Muhammad Ali

Also known as: Cassius Marcellus Clay, Cassius Marcellus Clay, Jr., Cassius Clay (1942-)

Professional boxer

Personal Information

Born Cassius Marcellus Clay, Jr.; name changed to Muhammad Ali, 1963; born January, 17, 1942, in Louisville, KY; son of Cassius (a piano player) and Odessa Clay (both deceased); first wife, Belinda; second wife, Aaisha; third wife, Veronica Porche; fourth (and current) wife, Yolanda Williams, married in 1986; children: nine (one with Yolanda). **Religion:** Muslim. **Addresses:** Home--P.O. Box 187, Berrien Springs, MI 59103.

Career

Former world heavyweight boxing champion. Began professional career, 1960; initially became heavyweight champ, 1964; stripped of title and boxing license over refusal to participate in the Vietnam War, 1966; retired from boxing, 1981. Appeared in film The Greatest, 1976, and television film Freedom Road.

Awards

Olympic Gold Medal in boxing, 1960; six Kentucky Golden Gloves titles; National Golden Gloves titles, 1959-60; World Heavyweight Championship, 1964-67, 1974-78, 1978-79; U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame, inductee, 1983; named the greatest heavyweight champion of all time, Ring Magazine, 1987; International Boxing Hall of Fame, inductee, 1990; Jim Thorpe Pro Sports Award, Lifetime Achievement, 1992; Muhammad Ali Museum, Louisville Galleria, opened 1995; Essence Award, 1997.

Writings

- (With Richard Durham) The Greatest: My Own Story, Random House, 1975.

Biographical Information

Three-time world heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali, known for his lyrical charm and boasts as much as for his powerful fists, has moved far beyond the boxing ring in both influence and purpose. Ali won an Olympic gold medal and later tossed it into a river because he was disgusted by racism in America. As a young man he was recruited by Malcolm X to join the Nation of Islam. He refused to serve in Vietnam--a professional fighter willing to serve time in jail for his pacifist ideals. He has contributed to countless, diverse charities and causes. And his later years have found him interested in world politics as he has battled to keep Parkinson's disease at bay.

Muhammad Ali was born Cassius Marcellus Clay, Jr., on January 17, 1942, and was raised in a clapboard house at 3302 Grand Avenue in middle-class Louisville, Kentucky. He began boxing at the age of 12. A white Louisville patrolman named Joe

Martin, who had an early television show called "Tomorrow's Champions," started Ali working out in Louisville's Columbia Gym, but it was a black trainer named Fred Stoner who taught Ali the science of boxing. Stoner taught him to move with the grace of a dancer, and impressed upon him the subtle skills necessary to move beyond good and into the realm of great.

After winning an Olympic gold medal at 18, Ali signed the most lucrative contract--a 50-50 split--negotiated by a beginning professional in the history ofboxing, with a 12-member group of millionaires called the Louisville Sponsoring Group. Later, he worked his way into contention for the coveted heavyweight title shot by boasting and creating media interest at a time when, by his own admission, he was only ranked number nine on the list of contenders. Even from the beginning, it was clear that Ali was his own man--quick, strong-willed, original, and witty. In 1961 he told Sports Illustrated's Gilbert Rogin, "Boxing is dying because everybody's so quiet.... What boxing needs is more ... Clays." Ali knew that his rhymes and press-grabbing claims would infuse more interest and more money into the sport of boxing, and he was his own best public relations man. In February of 1964 he told readers of Sports Illustrated, "If I were like a lot of ... heavyweight boxers ... you wouldn't be reading this story right now. If you wonder what the difference between them and me is, I'll break the news: you never heard of them. I'm not saying they're not good boxers. Most of them ... can fight almost as good as I can. I'm just saying you never heard of them. And the reason for that is because they cannot throw the jive. Cassius Clay is a boxer who can throw the jive better than anybody."

The following month Ali--then still Cassius Clay--fought Sonny Liston in a match of classic contenders for the heavyweight championship of the world. The Miami fight almost single-handedly restored intelligence and balance to boxing. Cassius Clay had been chanting the war cry "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee" for weeks; he beat Liston in a display of beautiful, controlled boxing. Liston could hit with deadly power, but Ali utilized his skills and courage with forethought and aplomb. He won the fight to become heavyweight champion of the world. At the tender age of 22 Ali knew that he was something above and beyond a great boxer: He had marketing sense, political finesse, and a feeling of noble purpose.

