "This simply has to stop! Ali can't

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<sup>250</sup> "Larry Holmes." BoxRec.com

<sup>251</sup> "Muhammad Ali vs. Larry Holmes." YouTube

<sup>252</sup> "Muhammad Ali vs. Larry Holmes." BoxRec.com. Boxing Records Inc., 10 Jan. 2014. Web. 12 Feb. 2014.  
<[http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Larry\\_Holmes\\_vs.\\_Muhammad\\_Ali](http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Larry_Holmes_vs._Muhammad_Ali)>.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid

<sup>254</sup> "Muhammad Ali vs. Larry Holmes." YouTube

<sup>255</sup> Ibid

take it any longer. His body is too frail, too old. This must stop!”<sup>256</sup> At one point, Holmes turned to referee Richard Greene and implored, “If you keep this going, I’m going to hurt him. Please, stop this thing. I don’t want to hurt him.”<sup>257</sup> Finally, before the start of the tenth round, at the insistence of Ali’s longtime trainer Angelo Dundee, Richard Greene stopped the fight.<sup>258</sup> It was the first time that Muhammad Ali had failed to take a fight the distance, and it was a terribly sad moment for sports fans around the world.<sup>259</sup> In the post-fight interview, Howard Cosell asked a tearful Larry Holmes, “Why are you crying Larry? It hurt you to punish him like that, didn’t it?” Holmes responded, “He’s my hero. He’s always stood up for what he believes in. He’s a great champion. He’ll always be the champ.”<sup>260</sup> Cosell expressed the feelings of the nation in his post-fight analysis, “The champ is dead. Long live the champ!”<sup>261</sup> However, Ali himself wasn’t ready for his obituaries to be written quite yet. “I shall return!” Ali said, “They wrote me off after Frazier. They wrote me off after Norton. They wrote me off after the draft. Don’t write me off.”<sup>262</sup> Ali proved, for a third time that he didn’t know when or how to hang up the gloves.

Muhammad Ali did indeed fight again. At age thirty nine, he fought twenty seven year old Trevor Berbick at the Queen Elizabeth Sports Center in Nassau on December 11, 1981 in a

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<sup>256</sup> "Muhammad Ali vs. Larry Holmes." YouTube

<sup>257</sup> Ibid

<sup>258</sup> Ibid

<sup>259</sup> "Muhammad Ali vs. Larry Holmes." BoxRec.com. Boxing Records Inc.

<sup>260</sup> "Muhammad Ali vs. Larry Holmes." YouTube

<sup>261</sup> Ibid

<sup>262</sup> "Muhammad Ali vs. Larry Holmes." BoxRec.com. Boxing Records Inc.



fight Don King coined, "Drama in the Bahama."<sup>263</sup> Berbick wasn't nearly as talented a boxer as Larry Holmes. So, Ali was able to keep it close for the first few rounds.<sup>264</sup> However, in the last three rounds, Berbick took control.<sup>265</sup> He treated Ali in the same way you might treat an old family dog that you have to put down. Berbick showed Ali respect, but made it clear who the better fighter was and claimed a unanimous decision victory.<sup>266</sup> This time, Ali knew it was the end. "Father Time caught up with me," Ali said after the fight, "In my younger days, I wouldn't have had any trouble. But I just couldn't do what I wanted to do."<sup>267</sup> When asked whether he thought his skills may be eroding, Ali chuckled and replied, "It's not 'may' have gone. They *have* gone."<sup>268</sup> Muhammad Ali had stepped into the ring for the final time. He'd been heavyweight champion of the world three times.<sup>269</sup> He'd won an Olympic gold medal for his country.<sup>270</sup> He'd changed his name in an effort to establish his own religious identity.<sup>271</sup> And, he'd stood up against the greatest imperial power the world had ever known when they asked him to do something he believed was unjust.<sup>272</sup> He'd fought in sixty one professional fights and won fifty six of them, knocking out his opponent thirty seven times.<sup>273</sup> Muhammad Ali had nothing left to prove. He'd been right all along, going all the way back to the first time he unleashed his poetry on the world against Henry Cooper eighteen years prior, he really was the greatest of all time.

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<sup>263</sup> "Trevor Berbick vs. Muhammad Ali." BoxRec.com. Boxing Records Inc., 10 Jan. 2014. Web. 12 Feb. 2014. <[http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Trevor\\_Berbick\\_vs.\\_Muhammad\\_Ali](http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Trevor_Berbick_vs._Muhammad_Ali)>.

<sup>264</sup>Ibid

<sup>265</sup>Ibid

<sup>266</sup>Ibid

<sup>267</sup>Ibid

<sup>268</sup>Ibid

<sup>269</sup>Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali."

<sup>270</sup>Ibid

<sup>271</sup>Ibid

<sup>272</sup>Ibid

<sup>273</sup>"Muhammad Ali's Ring Record." Espn.go.com

Muhammad Ali's family hadn't been the only ones to notice the physical abnormalities that he'd developed. Prior to his fight with Larry Holmes, the World Boxing Association had asked him to complete a neurological evaluation to determine whether it was safe for him to fight.<sup>274</sup> During that evaluation, the doctor conducting the exam asked Ali to touch the tip of his index finger to the tip of his nose.<sup>275</sup> His finger landed just above his upper lip.<sup>276</sup> He was given ten basic speech evaluations to test how well he could coordinate his sentences.<sup>277</sup> He failed six of them.<sup>278</sup> He was asked to hop on one foot. He fell down.<sup>279</sup> The doctor concluded that Ali was simply, "Punch-Drunk," and while he may have had minor brain damage, a fight with Larry Holmes wasn't a serious health risk.<sup>280</sup> Ali was cleared to fight and the Holmes disaster ensued. After his last fight versus Trevor Berbick, Ali's health continued to decline. He was rigid and slow and his speech was slurred to the point that he often required subtitles when appearing on television.<sup>281</sup> In 1984, Muhammad's fourth wife Lonnie, a longtime friend who'd known him since 1964, got so concerned that she asked him to check himself into the hospital.<sup>282</sup> Medical evaluations conducted at the Columbia University Medical Center, including a PET scan, confirmed the worst; at age forty two, Muhammad Ali had Parkinson's disease.<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Author, Department. "Ali V Holmes: The Fight That Should Not Have Been | Columbia Neurosurgery."

<sup>275</sup> Ibid

<sup>276</sup> Ibid

<sup>277</sup> Ibid

<sup>278</sup> Ibid

<sup>279</sup> Ibid

<sup>280</sup> Ibid

<sup>281</sup> Gray, Barbara B. "Ali's Daughter Champions Fight Against Parkinson's."

<sup>282</sup> Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali."

<sup>283</sup> Author, Department. "Ali V Holmes: The Fight That Should Not Have Been | Columbia Neurosurgery."

Parkinson's disease is a progressive, chronic, incurable neurological disorder that disrupts motor function, slows the thought process and, eventually, cripples its victims.<sup>284</sup> Finally, it shuts down the body's systems, resulting in death.<sup>285</sup> In almost every case, its onset doesn't occur until patients are senior citizens.<sup>286</sup> Muhammad Ali was more than thirty years younger than the average Parkinson's patient when he was diagnosed.<sup>287</sup> This has led many to ask a reasonable question, "Did Muhammad Ali develop Parkinson's because of his boxing career?" The short answer is yes. Dr. Stanley Fahn, one of the neurologists who examined Ali at Columbia University explained that while there was no way to be sure, "Research has shown that the early-onset of PD can be related to head trauma. So, to say that Mr. Ali's disease is a result of his profession, would be a fairly reasonable conclusion to draw."<sup>288</sup> Those in the boxing field went farther than that. "If Ali had retired after Manila, when he said was going to, he'd never have contracted Parkinson's. He'd never have gone through the Holmes mess. His career would have ended much better and his life after boxing would have been much more enjoyable," Boxing expert Ben Cohen wrote.<sup>289</sup> However, Dr. Robert Goodman at the movement center argues that, "His kind of Parkinson's appears to have followed a traditional course" and it is very possible that he would have developed the disease anyway."<sup>290</sup> Ali's daughter May-May disagrees, "My

