

If it's true that boxing sold its soul to television networks a generation ago, eagerly snatching pay-per-view's thirty pieces of silver and prostituting itself on the behest of an array of clandestine figures and their grubby titles. the story of Ali Nuumbembe, a Namibian welterweight, and philanthropic publican Chad Parker with whom he plots a path to boxing glory from the obscurity of a refitted caravan in Glossop, England, will help remind fans that for all its faults, boxing remains the sport "to which all other sports aspire."

From the economic ravages of the once war torn Namibia to the dark, moody skies of the Glossop community that now cherishes the smiling African as one of their own, Ali's story is a timeless parable of generosity and one man's determination to triumph over the adversity that plagued his early life.

The tale begins in the hills of northern Namibia, a country so vast it would provide ample eiderdown for a snoozing France and Germany and populated, or in truth not populated, by just two million people. In a childhood blighted by the abhorrent face of South Africa's apartheid rule and their 25 years of conflict with the guerrilla freedom fighters of the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO), Ali, like others of his generation, lost many of his relatives during the painful quest for Namibian independence. Some of who simply disappeared. Ali, as always softly spoken, explains the extent of his personal loss, remarkable to us, a familiar story to the people of Namibia.

"I lost relatives. Lost my brother, my half brother, my uncle and aunt and some relatives. But that was before independence, they got independence in '90. My brother, my brother, my young brother and my sister, kidnapped, just gone; it must be '87 or something like that. I've never heard from them, nobody knows where they are."

This week's discovery of a mass, unmarked grave in Northern Namibia served to illustrate the scale of the atrocities that occurred during those troubled times, and further illuminates the wider world to the horrifying reality behind the numerous "disappearances" that befell those that dared to resist South Africa's oppressive and separatist rule.

"Because Namibians were fighting against the South Africans, South African government, and ... they used to do that, to people who helped SWAPO, you know, the freedom fighters. If the South Africans find out you're assisting them, then you disappeared; otherwise they took you to a prison. But it's a quiet place now. Peaceful."

By 1990, almost twenty years since the United Nations declared South Africa's occupancy of Namibia illegal, the proud Namibian people finally celebrated independence. A young Ali returned to the once troubled town of Oshokati from the safety of his aunt's home in the remote Namibian countryside to help his mum. His schooling complete, Ali elected to join the NDF, the Namibian Defence Force, in 1996, driven in part by his thirst for revenge. An apparently natural affinity for fighting was first nurtured in the traditional playground game of Onghandeka and led

Ali to boxing and subsequent success representing the army.

"In a village where I lived with my aunt growing up, when there is more going on we used to play a game called Onghandeka, kind of like, like fighting, condensed fighting, fighting games, like boxing but open hands. Soon as I started school I've been doing that, and that's where I get the love of fighting, so when I moved back to Oshokati I joined the boxing [club] because they don't play traditional games in the towns."

This natural talent blossomed and Ali was soon traveling the world to compete, though most of his fights took place in South Africa. Over the six years he competed in the unpaid ranks Ali built an outstanding 144-11 record and this pedigree culminated in a bronze medal at the Commonwealth games in Manchester in 2002.

"I was in the army since '96, I've been boxing in Amateur club, I've been boxing for NDF since 1996, when I was boxing in national championships I was boxing for the NDF. I went to the African championships, and then to the Commonwealth in '98, Kuala Lumpur and then Sydney (Olympics) and then Commonwealth and some more military games. Winning the bronze medal in Manchester, that was the first medal that Namibia had won on the boxing side." Ali adds proudly.

In the days before competition in the 2002 Commonwealth Games, fate intervened to introduce the softly spoken fighter to Richard "Chad" Parker, pub landlord at The Beehive, Glossop and a former Amateur fighter himself. On arriving in England, the Namibian team discovered their kit had been lost in transit; Chad picks up the story.

"Well it's strange, because it's never been a story to us, it's just how it happened; none of it was ever planned. I used to box, only amateur, and I kept in touch with the boxing club and they (the Namibian team) were using the gym when they came over here for the Commonwealth Games. I replaced their lost kit to allow them to compete. So we got to know them and they were a great set of lads. I went to see them at the Games and before they left I had a party for them here. They were based in Manchester, in the athletes' village, and they were all given cars and drivers, so they brought them up to the party and took them back, it was really good. You know I watched Ali, watched him training, watched him boxing and thought he's good, really good, and on that last night we got talking to his coach and it rolled from there."