Throughout his career and life, Ali has always professed to want to help other black Americans--and he has, time and time again. When he returned from Italy, having just won an Olympic gold medal, he was so proud of his trophy that he wore it day and night and showed it to everyone, whether they wanted to see it or not. In the Philadelphia Inquirer Ali's first wife remembered him saying "I was young, black Cassius Marcellus Clay, who had won a gold medal for his country. I went to downtown Louisville to a five-and-dime store that had a soda fountain. I sat down at the counter to order a burger and soda pop. The waitress looked at me.... 'Sorry, we don't serve coloreds,' she said. I was furious. I went all the way to Italy to represent my country, won a gold medal, and now I come back to America and can't even get served at a five-and-dime store. I went to a bridge, tore the medal off my neck and threw it into the river. That gold medal didn't mean a thing to me if my black brothers and sisters were treated wrong in a country I was supposed to represent."

While in Miami, at the age of 21, Ali was inspired by human rights activist Malcolm X to become a member of the Muslim faith. The following year Malcolm X said of Ali, as was quoted by Houston Horn in Sports Illustrated, "[He] will mean more to his people than any athlete before him. He is more than [first black major-league

baseball player] Jackie Robinson was, because Robinson is the white man's hero. But Cassius is the black man's hero. Do you know why? Because the white press wanted him to lose [his heavyweight championship bout] ... because he is a Muslim. You notice nobody cares about the religion of other athletes. But their prejudice against Clay blinded them to his ability." Twelve years later, on Face The Nation, Ali said "We don't have Black Muslims, that's a press word. We have white brothers, we have brown, red, and yellow, all colors can be Muslims.... I'm looking for peace one day with all people." Cassius Clay, Jr., was given the name Muhammad Ali by Muslim patriarch Elijah Muhammad; it was not just a name, but a title meaning "beloved of Allah," deity of the Muslim faith.

Ali retained his world heavyweight champion title in June of 1965 by again knocking out Sonny Liston, this time with a stunning right-hand punch to the side of the head. The knock-out blow was thrown with the astounding speed that separated Ali from other heavyweights; it had sufficient force to lift Liston's left foot-- upon which most of his weight was resting--clear off the canvas.

As a Muslim and thus, a conscientious objector, Muhammad Ali refused to even consider going to Vietnam in 1966; a tremendous public outcry erupted against him. According to Jack Olsen in Sports Illustrated, "The governor of Illinois found Clay 'disgusting,' and the governor of Maine said Clay 'should be held in utter contempt by every patriotic American.' An American Legion post in Miami asked people to 'join in condemnation of this unpatriotic, loudmouthed, bombastic individual.' The Chicago Tribune waged a choleric campaign against holding the next Clay fight in Chicago.... The noise became a din, the drumbeats of a holy war. TV and radio commentators, little old ladies ... bookmakers, and parish priests, armchair strategists at the Pentagon and politicians all over the place joined in a crescendo of get-Cassius clamor."

Although Ali had not been charged or arrested for violating the Selective Service Act--much less convicted--the New York State Athletic Commission and World Boxing Association suspended his boxing license and stripped him of his heavyweight title in May of 1967, minutes after he officially announced that he would not submit to induction. Ali said to Sports Illustrated contributor Edwin Shrake, "I'm giving up my title, my wealth, maybe my future. Many great men have been tested for their religious beliefs. If I pass this test, I'll come out stronger than ever." Eventually Ali was sentenced to five years in prison, released on appeal, and his conviction overturned three years later.

In November of 1970 Ali fought Jerry Quarry in Atlanta. His victory was a symbol of release and freedom to the 5,000 people watching the fight; Ali had personally survived his vilification by much of the American public, but more, he had reclaimed his professional reputation and prominence. Four months later Ali had the world as his audience when he went up against Joe Frazier in New York. There he fell from invincibility; suddenly Frazier reigned as heavyweight champ. "Man, I hit him with punches that'd bring down the walls of a city," Frazier said to Mark Kram in Sports Illustrated. Ali responded, "It was like death. Closest thing to dyin' that I know of." Ali regained his title as world heavyweight champion in 1974 after defeating George Foreman in a bout staged in Zaire. Ali fought Frazier twice more, once in 1974 and again in 1975. Ali won both matches and secured his title. Taking time to reflect on the tumult of his fifteen-year boxing career, Ali co-wrote his autobiography--characteristically titled The Greatest--My Own Story--in 1975.

In 1982 Dr. Dennis Cope, director of the Medical Ambulatory Care Center at the University of California, Los Angeles, began treating Ali for Parkinson's syndrome; Cope and colleague Dr. Stanley Fahn later theorized in the Chicago Tribune that Ali was suffering, more precisely, from Pugilistic Parkinsonism, brought on by repetitive trauma to the head--and that only an autopsy could confirm their suspicions. After losing a 1980 title bout to Larry Holmes, Ali had exhibited sluggishness and was misdiagnosed as having a thyroid condition; he was given a thyroid hormone. When Dr. Cope made the connection between Ali's decreasing motor skills and Parkinson's disease, he prescribed Sinemet (L-dopa). Ali was shortly restored to his previous level of energy and awareness; as long as he took his medication regularly, he was able to keep the disease in check. In 1988 Ali told New York Times Magazine contributor Peter Tauber: "I've got Parkinson's syndrome. I'm in no pain.... If I was in perfect health--if I had won my last two fights--if I had no problem, people would be afraid of me. Now they feel sorry for me. They thought I was Superman. Now they can say 'He's human, like us. He has problems.'"