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<sup>284</sup> "NINDS Parkinson's Disease Information Page." Ninds.nih.gov. National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, 10 Feb. 2014. Web. 12 Feb. 2014.  
<[http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/parkinsons\\_disease/parkinsons\\_disease.htm](http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/parkinsons_disease/parkinsons_disease.htm)>.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid

<sup>286</sup> Ibid

<sup>287</sup> Author, Department. "Ali V Holmes: The Fight That Should Not Have Been | Columbia Neurosurgery."

<sup>288</sup> Ibid

<sup>289</sup> Cohen, Ben. "Was Muhammad Ali Really the Greatest?"

<sup>290</sup> Author, Department. "Ali V Holmes: The Fight That Should Not Have Been | Columbia Neurosurgery."

Father's Parkinson's is the result of fighting too many times. There's no doubt about it; he knows, I know it. We live with that knowledge."<sup>291</sup> Ali's inability to know when to quit had truly become a fatal flaw. He would spend the rest of his life fighting an opponent he'd never expected; his own body. Yet, just like after his first fight with Joe Frazier, just like after his first fight with Leon Spinks, just like his battle with the U.S. government, Muhammad Ali wasn't someone to be counted out.

For the first few years following his diagnosis, Muhammad Ali and his wife Lonnie refused to talk about his illness in public. In fact, in many cases, they flat out denied it "Muhammad doesn't have Parkinson's Disease," Lonnie said in a 1986 interview.<sup>292</sup> Yet, as time passed and his symptoms became more and more evident, it became harder and harder avoid the topic. Instead, Ali chose to embrace it. In 1997, he opened the Muhammad Ali Parkinson's Center at the Barrow neurological institute at St. Joseph's Medical Center in Louisville.<sup>293</sup> The center focuses on Parkinson's research in an effort to develop new treatments and search for a cure.<sup>294</sup> In 1995, Ali partnered with Michael J. Fox and his foundation for Parkinson's research for a series of public service announcements to spread awareness for the disease and raise money for the foundation.<sup>295</sup> In one ad, Ali acts as if he's knocking over the esteemed Actor

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<sup>291</sup> Gray, Barbara B. "Ali's Daughter Champions Fight Against Parkinson's."

<sup>292</sup> "Muhammad Ali Speaking about Parkinson Disease." YouTube. YouTube, 18 Dec. 2007. Web. 13 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3l6diJ2oZ4>>.

<sup>293</sup> "Muhammad Ali Parkinson Center." TheBarrow.org. The Barrow Neurological Institute, n.d. Web. 13 Feb. 2014. <[http://www.thebarrow.org/Neurological\\_Services/Muhammad\\_Ali\\_Parkinson\\_Center/index.htm](http://www.thebarrow.org/Neurological_Services/Muhammad_Ali_Parkinson_Center/index.htm)>

<sup>294</sup> Ibid

<sup>295</sup> "Parkinsons Disease PSA - Michael J Fox Muhammad Ali (1)." YouTube. YouTube, 02 Feb. 2009. Web. 13 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pOhBtTYfSE4>>.

(who also suffers from the disease), Fox falls over and Ali proclaims in his now quiet and shaky voice, "I'm still bad! I believe I'll make a comeback!"<sup>296</sup> These ads and more helped create a new image for Ali. He was more than a boxer. He was now an advocate for people who suffered around the world. In 1998, the United Nations appointed Muhammad Ali as a, "Messenger of Peace," and for the next several years the poor, skinny kid from Louisville, KY traveled the world signing autographs, visiting children's hospitals and meeting with Kings, Presidents and other dignitaries.<sup>297</sup>

Today, Muhammad Ali lives with his wife Lonnie and a nurse at their home in Mesa, AZ.<sup>298</sup> Ali requires twenty four care.<sup>299</sup> He is incapable of walking or feeding himself.<sup>300</sup> But, perhaps most cruelly of all, for a man who made his reputation with his mouth, Parkinson's has robbed Muhammad Ali of his voice.<sup>301</sup> Yet, he feels no shame and asks for no pity. In a 1991 interview with the Today Show's Bryant Gumbel Ali said of his disease:

It is only a trial from Allah. God tries you with wealth. He tries you with fame. This is simply another trial. See, I've conquered the world. I've had all the fame. They say I'm the world's most known man. I've made money; wine, women and song. And, you know, twenty five years later, it's over like that [snaps his fingers]... I thought I enjoyed it, but it's only for losers. I think about my death five times a day, when I pray. This life is

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<sup>296</sup>"Parkinsons Disease PSA - Michael J Fox Muhammad Ali (1)." YouTube.

<sup>297</sup> Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Muhammad Ali."

<sup>298</sup> Gray, Barbara B. "Ali's Daughter Champions Fight Against Parkinson's."

<sup>299</sup> Ibid

<sup>300</sup> Ibid

<sup>301</sup> Ibid

short. This life is the first step towards the eternal life. I believe in Allah, so I don't fear it. Whether I die next week, whether I die next year, I don't know when I'll die. I don't want pity. I've done more than I could have ever hoped for. This is my trial. If I prove my faith and allegiance to Allah, he will bless me. I want to do that.<sup>302</sup>

So, as Janet Evans finished her climb up the scaffolding at the Olympic Stadium in Atlanta, GA in 1996, the crowd roared as a familiar face appeared atop the stairs. There was Muhammad Ali. A man who had won Olympic gold, been the heavyweight champion of the world three time, stood up for his beliefs and defeated the greatest military industrial complex in the world, and a man who, through his personal struggle with Parkinson's disease, had become a silent symbol of strength for the world to admire. As U.S. President Bill Clinton tearfully looked on, NBC's Bob Costas described the emotional moment, "Look at him. He is still such an incredible presence; exuding nobility and stature. And, the response he evokes is part emotion, part excitement, but especially respect."<sup>303</sup> But, as Ali gripped the Olympic torch in his right hand and raised it high above his head, his left hand began to shake.<sup>304</sup> He described his feelings at that moment in an essay titled, "*I am still the greatest*" for National Public Radio:

When the moment came for me to walk out on the 140-foot high scaffolding and take the torch from Janet Evans, I realized I had the eyes of the world on me. I also realized that as I held the Olympic torch high above my head, my tremors had taken over. Just at that moment, I heard a rumble in the stadium that became a pounding roar and then turned

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<sup>302</sup> "Muhammad Ali Speaking about Parkinson Disease." YouTube.

<sup>303</sup> "Gold Medal Moments: Muhammad Ali @ Atlanta 1996 Games Opening Ceremony." YouTube.com. YouTube, 28 June 2012. Web. 13 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QEhNDUwksvU>>.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid

into a deafening applause. I was reminded of my 1960 Olympic experience in Rome, when I won the gold medal. Those 36 years between Rome and Atlanta flashed before me and I realized that I had come full circle.<sup>305</sup>

There is a difference between the word “best” and the word “greatest” that goes beyond simple semantics. To be the “best” at something means simply that no one is better than you at that one particular thing. However, greatness is something much bigger. In order to be “the greatest” one must transcend that particular thing, whether it’s a sport, a hobby, or a career. It is quite possible to argue whether Muhammad Ali is the “best” boxer of all time. However, it is impossible to argue his greatness. Ali is perhaps the most iconic man in the world. While many know him simply as a boxer, it was his choice to refuse induction into the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War and his personal struggle with Parkinson’s disease that made him, as he put it, “bigger than boxing.” And, in the end, the champ is exactly what he told us he was. Muhammad Ali is, was, and will always be, the greatest of all time.

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<sup>305</sup> Ali, Muhammad. "I Am Still the Greatest." Thisibelieve.org. National Public Radio, 6 Apr. 2009. Web. 13 Feb. 2014. <<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/62638/>>.

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