

Sports lost several titans in 2016

By FRED LIEF
Associated Press

Mighty sequoias fell in sports in 2016, transformational figures who reshaped the games and the culture — from Muhammad Ali to Gordie Howe, from Arnold Palmer to Pat Summitt.

And there was loss much too soon. The famous poem "To an Athlete Dying Young" tells of a runner and his town, and how "shoulder-high we bring you home." So it was with the Miami Marlins and 24-year-old pitcher Jose Fernandez, killed in a boating accident.

Along the way, other lives lit up sports across the years:

Baseball said goodbye to Ralph Branca, Monte Irvin and Joe Garagiola. Basketball lost Jim McMillian, Dwayne "Pearl" Washington, and the fierce Nate Thurmond. Gone in boxing was relentless Aaron Pryor. In football, it was Buddy Ryan, Dennis Byrd and Dennis Green.

Hockey mourned Andy Bathgate and skiing remembered big-talking Bill Johnson. Soccer is now without the great Johan Cruyff and former FIFA President Joao Havelange, who died at 100. On television, tennis and the NBA are diminished with the loss of Bud Collins and Craig Sager.

Muhammad Ali, 74

On that last ride, the hearse windshield was covered with so many flowers the driver could barely see the road let alone the throngs lining the streets. Muhammad Ali was back where it all began, in Louisville, Kentucky, where he launched a career that would shake sports like no athlete before or after him.

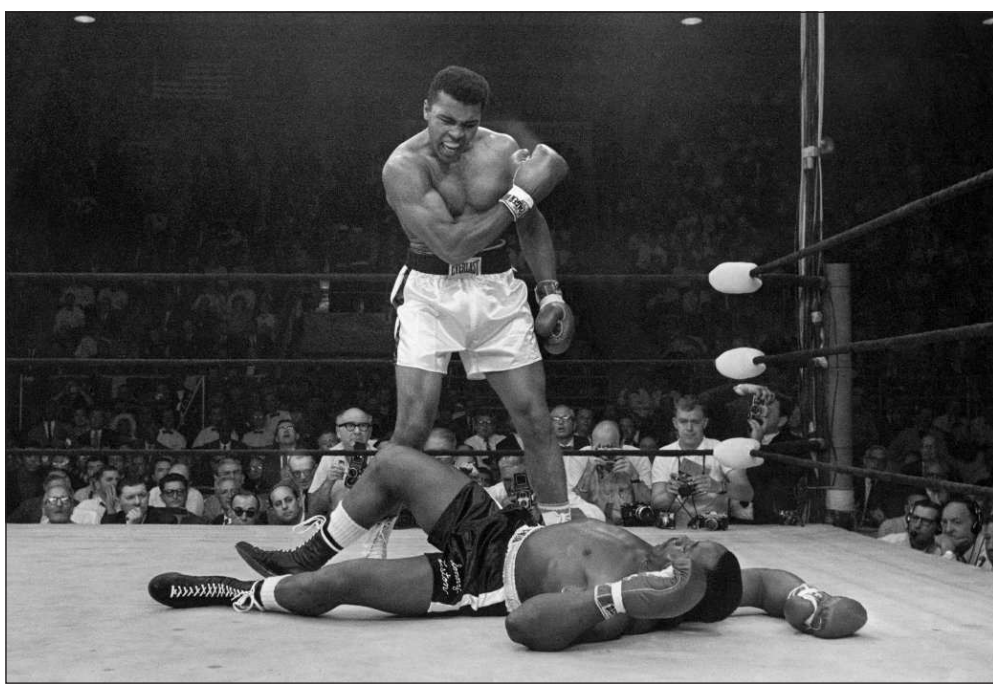
He was a three-time heavyweight champion, an audacious mix of speed, dazzle and brute force — the stark counterpoint years later to the shuffling man with a whisper slowed by Parkinson's.

His fights with Joe Frazier were an epic trilogy. He proclaimed himself The Greatest. He did it with wit and guile, boasts and taunts, in prose and rhyme, and always with a wink. He understood the marketplace and the showmanship that go with ticket sales. Ali fought everywhere and said they would know him in an Asian rice paddy.

He lost prime years, refusing military induction. He spoke up when that was not in fashion. He changed his religion and his name. He became a flash point for a country on edge.