In 1984 another of Ali's medical confidantes, Dr. Martin D. Ecker, ventured in the Boston Globe that Ali should have quit boxing long before he finally did--for the second and final time--in 1981 after losing to Trevor Berbick. His bout with Berbick was his 61st and final fight. By then Ali had been showing signs of neurological damage for over a year. Ali's former doctor, Dr. Ferdie Pacheco, told the fighter to quit in 1977 when he first saw signs of Ali's reflexes slowing down. Seven years later, Pacheco, a consultant and boxing commentator for NBC-TV, explained to Betsy Lehman in the Boston Globe why he feels Ali didn't quit boxing in 1977: "The most virulent infection in the human race is the standing ovation. Once you've seen that, you can't get off the stage. Once you feel that recognition ... the roar of 50,000 people, you just don't want to give it up." When Ali initially surrendered his title in 1979, he was paid $250,000 to quit, but he eventually returned to his sport, perhaps as Pacheco suggested, because the recognition had become habit-forming.

Toward the end of Ali's boxing career, and afterward, his ambitions took a decided turn toward statesmanship. In 1980 he cast his lot with the Democratic Party, supporting then-Presidential candidate Jimmy Carter. In August of that year, while in intense training for the Holmes fight, he found time to work the floor of the Democratic National Convention in New York City. He also functioned as something of a diplomat in February of 1985 when he attempted to secure the release of four kidnapped Americans in Lebanon; unfortunately, he and his three advisers were not successful.

During his career in the ring Ali made more than $50 million, two thirds of wwent to managerial expenses and taxes. He said to New York Times Magazine contributor Tauber in 1988, "I never talk about boxing. It just served its purpose. I was only about 11 or 12 years old when I said 'I'm gonna get famous so I can help my people.'" Indicating his continuing desire to help people, in 1990 Ali visited Our Children's Foundation, Inc., on Manhattan's 125th Street. According to Bill Gallo in the New York Daily News, he addressed the children there, saying, "The sun has a purpose. The moon has a purpose. The snow has a purpose. Cows have a purpose. You were born for a purpose. You have to find your purpose. Go to school. Learn to read and write.... What is your purpose, your occupation? Find your purpose.... What do you have to find?" "Purpose!," they shouted gleefully in unison. True to form, one of Ali's favored inscriptions when signing autographs is "Love is the net where hearts are caught like fish."

Although Parkinson's syndrome has slowed Ali down, he still remain active--raising money for the Muhammad Ali Foundation and frequently appearing at sports tributes and fund-raisers. Muhammad's wife Lonnie believes "Muhammad knows he has this illness for a reason. It's not by chance. Parkinson's disease has made him a more spiritual person. Muhammad believes God gave it to him to bring him to another level, to create another destiny." she stated in People.

During the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, 3.5 billion people watched on television as three-time heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali slowly ascended the stadium steps with trembling hands to ignite the Olympic Flame. Everyone was deeply touched, however, No one was more moved than Ali himself. "He kept turning it [the torch] in his hands and looking at it. He knows now that people won't slight his message because of his impairment." said his wife Lonnie in People.

Muhammad has been blessed to meet with important dignitaries, including with President Clinton, Queen Elizabeth II, Nelson Mandela, and Pope John Paul II. His travels are his main source of income--charging as much as $200,000 for appearances. He usually travels 275 days out of the year. Although he enjoys his missionary work and public appearances, Ali's greatest pleasure is when he is at home in Berrien Springs, Michigan with his family--wife Yolanda and his adopted son Asaad Amin.

In Berrien Springs, he lives a modest life in a house at the end of the road on an old farm. He has a pool and a pond and a security gate with an intercom. According to Kim Forburger, Ali's assistant, "He's the only man I know where the kids come to the gate and say 'Can Muhammad come out and play?'

When asked if he has any regrets, Ali responds, "My children, I never got to raise them because I was always boxing and because of divorce," he said in People. When asked whether he is sorry he ever got into the ring, he responded, "If I wasn't a boxer, I wouldn't be famous. If I wasn't famous, I wouldn't be able to do what I'm doing now."

Source: *Contemporary Black Biography*, Volume 16. Gale Research, 1997.
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