

The Making of a Champion

by Ulysses Tucker, Jr.

Will boxing be the same now that the "Greatest" has retired?

Gaining 40 pounds since he announced his retirement, Muhammad Ali has finally pulled the plug on a sport that he saved when it was on its deathbed. His leaving the ring will have the same impact as the January ice storm in Portland.

Ali was born in Louisville, Kentucky, 37 years ago, to a painter who had two sons. Originally, he was christened Cassius Marcellus Clay, Jr. The elder Clay knew that his son would be great one day because he had a big head like a King.

Throughout his early career, Ali kept the christian name which he criticized as a slave name. He breezed through Rome at the tender age of 18 in 1960 and captured a Gold Medal for his Olympic efforts. Clay also swept all of his early pro fights.

After winning the heavyweight championship on February 25, 1964 from the tough Sonny Liston in Miami Beach, Florida, the young champ announced that he had become a Muslim and should be called Muhammad Ali.

The champ's religious convictions caused him some early grief and hardships. In 1967, Ali was ordered to serve the United States Military—he refused to take the proper steps for induction in Houston, Texas. At that time he was quoted as saying, "I am 90 per cent a Muslim minister and 10 per cent a fighter."

The government sought to arrest him as an evader of draft regulations, but Ali fought the system with pride, strength, and all the funds he could gather. Ultimately, without spending a day in a penal institution Ali's beliefs were upheld by the highest court in the land.

This victory left Ali unemployed and almost broke. He left the good life for the dark days in a Chicago ghetto. The dethroned champion took care of his second wife Kahlilah, and daughter Maryum, now ten, by lecturing around the nation about his opposition to the Vietnam War.

After three-and-a-half years incognito, a rusty and overweight Ali launched his comeback by pouncing out a victory over Jerry Quarry in Atlantic on October 26, 1970.

Next came "Smokin" Joe Frazier, Ali's springboard to greatness and riches. He won two of the three fights. On October 30, 1974, Ali cold-cocked the highly groomed George Foreman in Zaire, Africa in eight rounds to join Floyd Patterson as the only other man to win the heavyweight title of the world twice.

During this period Ali welcomed an added addition to his family—Kahlilah gave birth to twin girls, Reeshamah and Jamillah, now 8, and Muhammad Ibn Ali who is 6.

In the spring of 1977, Kahlilah packed up and left. She filed for divorce, stating that Ali "violated his vows contrary to the teachings of Islam," and failed to support her and the children in accordance with his wealth. She also accused him of desertion, mental cruelty, and having a child by another woman. Ali acknowledged being the father of a baby born to Veronica Porsche in August of 1976, who has since become his wife.

On February 15, 1978, Leon Spinks, a 25-year-old ex-marine



from the St. Louis ghetto stunned the champion by taking a 15-round split decision in Las Vegas.

After the loss, Ali vowed that he would be the first man to ever win the heavyweight title three times—he kept his word by defeating Spinks in a rematch at the Superdome in New Orleans on September 16, 1979. A feat accomplished in front of 70,000 fans chanting "Ali, Ali, Ali." The victory was his sweetest.

Now Ali stands alone in the record books, "although the listing might show an asterick because the WBC recognizes Larry Holmes a champion." Holmes beat Ken Norton who was given the title taken from Leon Spinks when he agreed to fight Ali instead of a proposed fight with Norton. But the people know who the champ is.

Over the years, only three fighters have gained victories against Ali, and each time he has come back to place his identity in the proper perspective. Ken Norton, Joe Frazier, and Leon Spinks were the victims.

A true champion outside of the ring, Ali has given millions to drought-stricken countries in Africa and other poor countries. Once he read in the *New York Times* that a senior citizens home was going under for lack of finances, Ali took a limousine over and donated \$150,000 to keep it alive.

He also built a house for world class sprinter Houston McTear and his parents who were broke.

"Money don't do you no good if it's in the bank, nobody can claim money. It belongs to God. It's just lent to us to do good things," he once philosophized. Ali isn't broke. He has earned well over \$40 million. For sure, he won't end up like Joe "The Brown Bomber" Louis did.

There is no man, other than Christ, who has enjoyed higher recognition than Ali. Whether cruising through an American ghetto, or making his pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca, he is always in the limelight. Ali is the first person to receive three keys to New York City.

Ali has entered palaces all over the world, scholars seek his erudite intellectual abilities, and he has become a modern piped piper, with

swarms of admirers at his feet.

Although Ali never graduated from high school he is widely sought for speaking engagements universally. He captured the minds of Harvard and Yale students and occupied a lecturers chair at the highest learning institution in the world, Oxford University in England.

Ali has also become good friends with the Soviet Union and its president Leonid Brezhnev. Last year the champ took a visit and came back to America with more friends in that country than the U.S. government.

"Don't worry about the Russians starting a war," said Ali in the *New World Review*, "somebody's got to mess with them first."

A true diplomat, Ali has been a man for all seasons—mystical in many ways, a fierce fighter one moment, a boyish charmer the next. He has been warm, arrogant, bombastic, understanding and always exciting.

Without a doubt, he is the greatest fighter ever to walk on earth and in 17 years, Ali has confronted astronomical odds in the ring, life, and he has survived every test!

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