

February is Black History Month

Muhammad Ali: fighter for freedom

RYAN BRINKLEY
Staff Writer

On Feb. 25, 1964 in Miami Beach, less than 2,500 boxing fans witnessed the triumph of an athlete and the birth of a legend, Cassius Clay, better known as Muhammad Ali.

When he was a young boy growing up in Kentucky, Cassius Clay was the victim of a crime. Another child had stolen his bicycle. The 12-year-old Cassius, angered by the theft, ran down a local police officer and asked for help. The officer, who was also an amateur boxing trainer, told Cassius that he would teach him to fight so that he could better defend himself and his property.

Little did the officer know that 10 years later, Cassius Clay would be

fighting Sonny Liston for the heavy-weight championship of the world.

Although his amateur career had been successful, the 22-year-old Clay was a relative unknown going into his bout with Liston. Intent on making Liston believe that he was crazy, Clay's behavior was erratic before the fight. The rhythmic and harsh tone of Clay's voice prompted sports writers to nickname him "The Louisville Lip." Many felt Cassius' crazed look and verbal barbs were further evidence that he was all style and little substance.

But that night, Clay entered the ring in Miami and beat Sonny Liston. In a time when ESPN and the Internet didn't exist, news of the victory didn't spread instantly. But by the next morning, Cassius Clay had

not only become the world heavy-weight champion, but also the Nation of Islam's most famous member.

Throughout his training for the fight, Clay was accompanied by Malcolm X, then a high-ranking official in the Nation of Islam. The morning after beating Liston, Clay confirmed that he was a member of the religion.

On March 6, Black Muslim leader, Elijah Muhammad, announced that Cassius Clay's name was one that lacked meaning and gave him the Muslim name, Muhammad Ali, which meant "worthy of praise." Many white Americans feared the Nation of Islam and characterized it as a "separatist hate religion." In the coming years, Ali's association with the religion and his outspoken nature led many to despise him.

In 1966, Ali spoke out in opposition to the escalated conflict in Vietnam.

"I ain't got no quarrel with them Viet Cong."



Ali at Howard University, Washington DC, 1967. INTERNET PHOTOGRAPH / HOWARD BINGHAM



Ali lighting the torch at the 1996 Olympics, Atlanta, Georgia. INTERNET PHOTOGRAPH / HOWARD BINGHAM

The statement would echo through the growing anti-war movement. Many in the media would chastise Ali for speaking out against the war.

During that time, perhaps the only thing stronger than Muhammad Ali's bark was his bite. He would punish other fighters with his lightning fast jab and mesmerizing foot-speed. Ali would successfully defend the title nine times before he met his most powerful opponent.

On April 28, 1967 Ali claimed exemption from military service as a minister of a Black Muslim sect and refused induction into military service. The government refused his request for exemption and he was convicted for refusing military orders.

"I have searched my conscience and I find I cannot be true to my belief in my religion by accepting such a call."

The boxing associations suspended his license and stripped him of his title. Convicted in the criminal prosecution two months later, Ali

free speech. Support for his Supreme Court case deepened. Even some writers, who a decade before had criticized his political statements, began to support Ali.

Ali also continued his fight to regain the championship. In 1970, he was allowed to fight again in New York. And in 1971, Ali stepped into the ring with then champion, Joe Fraizer. Ali lost in what many called "The Fight of the Century." The bout was so exciting that one spectator actually died of a heart attack.

After the fight, in June of that year, the Supreme Court ruled in Ali's favor granting him the right to refuse military service.

The classic fight dubbed, "The Rumble in the Jungle" etched another chapter in Ali's legacy. Ali became the second man only to regain the heavyweight title by knocking out George Foreman in 1974.

Ali successfully defended his title 10 times in 3 1/2 years before he lost it to Leon Spinks on Feb. 15, 1978. Seven months later, he would defeat Spinks regaining the heavyweight championship for a record third time.

On June 27, 1979, Muhammad Ali announced his retirement though he came back for two fights in the early eighties and lost them both.

For many of us, the lasting image of Muhammad Ali came from the 1996 Olympics. Stricken by the effects of Parkinson's disease and unable to control its characteristic tremors, Ali stood on the world's grandest stage and lit the Olympic flame.

As we honor Black History Month, let us not forget the long line of men and women who have come before us and stood up for what they thought was humane and just.

Longing for respect in his youth, vilified by many as an adult, now coping with a devastating disease, Muhammad Ali stands as a symbol of what one can endure and accomplish when character is questioned and courage is tested.

was sentenced to the maximum five years in prison and \$10,000 fine. Court of Appeals upheld the conviction and the case went before the US Supreme Court.

In the years that followed, anti-war sentiment intensified. Every night, as families sat down to eat dinner, news reports would "keep score" by relaying casualty statistics. Rallies, songs and movies about the harsh realities of war became a part of American culture.

During his exile from boxing, Ali lectured on college campuses about

"I ain't got no quarrel with them Viet Cong."
Muhammad Ali

"I find I cannot be true to my belief in my religion by accepting such a call."
Muhammad Ali on refusing induction

Linfield is everywhere!

Completing your college education has never been simpler or more affordable!

The Linfield College Adult Degree Program is available to you on campuses throughout the region—which means you can earn your bachelor's degree or certificate close to home, in evenings and on weekends.

You've been waiting for the right opportunity to finish your education. With Linfield, the opportunity is now!

Increase your income possibilities. Realize your potential.

For a private college education at a public university cost, call Linfield today.



PERSONAL ATTENTION • CLASSROOM BASED INSTRUCTION
BACHELOR'S DEGREES & CERTIFICATES • EVENING & WEEKEND CLASSES

Contact us at (800) 452-4176 or visit our web site at www.linfield.edu/dce

Nine convenient locations throughout Oregon & SW Washington

ALBANY • ASTORIA • CENTRAL OREGON • COOS BAY • EUGENE • LONGVIEW • MCMINNVILLE • PORTLAND • SALEM

- MARKETING
- ACCOUNTING
- MANAGEMENT
- ARTS & HUMANITIES
- BUSINESS INFO SYSTEMS
- INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS
- COMPUTER INFO SYSTEMS
- HUMAN RESOURCE MNGMT
- SOCIAL & BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES