

## SPORTING LEGENDS: MUHAMMED ALI

### SPORT: BOXING

### COMPETITIVE ERA: 1960 - 1981

Muhammad Ali-Haj (born January 17, 1942 as Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr.) is an American boxer. He is considered to be one of the world's greatest heavyweight boxers, as well as one of the world's most famous individuals, renowned the world over for his boxing and political activism.

In 1999, he was crowned Sportsman of the Century by Sports Illustrated and is considered by many to be one of the greatest athletes of the 20th century.

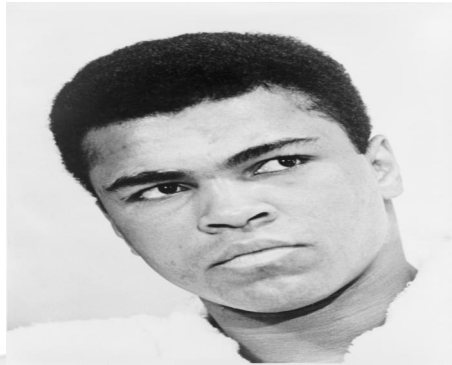


Ali had a highly unorthodox style for a heavyweight boxer. He carried his hands at his sides rather than the orthodox boxing style of carrying the hands high to defend the face. Instead, he relied on his extraordinary reflexes and reach (83 inches) to keep him away from his opponents' blows. Ali punched to the head much more than most boxers, a high-risk strategy since, over the duration of a long fight, punches to the body can be much more effective in tiring an opponent out.

At the 1960 Summer Olympics in Rome, he won a gold medal as a light heavyweight boxer. Ali would later dispose of the medal in response to some racial slurs. He then turned professional under the tutelage of boxing legend Angelo Dundee and quickly became famous for his unorthodox style, his spectacular results, and his tireless self-promotion.

He made a name for himself as the "Louisville Lip" by composing poems predicting in which round he would knock out his opponent. He boisterously sang his own praises, with sayings like "I am the greatest" and "I'm young, I'm pretty, I'm fast, and no one can beat me."

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Cassius Clay became an icon for young Black Americans during the 80s

From 1960 to 1963, the young fighter amassed a record of 19-0 with 15 knockouts. He defeated such boxers as Tony Esperti, Jim Robinson, Donnie Fleeman, Duke Sabedong, Alonzo Johnson, George Logan, Willi Besmanoff, and Lamar Clark (who had won his previous 40 bouts by knockout).

Among Clay's more impressive victories were against Sonny Banks (who knocked him down earlier in the bout), Alejandro Lavorante, and Archie Moore (a boxing legend who had won over 200 previous fights). Cassius became the number one contender for Sonny Liston's title. Liston was greatly feared, and some have said that he was the Mike Tyson of his era.

Almost no one gave the young boxer a chance of beating Liston. The date was fixed for February 25, 1964; during the weigh-in, the boisterous Ali declared that he would "float like a butterfly, sting like a bee."

Clay, however, had a plan. Misreading Clay's exuberance as nervousness, Liston was over-confident and unprepared for any result but a quick stoppage. In the opening rounds, Clay's speed, greater even than his idols, Sugar Ray Robinson and Archie Moore, kept him away from Liston's powerful head and body shots, as he used his height and reach advantage to effectively counterpunch with the jab.

As early as the third round, Liston began to visibly tire, and Clay took full advantage, landing several heavy punches. Clay was able to keep out of range, and by the fifth and into the sixth, he was looking for a finish. That came before the seventh, when Liston retired on his stool, later claiming his shoulder had become dislocated. Clay leapt out of his corner, proclaiming himself "King of the World" and demanding the writers eat their words.

He would reconfirm his abilities when he knocked out Liston in the first round of their rematch in Lewiston, Maine on May 25, 1965,

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Ali's bout with Foreman in 1974 is considered by many to be his greatest triumph.

That November, Clay met and defeated former champion Floyd Patterson. The referee stopped the fight in Round 12 after Patterson had taken a horrible beating.

In between the two matches, he also became famous for other reasons: he joined the Nation of Islam and changed his name to Muhammad Ali, although only a few journalists (most notably Howard Cosell) accepted it.

