

Happy Birthday Champ

Written by Frank Lotierzo
Friday, 16 January 2004 18:00

It was 62 years ago today he was born. He is now old enough to collect Social Security and retire. He is Muhammad Ali aka Cassius Marcellous Clay. He was born on January 17th 1942, 12 years later he would enter a boxing gym for the first time. Twenty two years later he would score one of the biggest upsets in heavyweight history on his way to capturing the heavyweight championship of the world. Sixty two years later he is one of, if not the most recognized human being on the planet. Without question he is the most famous athlete in the history of civilization, sorry Babe Ruth, sorry Michael Jordan, but neither of you are Ali!

Muhammad Ali crossed so many paths, that in one way or another he touched all of us. Like former heavyweight champ and Ali foe George Foreman has often said, limiting Ali to a boxer is an insult. He's much bigger than that. Over the course of the last 40+ years, Ali has made us all think and debate many touchy topics.

He was a lightning rod on race and religion. He made us debate politics and war. He brought huge money into sports, not just boxing. Ali made athletes in all sports realize that they were the true stars. Ali realized that the people paid to see the athlete perform. Without Ali, there is no Sugar Ray Leonard, Michael Jordan, Wayne Gretzky, or Tiger Woods. And think about it, Ali was that huge before the media explosion had taken place before the ESPN SportsCenter era. Imagine if he was around today with talk radio, 24 hour cable news, and ESPN? It boggles the mind to think how big he'd be today.

Over the years many have tried to duplicate and copy the Ali persona, but they have all failed miserably. In Hollywood there is a saying that asks whether or not the entertainer has it. Nobody has really defined what it is, but it is for certain that Muhammad Ali had it! Whether you were black or white, man or woman, there was just something about the guy that just drew you to him. Think about it, how many people in their lifetime can go from being the most hated, to being the most loved? I can't think of anyone else who that can be said about other than Muhammad Ali.

I remember in 1970, I was 10 years old and totally bitten by the boxing bug. I had been totally taken by this guy who I saw on the 6 o'clock news who was yelling at Sonny Liston by the name of Cassius Clay. From that moment on it was over for me. I have often asked myself over the years what came first, my love of boxing, or was it my fascination with Ali that drew me to boxing. I'm still not sure I know the answer?

Back to 1970. It was October and Ali was coming back to fight second ranked Jerry Quarry after a forced 43 month exile for refusing induction into the U.S. Army. At that time I was a huge Quarry fan, mainly because he was tough and could fight, and also because he was the best white heavyweight fighter around at the time. Being white, I must admit that I did want to see a white guy do good and possibly win the title. On the day of the fight I pleaded with my father to take me to see the closed circuit showing of Ali-Quarry. I remember thinking to myself, who should I root for? I kept telling myself that I should probably be rooting for Quarry, however I

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knew that if Quarry would've beat Ali, it would have devastated me. Where if Quarry lost, I could have lived with it, and on top of that, I expected Quarry to lose to Ali.

Needless to say, once Ali came into view my blood was pumping and I cheered for him louder than anyone in the arena. I lived and died with every punch and was ecstatic when Quarry couldn't come out for round four. That was probably the moment in my life that I realized Ali was colorless. It didn't matter what color or country the opponent was from, Ali was Ali and that was all that mattered

Over the years so much has been written about Ali. I am no where near the caliber writer to write about him and do him any real justice. This is strictly from the heart! That being said, there are many things about Ali the fighter that make him special. Forget about his speed and physical gifts, how about the intangibles? Oh, before I mention the intangibles, I must convey that in my opinion Muhammad Ali was a very overrated boxer, not fighter, but boxer. He broke every rule in the book, and never learned basics and fundamental defense. Yet he still dominated the best heavyweight era in boxing history, despite missing the best 43 months of his physical prime.

Back to Ali's intangibles and admirable traits. One thing that can never be taken from Ali is the fact that he fought everybody. From 1964 through 1977, there isn't one period that he hadn't fought and defeated at least 5 of the top 10 ranked heavyweights in the world. In most cases he fought 6 or 7, and in some instances he fought as many as 9 of them. When Liston, Frazier, and Foreman were thought to be unbeatable, Ali was the one who sought them out in order to make the fight.

After upsetting Liston in 1964, he made his first defense against Liston. He could have fought two or three easy touches to pad his record and bank account. Instead he fought the biggest and baddest fighter around. After splitting two very close fights with Ken Norton, a fighter who was always difficult for him, he defended his title against him. After winning the title back from George Foreman in 1974, he defends it against top contenders Lyle and Frazier in 1975. After beating Norton in their third fight in September of 1976, he was willing to give Foreman a rematch, however Foreman lost to Young in March of 1977. So Ali fights the next toughest and biggest hitter around in September of 1977, Earnie Shavers.

Throughout his entire career, Ali fought everybody, and gave many of them rematches. His heart and will to win are equal to or better than any fighter in history. Ali sometimes looked ordinary against second tier opposition, but he was brilliant against the best of the best. Nobody sucked it up in the big spot like Muhammad Ali. Like him or not, that can never be denied. Without question Ali fought and defeated the overall best grade of fighter during his career. More so than any other heavyweight in history. The bottom line is that Ali the fighter had more ways and weapons to beat great fighters than any other heavyweight in history. He ate up the big punchers, frustrated and muscled the boxers and counter punchers, and always had an extra gear late in a tough fight to break his opponents will. He also had a cast iron chin and an indomitable will to win.

All that being said, I left out Ali's greatest attributes. He was a truly a great man. Oh some may

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say he was too mean with his tongue vs Frazier, and he humiliated Patterson and Terrell. However, even Ali was not perfect. He recognized those short comings and made amends for them. Which is the true mark of a big man, admitting you were wrong, and not gloating when your right. Anyone who is truly a student of Ali knows that the man had time for everybody. Black or White, Rich or Poor, Big or Small. No athlete or entertainer has given more back to their fans than Muhammad Ali. He is the most accessible superstar in the world. He has never turned anyone down for a picture or an autograph. He understood that without the fans, he wouldn't have mattered at all. And to this day, he still knows it.

Ali also did something else that stands out. When he was at his physical prime and at the point of his career where his earning power was at its peak, he stood by his convictions. He gave up the biggest prize in sports for his Religious beliefs, something he still lives by 40 years later. In the biggest spot of his life he didn't falter a bit when challenged by the U.S. Government. Typical Muhammad Ali! Happy Birthday Champ! You Are The Greatest!!

Writers Note

The career of Muhammad Ali was too big to capsule, plus everyone knows it. This was just to honor and recognize his 62nd birthday. The writing is not my best, but it came from the heart. It was just my small way of honoring one of the most important people of the 20th century. I just skimmed over many things, mainly because mostly all know the Ali story. There is nothing new or more to add. Just one man's small acknowledgement and remembrance.