Time softened the rancor. By the end, he was a national monument. At the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, he stood, shakily, with torch in hand at the cauldron.

"The man who has no imagination," he once said, "has no wings."



In this May 25, 1965, file photo, heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali stands over fallen challenger Sonny Liston, shouting and gesturing shortly after dropping Liston with a short hard right to the jaw, in Lewiston, Maine.



This April 5, 2007, file photo, shows Arnold Palmer acknowledging the crowd after hitting the ceremonial first tee shot at the 2007 Masters in Augusta, Ga.

Gordie Howe, 88

He was as elemental to the game as ice.

Gordie Howe came out of the hard Saskatchewan prairie and presided over his sport for five decades. He was Mr. Hockey.

Even Wayne Gretzky acknowledged the preeminence of No. 9 of the Detroit Red Wings, and it was no coincidence Gretzky wore No. 99.

Howe joined the NHL just after World War II, and before he was done finished with 801 goals and 1,850 points. He led the Red Wings to four Stanley Cups and was MVP six times.

He was a player with vision, presence and toughness. Sticks and checks and fists were the flip side to his majesty on the ice.

Family was paramount, and when he left the NHL at 45 to join the renegade WHA, nothing gave him more pleasure than to play beside sons Mark and Marty. This Methuselah with a slap shot came back to the NHL at 52. "He was," former Flyers captain Bobby Clarke said, "the ultimate professional hockey player."

Arnold Palmer, 87

His was a life well played.

When golfers today look around at the big prize money, the television coverage, the sponsorships and the place

golf holds in the sports conversation, they can take a 3-iron from their bag, hold it aloft and thank Arnold Palmer.

"He was The King of our sport and always will be," Jack Nicklaus said.

Palmer never much cared for the regal honorific. His roots were in western Pennsylvania, and with sinewy wrists, a whip of a swing, a swaggering glint in his eye he carried an entire sport into a new age. Palmer and TV came along at the same time. "If it wasn't for Arnold, golf wouldn't be as popular as it is today," Tiger Woods said.

Palmer won seven majors and 62 PGA tournaments, and his rivalry with Nicklaus gave golf its juice. Palmer had a daring game, gambler's instinct and a connection to the gallery that liberated golf from its country-club enclaves.

Pat Summitt, 64

When she was 38 and deep into a pregnancy Pat Summitt insisted on making a recruiting trip to Pennsylvania. The timing was off for the Tennessee basketball coach.

Her water broke while she was making her recruiting pitch. A frantic ride to the airport followed, although Summitt was the calmest one around. The plane was prepared to stop in Virginia. But Summitt,

who bleeds Volunteer orange, wouldn't hear of it. Her child would be born in Tennessee. And so he was.

Her stare could crack steel. Her authority was unchallenged. She coached 38 years at Tennessee and became the first NCAA coach to reach 1,000 wins. Her showdowns with UConn counterpart Geno Auriemma became the sport's signature rivalry.

She moved women's basketball into big-time arenas. Her coaching — and her life — was cut short by early onset dementia. But when the conversation turns to the game's greatest coaches — man or woman — Pat Summitt's name is part of it.

Jose Fernandez, 24

Maybe it's best to remember the succession of batters flailing at his pitches; his Cuban grandmother in the stands; the exuberance of him pounding the dugout railing, the pure and simple joy of baseball.

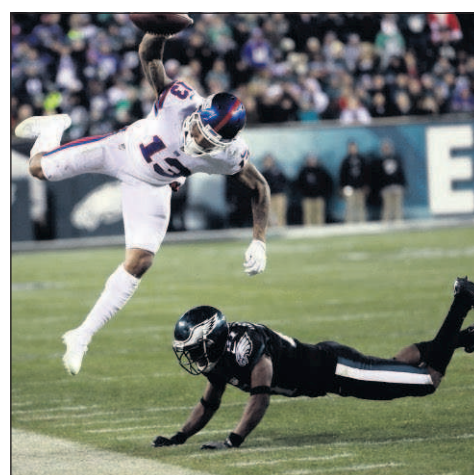
But other images are just as indelible: his No. 16 carved into the pitching mound dirt in his honor; the trumpet's haunting notes of "Take Me Out to the Ball Game."

Jose Fernandez fled Cuba by boat at age 15, making a successful escape on his fourth attempt. But as the sea proved a starting point to stardom, so it was the finish. On a September night after a game, Fernandez and two friends died when their boat crashed at high speed into rocks near Miami Beach. The medical examiner would rule alcohol and cocaine were in his system.

Fernandez was twice an All-Star for the Miami Marlins and had a 38-17 record in four seasons. He was NL Rookie of the Year in 2013, with a future possibly pointed to Cooperstown.

"Sadly," Marlins owner Jeffrey Loria said, "the brightest lights are often the ones that extinguish the fastest."

NFL



New York Giants' Odell Beckham (13) is sent flying after a hit by Philadelphia Eagles' Leodis McKelvin (21) Thursday, in Philadelphia.

AP Photo/Michael Perez

Giants a good lesson for playoff hopefuls

By TERESA M. WALKER
AP Pro Football Writer

The New York Giants have given teams chasing playoff berths a fresh reminder to take nobody for granted, especially division rivals.

As a result, the Dallas Cowboys' only challenge now as the NFC East champs and the NFC's top seed is handling the final two regular-season games before a first-round bye.

The Giants only had to beat Philadelphia on Thursday night to clinch at least a wild-card berth, yet Eli Manning was intercepted three times in a 24-19 loss. That started a big celebration by the Cowboys' faithful, with Dallas now assured of staying in Texas throughout the postseason.

Five division titles remain up for grabs with two weeks left in the season.

Dallas can help out the Giants, the only team to beat the Cowboys all season, by defeating Detroit on Monday night, which would clinch a wild-card berth for New York. The Giants also clinch a spot if Green Bay, Tampa Bay or Atlanta loses.

New England, AFC East title in hand, needs a little help this week to claim home-field advantage throughout the AFC playoffs. The Patriots first must beat the Jets, then wait to see if the Colts can win in Oakland. The Raiders can win the AFC West title and grab their own first-round bye by beating the Colts with Denver beating Kansas City on Sunday night.

Seattle is trying to earn the NFC's other first-round bye. The NFC West champs must beat Arizona and also need Atlanta to lose or tie and then wait to see if Detroit can win in Dallas on Monday night.

Three division titles have been clinched, with eight playoff berths still up for grabs, and the Pittsburgh Steelers can wrap up the AFC North title by beating

Baltimore on Christmas.

The Houston Texans will know before kicking off Saturday night if a victory over Cincinnati will give them their second straight AFC South championship. They need Tennessee to lose to Jacksonville earlier Saturday to avoid playing the Titans on Jan. 1 for the division title.

Atlanta heads to Carolina trying to clinch both a playoff berth and the NFC South title, needing both a win and a New Orleans victory over Tampa Bay to win the division. If they don't get that, the Falcons could still clinch at least a wild card this weekend.

Green Bay needs a win over Minnesota and help to clinch a playoff berth Saturday. But the Packers only need to win their final two games to take the NFC North title.

The Lions are trying to hang on in that division, and they can clinch the crown Monday night if Green Bay loses to Minnesota. The Lions could have a playoff berth in hand if Washington and Tampa Bay already have lost and Atlanta wins at Carolina. If not, the Saints beating Tampa Bay can allow Detroit to clinch at least a wild-card spot with a win or a tie in Dallas.

Kansas City already squandered one chance to clinch a playoff berth. Now the Chiefs can assure themselves of at least an AFC wild card by beating Denver on Christmas night, putting the Broncos on the verge of elimination. The Chiefs also can clinch a spot if Baltimore loses earlier Sunday.

The Miami Dolphins need a win, with Denver losing or tying. The Dolphins also can leave Buffalo with a tie and clinch if Baltimore, Denver and Houston lose, or with losses by Baltimore, Denver and Tennessee.

James Winston and the Buccaneers also can clinch a playoff berth by beating New Orleans, combined with losses by Green Bay, Detroit and Washington.

TOP PLAYS: Jenkins' buzzer-beater for national title comes in second

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wrapped all over him — catches the game-winning pass from Hunter Wells, giving Youngstown State a win over Eastern Washington in the FCS national semifinals. Rader was deemed to be in control of the ball, even while pinning it against the body of Eastern Washington linebacker Ketter Kupp.