1966 and early 1967 were a busy time for the champion. In a period of a year he defended his title seven times. No other champion has had that many defenses in only a year. In March 1966, he won a unanimous decision over tough Canadian champion George Chuvalo (who was never knocked down in his career).

Ali then traveled to England to face "British Bulldog" Brian London and Henry Cooper (who had knocked him down in their initial 1963 match). Ali won both fights by knockout. He traveled to Germany next to face southpaw Karl Mildenberger (who was the first German to fight for the title since Max Schmeling). In one of his tougher fights, Ali finally won by knockout in Round 12.

In November 1966, Ali returned to the United States to face Cleveland "Big Cat" Williams in the Houston Astrodome. Williams had one of the highest knockout percentages in history and has often been ranked as one of the finest fighters who never won a title. Many felt he would give the champion a tough battle, however Ali easily knocked him out in the third round.

In February of 1967, Ali faced Ernie Terrell in the Astrodome at Madison Square Garden. Terrell had refused to acknowledge Ali's name and the champ vowed to punish him for this perceived insolence. Even though the fight went to a decision, Ali delivered a horrible beating and won every round.

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Ali's 1971 title defeat to Joe Frazier was an epic battle that could've gone either way.

In March of the same year and in the same location, he faced Zora Folley. Ali's fight with the 35 year-old Folley is regarded by many as his finest performance in the ring. He showed what a breathtaking fighter he was by throwing every punch sharply and on target. He knocked out the challenger in Round 7.

Ali's actions in refusing military service and aligning himself with the Nation of Islam made him a lightning rod of controversy, turning the outspoken but popular former champion into one of that era's most recognizable and controversial figures.

In 1970, granted a license to box once more following his Supreme Court victory wherein he was granted his right to refuse military service for religious reasons, he began a comeback. But he suffered a setback when he lost his 1971 title fight, a bruising 15-round encounter with Joe Frazier at Madison Square Garden.

This fight, known simply as "The Fight," was perhaps one of the most famous and eagerly anticipated bouts of all time, since it featured two skilled, undefeated fighters, both of whom had reasonable claims to the heavyweight crown. The fight lived up to the hype, and Frazier punctuated his victory by flooring Ali with a hard left hook in the final round. Ali split two bouts with Ken Norton before beating Frazier on points in their 1974 rematch to earn another title shot.

The incumbent, George Foreman, was a large, hard-hitting, undefeated young fighter who had previously demolished Frazier, KO'ing him in the second round of their championship fight. Foreman was the heavy favorite. The fight was held in Zaire and promoted by Don King as "The Rumble in the Jungle."

In the October 30, 1974 bout that would cement his reputation as "The Greatest", Ali boxed his best tactical fight. Leading with his "wrong" hand and playing "rope-a-dope" by leaning far back on the ropes, Ali absorbed everything Foreman could throw at him, whilst only occasionally throwing counter-punches.

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Ali's deteriorating physical condition has never affected his true fighting spirit.

By the end of the sixth round, Foreman had punched himself out, and Ali was able to attack a little more. Foreman kept advancing, but his blows were much less effective, and near the end of the eighth, Ali's right hand finally sent the exhausted Foreman to the floor. As a result of this fight, he was awarded the 1974 Hickok Belt as top professional athlete of the year and *Sports Illustrated* magazine's "Sportsman of the Year" award.

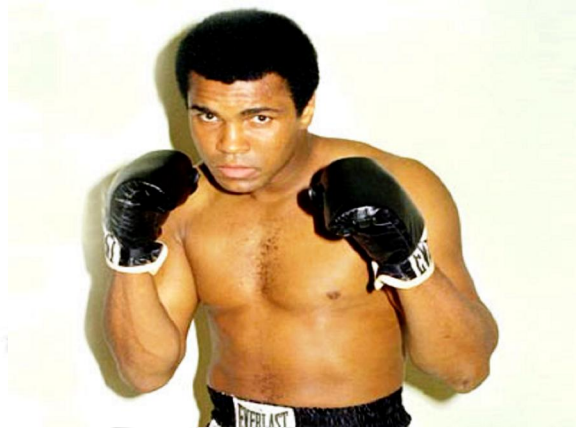
In 1975, Ali defeated Joe Frazier once more in the Thrilla In Manila in the Philippines. This fight surpassed their earlier bouts and became one of the most well-known heavyweight fights ever. After 14 grueling rounds, Frazier's trainer Eddie Futch refused to allow Frazier to continue, and Ali left the winner by TKO. Along with the "Rumble", his fights with Frazier are widely considered among the greatest in boxing history.

