

Ali Circus Hits Town

Written by Ed Schuyler
Monday, 08 May 2006 19:00

Seen at many fights are men who noisily follow a boxer into the ring where they preen, hold championship belts aloft and scowl at their man's opponent. They are identified as a fighter's entourage, but often they often are just clowns without the price of ticket.

Whatever they are, they pale in comparison with the group that surrounded Muhammad Ali. Some of them were regulars, but a lot were on the fringe looking to get inside. Here are glimpses at some members of what I call the Ali Circus.

In the center ring, with Ali cracking the whip, were Drew "Bundini" Brown, Wali Muhammad, Lloyd Wells, Flip, Cassius Marcellus Clay Sr. and Rahman Ali.

Brown was Ali's guru and whipping boy. He was the man who came up with "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee." He also worked in the corner and sold Ali merchandise on the side. Bundini liked to take a drink, and that would get him berated by the boss. One night I walked into the hotel where Ali was staying for his 1975 fight against Joe Bugner in Kuala Lumpur to hear Bundini shout, "Even Jesus drank wine."

Wali Muhammad, formerly Walter Youngblood, worked in Ali's corner. During workouts, he would taste Ali's sweat to check the salt content. I am not making this up.

Lloyd Wells, who had some business propositions on the side, would count the number of sit-ups

Ali did every day when he was training. He then marked the total in notebook. I am not making this up.

Toward the end of Ali's career Wells secured a video camera, and he would stand on the ring apron recording Ali's sparring sessions. One day Wells recorded the sparring with the lens cap on the camera. That led Tom Kenville, a longtime member of the Madison Square Garden Boxing Department, to call him "Orson Wells." We also wondered if there ever was any tape in the camera.

During the week of a fight there appeared Flip, an entrepreneur of sorts who would not disclose his real name for various reasons. His age was anybody's guess, but it was obvious he was not a young man.

One day during the week of Ali's defense against Jean Pierre Coopman in Puerto Rico in 1976 there was a fire in the El San Juan Hotel. I was standing in the lobby watching the chaos. Out of an elevator came Flip with what looked to be 10 suits on hangers draped over his shoulder. The fire was not serious, but if it had been, Flip was going to be sure he remained well dressed.

Since I also covered horse racing, I was at the 1978 Preakness won by Affirmed on his way to

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becoming the last Triple Crown champion. Affirmed was led into the winner's circle, not by trainer Laz Barrera or even a groom, but by Flip. Somehow he had met Barrera and was considered a good luck charm by the great trainer.

Cassius Marcellus Clay Sr. – Ali had been junior – usually showed up around fight time unless the match was out of the country, then he would go on the road with the circus. He liked to have a drink and he loved to sing. One night at Ali's hotel in Kuala Lumpur he descended on an escalator while singing "My Way."

Rahman Ali, born Rudolph Valentino Clay, fought briefly as a heavyweight, making his pro debut by winning a four-round decision on the same card on which his brother stopped Sonny Liston to become heavyweight champion of the world. That was Rahman's only bout in 1964, and after fighting and winning twice in 1965, he did not fight again until 1970 when his brother came back against Jerry Quarry in Atlanta in 1970.

On that card, Rahman scored a third-round knockout, then followed with a four-round decision win the night Ali stopped Oscar Bonavena that same year. Then in a preliminary bout to the first Ali-Frazier fight in 1971 Rahman, who did not have an ounce of his brother's ability or personality, was outpointed in six rounds by inept Danny McAlinden. Someone suggested the Irishman be named Fighter of the Year. Rahman fought 10 more times (7-2-1) before retiring in 1972.

Rahman was devoted to his brother, and nothing could diminish that devotion. Once in Manilla for Ali's 1975 fight with Joe Frazier, Muhammad put down Rahman in front of reporters, then said, "I give him \$50,000. That's not bad for jivin' and drivin'."

One day Rahman, dressed in a Fruit of Islam uniform, walked out front of the Tropicana Hotel where Ali was training for his win over Ron Lyle in 1975 at the Las Vegas Convention Center. As he stood there a woman drove up, got out of the car, tossed the keys to him and said, "Park it."

Even after he stopped fighting, Rahman would work out when Ali was training. One day at Deer Lake, Pa., he was punching the heavy bag. Now when fighters work out they do things in segments of three minutes – sparring, shadowboxing, rope skipping and bag punching – because that is the length of a round. So after three minutes someone would call "Time" for Rahman. That is until Ali entered the ring, then all eyes were on him. Rahman kept on punching, and pretty soon he began to sag, holding on to the bag. Finally, someone looked and called, "Time."

There also was a more serious side to the circus.

Gene Kilroy made things happen. He was a business manager-quartermaster who handled the logistics. No task was too mundane for Gene, who was devoted to Ali, helping him in many ways. That devotion has never waned.

Always around was Howard Bingham, Ali's personal photographer, who still travels the world

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with Ali and is fourth wife, Lonnie.

Angelo Dundee was the trainer, although after awhile Ali, like a lot of top fighters, trained himself. Dundee was valuable because he was a top cornerman. He also was a favorite of the media, and he never missed a chance to build up Ali.

Dr. Ferdie Pacheco, a friend of Dundee's, turned his association with Ali into a career as a television boxing analyst where he was known as "The Fight Doctor." Pacheco did tend to Ali, and he treated members of the entourage. He also paid his way to the fights.

Two others were Luis Sarra, a masseur who stayed in the background, and Pat Patterson, a Chicago cop, who was more visible as Ali's bodyguard.