8. Simone's splash.

Simone Manuel of the U.S. was trailing by 0.47 seconds halfway through the women's 100-meter freestyle gold medal race at the Rio de Janeiro Olympics, and a half-second is quite a bit to make up in such a race against the world's best. But she made it look easy with a frantic final 50 meters, and made history — she became the first African-American woman to win an individual swimming Olympic gold, tying Canada's Penny Oleksiak for the win.

7. Super strip, sack, score.

Last season, but still this year — and still memorable. Denver's Von Miller had two critical strip-sacks of Carolina's Cam Newton in Super Bowl 50, the second one just about sealing the game. But the first one is the one that gave the Broncos a 10-0 lead midway through the first quarter and setting the tone. Malik Jackson pounced on this ball in the end zone, and Miller wound up winning Super Bowl MVP.



In this April 4, 2016 file photo, Villanova players celebrates after Kris Jenkins, center, scores a game winning three point basket in the closing seconds of NCAA Final Four tournament college basketball championship game in Houston.

6. Nerves of steel.

On the LPGA Tour, teens aren't afraid of the moment. Lydia Ko, 19, and Brooke Henderson, 18, went to a playoff to decide the KPMG Women's PGA Championship. And on the first extra hole, Henderson stood with a 7-iron in her hands, 158 yards from the hole. She knocked the approach within 3 feet, made the birdie putt and captured her first major title. "Like winning the Stanley Cup,"

the budding Canadian star said.

5. A skate-off winner.

They made it look so easy. Pittsburgh's Sidney Crosby won the faceoff in overtime of Game 2 of the Stanley Cup final against San Jose, played it back to Kris Letang, who found Conor Sheary — who fired the puck between the legs of oncoming defender Justin Braun and scored to give the Penguins a 2-1 win in

the game and 2-0 lead in the series. The Penguins would take the Stanley Cup in six games.

4. For you, Jose.

Dee Gordon of the Miami Marlins hit one home run in 2016. It was of the you-cannot-make-this-up variety — and it will forever live in Marlins lore. It was the first at-bat for the Marlins after the death of ace pitcher Jose Fernandez in a boating accident. Gordon, a lefty hitter, started on the right side of the plate as part of his Fernandez tribute. After moving back to the left side, he hit a ball farther than he ever has, while wearing a "Fernandez 16" jersey. Even some of the New York Mets were in tears, and the Mets tweeted out "BiggerThanBaseball."

3. A truly "golden" goal.

Imagine the pressure. Brazil, a soccer-crazed nation, is hosting the men's gold-medal soccer match at the Olympics. The stadium is packed, and all the brilliant young star Neymar needs to do to clinch the perfect medal is make the final kick of a penalty-shot tiebreaking shootout. He found a spot to his right, started approaching the ball, stuttered a bit and then finally delivered the kick. Germany goalie Timo Horn guessed wrong, the ball went into the net and Brazil roared in delight. Most of the crowd stayed in the stadium for an hour afterward, many weeping in joy.

2. For the title.

Marcus Paige might have just hit one of the biggest shots in NCAA men's basketball championship game history for North Carolina, a double-clutched, acrobatic-leg-kicking 3-pointer with 4.7 seconds left to pull the Tar Heels into a tie with Villanova. And then Kris Jenkins did him one better. Jenkins took a pass from Ryan Arcidiacono, leaped and let fly from well beyond the arc. "Bang," Wildcats coach Jay Wright said softly to himself as the ball was in flight — and bang was right. Jenkins' shot went in as time expired, and Villanova had just beaten the Tar Heels 77-74 for the national title.

1. The Block.

All due respect to Kyrie Irving's 3-pointer, The Play of The Finals was offered by King James. LeBron James' chasedown block of Andre Iguodala with 1:51 remaining in Game 7 of the NBA Finals — a shot that would have given Golden State the lead — wasn't just the defining moment of 2016, but perhaps the defining moment of James' Hall of Fame career as well. He didn't do it alone, as J.R. Smith helped impede Iguodala's path and give James the extra split-second that he needed to get to the rim. But the enormity of the moment made the block even bigger: Golden State had a record-setting 73-win regular season, the series was tied 3-3, the total points in that series were tied at that moment 699-699. After that block, the Warriors wouldn't score again. And James would soon become a three-time NBA champion.