

Muhammad Ali—Forever Young

Written by Ed Schuyler
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He flashes a smile as bright at the ring lights.

His jab is a heat-seeking missile. His quips are just as fast. When he does his trademark shuffle, the tassels on his boxing boots go into a frenzy.

He, indeed, seems to float like a butterfly and sting like a bee.

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On Wednesday, Jan. 17, Muhammad Ali will become a senior citizen. That's right, the Greatest will turn 65 years old, by the calendar that is. But by my reckoning, Ali will be forever young.

I am not in denial. I know his birth certificate and the calendar do not lie. I am aware Ali's movements have been severely slowed and his voice has been reduced to a whisper by Parkinson's disease. I believe, however, that Ali, who shuns pity, who is content in his religion and proud of his achievements, would be pleased that I choose to keep alive in my mind his younger self.

I see a picture or tape of Ali shakily lighting the Olympic flame at the 2000 Olympics at Atlanta. Moments later in my mind's eye Ali is ranting and raving at the weigh-in for his challenge to heavyweight champion Sonny Liston in 1964. Some people believe Ali is frightened of the fighter he calls the Bear and suggest the match be called off.

The last time I saw Ali was after his daughter Laila fought on the eve of the first Shane Mosley-Oscar De La Hoya bout in 2000 at Los Angeles. We exchanged a handshake and smiles, and he whispered something I could not make out. Back in the quiet of my hotel room, I see Ali punching a small rubber gorilla and shouting about what he will do to "the gorilla in Manila."

I see Ali on television, standing quietly and smiling. I also can see him standing unsmilingly and refusing to take the step forward that would signify his drafting into the military. It is an act for which he is willing to go to prison. It is an act that leads to a 3½ year banishment from boxing, an act that results in a victory over the establishment when the U.S. Supreme Court overturns the conviction in 1971.

I laugh when I remember him saying or hear him saying outrageous things.

"My name is known in Serbia, Pakistan, Morocco," says the native of Louisville. "These are countries that don't follow the Kentucky Derby."

It is 1974 and Ali is receiving the Bronze Medal, New York City's highest civilian award. "Mayor Daly (of Chicago) gave me a medal, too," Ali says. "But his was gold."

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After Larry Holmes lost to Michael Spinks in 1985 and failed to equal Rocky Marciano's 49-0 record, Holmes said after the fight that Marciano could not have carried his jock. Some people expressed outrage. I am convinced if Ali had said that there would have been laughter.

For Holmes, also a great fighter, Ali was an impossible act to follow. He always will be an impossible act to follow.

I sometimes cringe when I recall Ali taunting an opponent.

Sometimes I put on a tape of Ali fighting. Sometimes I can recall certain things that happened during one of his fights without the aid of a tape.

There is he making Sonny Liston look slow in winning the title. His arms are up in a victory gesture after knocking out Liston with a perfect, or a phantom, punch in the rematch. Cleveland Williams looks like a man caught in a whirlwind as Ali knocks him out in the third round. Fans are going crazy when Jerry Quarry cannot continue the third round in Ali's return from his banishment in 1970 at Atlanta, the first Ali fight I covered. There he is getting up from a 15th round knockout in a decision loss to Joe Frazier in 1971, and there he is exhausted but triumphant after his grueling 14th round victory over Frazier in the Thrilla' In Manila.

The fight in Manila was really the last hurrah for the two archrivals, who were young men, but who had become old fighters.

There really is not much more than needs to be written about Muhammad Ali. So as I close, my mind tells me to wish a happy 65th birthday to The Greatest, but my heart says, "Happy birthday, young man."