Ring Magazine called this bout 1975's Fight of the Year, the fifth year an Ali fight had earned that distinction. Many felt Ali should have retired after this fight, however he continued to box. 1976 saw him knock out two largely unknown opponents, Belgian stonecutter Jean-Pierre Coopman and English boxer Richard Dunn. On April 30, 1976 Ali faced Jimmy Young in Landover, Maryland and many regard this as his worst fight.

Ali was heavy and out of shape, refusing to take the young challenger seriously. Ali was awarded a unanimous decision, but it was widely booed by the crowd. Many who scored the fight at ringside thought Young deserved the decision. Even Ali's loyal trainer Angelo Dundee said this was his worst performance in the ring. In September, Ali faced Ken Norton in their third fight held at Yankee Stadium. Once again, the champion won a widely debated decision.

He would retain his title until a 1978 loss to 1976 Olympic champion Leon Spinks, who was fighting in only his eighth professional fight. He defeated Spinks in a rematch, becoming the heavyweight champion for the record third time.

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Many critics believe that Ali's ego and fighting pride allowed him to fight on for too long.

Then on June 27, 1979, he announced his retirement and vacated the title. That retirement was short-lived, however, and on October 2, 1980, he challenged Larry Holmes for the WBC's version of the world Heavyweight title. Looking to set another record, as the first boxer to win the Heavyweight title four times, he lost by technical knockout in round eleven, when Dundee would not let him come out for the round.

It was revealed after the fight that Ali had an examination at the Mayo Clinic and the results were shocking. He admitted to tingling in his hands and slurring of his speech. The exam revealed he actually had a hole in the membrane of his brain. However, Don King withheld this report and allowed the fight to go on and his best friend Johnny.

Despite the apparent finality of his loss to Holmes and his increasingly suspect medical condition, Ali would fight one more time. On December 11, 1981, he fought rising contender and future world champion Trevor Berbick, in what was billed as "The Drama in the Bahamas." Although Ali performed marginally better against Berbick than he had against Holmes fourteen months earlier, he still lost a 10-round unanimous decision to Berbick, who at 27 was twelve years younger.

Following this loss, Ali retired permanently in 1981 with a career record of 56 wins, 37 by knockout, against 5 losses. Ali was diagnosed with pugilistic Parkinson's syndrome in 1982, following which his motor functions began a slow decline.

Despite this, he remains a hero to millions around the world. In 1985, he was called on to negotiate for the release of kidnapped Americans in Lebanon. In 1996, he had the honor of lighting the Olympic flame in Atlanta, Georgia. At the same Olympics, Ali was also presented with a replacement gold medal. He had supposedly thrown the previous one, won in 1960, into the Ohio River after witnessing a white man being refused entry to a black church, confirming his own suspicions that black people were racist too.

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### Scott Burton's Final Thought

It's quite difficult to find things to say about this guy, as his life has been documented so vividly over the past 50 years!

In my opinion, Muhammed Ali can be considered as the greatest Heavyweight Champion of all-time, bar none.

His ring generalship, speed, agility and grace helped to make him virtually untouchable against his generation.

His legendary bouts against the likes of Frazier, Liston, Norton and Foreman are considered amongst the most exciting in boxing history.

Most people remember Ali for his bravado and mocking tactics, but underneath all of that was a fierce determination to succeed, along with a passion to gain the respect of the people, both black and white.

At his best, he was a joy to watch and a superb picture of sheer athleticism. In his later fights, he looked out of shape, slow and heavy.

Indeed, he should've retired around 1975 at the top of his game. Instead, the unnecessary punishment he took between 1976-1981 certainly played its part in his subsequent deteriorating medical condition. However, he remained an icon to millions, and is still, to this day - the greatest.



Cassius Clay's first major title; the Olympic Gold Medal in 1960.