Despite his love of boxing and the Namibian's pedigree and hunger, Chad knew little of the nuances and difficulties he would face trying to manage Ali. A spontaneous and committed character, he only bought his local pub because it was threatened with closure, but Chad didn't let his lack of experience dull his enthusiasm for the challenge. He was determined to bring Ali to England, and to guide him into the professional ranks.

"He went back to Namibia and then he flew to Ireland a couple of weeks later for the Military games, I flew over to see him to show I was seriously interested and after the games he went back to Namibia. We kept in touch and then about three months after the Commonwealth Games we managed to get him over, set him up with his visa, his work permit, and of course the caravan on the backfield."

Although a regular to foreign soil, the cultural and social difference between a scarcely populated Namibia and the “down to earth” essentially white community of Glossop, a town perched in the hills of Derbyshire, was a daunting one for the then 24-year-old. Despite the kindness displayed by benefactor Chad Parker, Ali was naturally concerned about the reception awaiting him. After all, the fighter dubbed the “Silent Assassin” by Parker and fellow benefactor Dr. Guy Wilkinson over a few pints in the Beehive was accustomed to a very different view of racial integration.

“When I think of coming over here I thought it was going to be like, to look at my background, in Namibia, independence and apartheid things. It’s like White here Black here. And there is ... (laughing) I’ve never been near white people, lived amongst the white people. I wanted to do boxing but I didn’t know what it was going to be like. But when I came here, it was different. Yes, I was a little nervous coming here. But days go by. I’m loving it.”

Ali’s love affair with England runs deep and his relationship with Chad and his family has become one of surrogate son; Chad often describes his role as part-agent, part-dad to the now 27-year-old. Despite this closeness, Ali still travels home and dreams of one day returning to help develop Namibia’s embryonic boxing scene.

“I would love to help with the boxing side in Namibia. They need people like me, professional boxing is very small, it’s less than ten years old and there are only twenty professionals in Namibia. I want to do my boxing here, and then go back, but I’d love to come back and visit.”

The impact a single African has had on the Glossop community in which he lives is evident when Ali fights. A strong ticket seller and always entertaining, he’s also become popular with SKY television who’ve showcased a couple of his fights – most famously when he pitched in at four days notice for the Commonwealth welterweight title versus then undefeated prospect David Barnes. The moral victor in the drawn verdict, Ali is humble but blunt when talk turns to that encounter: *“I won that fight.”*

Such is the respect and esteem in which he’s now held in his adopted town, Ali’s influence reaches beyond his performances in the ring. A regular visitor to local schools and youth groups, Ali promotes a message of good behaviour and self-respect. Though shy and reticent, Ali smiles when pressed about his contribution.

“I just talk to the kids really, you know, how to behave themselves. Like in this country I have seen a lot of kids drinking, smoking and using drugs, it’s not good for them. I think for me it’s a chance to speak to them and maybe they wont pick up something and they do, they do, really listen to me, and they love me and I love them so,” he said with a laugh.

In his fledgling career, 13-1-1 (5), the likeable Namibian has collected two nicknames, Silent Assassin and Ali, the name by which everybody knows him, which was bestowed on him back in Namibia during his early ventures into the ring.

“Muhammad Ali my hero. Ali’s not my real name, Paulus is my real name. When I started boxing, well before I started boxing, I used to watch Muhammad Ali on telly doing all the

Behind the Smile: Ali Nuumbembe

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shuffles and all that, so when I went to the ring I started doing the same thing. I wasn't good with my hands but with my legs (grinning) and the fans started shouting 'Ali, Ali, Ali,' and since, well, it's Ali."

The fistic connection between the soft-spoken African and the sport's most famous son may be tenuous, and their personalities polar opposites, but their respective struggles to emerge from the bigotry that blighted their youth creates a bond far beyond their shared name.

Something else for Ali Nuumbembe to smile about.