

From Radical to Icon: The Strange Public Career of Muhammad Ali

Written by Kelsey McCarson
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Muhammad Ali was not always been beloved. In fact, he wasn't even always Muhammad Ali.

Ali was born Cassius Marcellus Clay, Jr. on January 17, 1942 in Louisville, Kentucky. After being introduced to boxing at age 12, Clay established himself on the amateur boxing scene by winning six Kentucky Golden Gloves titles, two National Golden Gloves titles, an AAU National Title, and a gold medal in the 1960 Summer Olympics in Rome, Italy.

Clay made his professional debut the very same year, and was named number one contender to heavyweight champion Sonny Liston just four years later. Despite being only 22 years old and a heavy underdog in the fight, Clay was already certain he was "The Greatest."

Others were not so sure. Indeed, the wit and witticism he later became so celebrated for was barely tolerated before his 1964 title fight against Liston. An audacious challenger, Clay taunted Liston by calling him a "big ugly bear." He told anyone and everyone who would listen to him that he would "float like a butterfly and sting like a bee" in the bout, and dethrone perhaps the most feared heavyweight champion in all of boxing history. Still, Clay was considered by most a good-looking and funny flake with very little chance of actually lifting the title from Liston.

But that's just what he did. Clay dominated the fight with his tremendous footwork and blindingly fast hands, and he was declared the bout's winner when Liston refused to answer the bell for the seventh round. After the fight, Clay famously exclaimed "I shook up the world...I must be the Greatest!"

Maybe he was. The boxing world, at least, was starting to notice the brash and flashy puncher from Louisville, but Clay's precociousness wasn't exactly winning people over. At least, not yet.

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Clay met Liston in a rematch one year later. By then, Clay had converted to the Nation of Islam through the teachings of polarizing Black Muslim leader Elijah Muhammad and changed his name from Cassius Clay to Muhammad Ali. Ali quickly dispatched Liston in the rematch in just one round, with a short, hooking-type punch he dubbed an “anchor punch” akin to what he learned from former heavyweight champion Jack Johnson.

But despite solidifying himself as the best heavyweight in the world, it was Ali’s newfound religious conviction that had made the deepest impression on the public. At the time, the Nation of Islam was widely regarded by Americans as a dangerous and extreme organization bent on the separation of black Americans from society. So much so, in fact, that it’s most prominent member, human rights activist Malcolm X, had severed ties with the group in 1964.

The few writers who had supported Ali before his conversion felt betrayed. One referred to Ali as a “once likable loudmouth.” Another called Ali’s conversion “calculated deception” meant to drive up ticket sales for his fight.

Things were about to get worse.

“My conscience won’t let me go shoot my brother, or some darker people, or some poor hungry people in the mud for big powerful America,” said the World’s Heavyweight Champion, Ali, in 1967 after refusing induction into the United States military based on his religious beliefs. “And shoot them for what? They never called me nigger, they never lynched me, they didn’t put no dogs on me, they didn’t rob me of my nationality, rape and kill my mother and father... Shoot them for what? ...How can I shoot them poor people? Just take me to jail.”

Ali’s boxing license was almost immediately suspended, and he was arrested and sentenced to five years in prison for draft evasion. In appealing the decision, Ali was thrust into becoming something more than just a boxer who’d held the title from 1964-67, more than just a man with a polarizing religion. He was now a civil rights activist who’d help spark opposition to an ongoing war.

During his exile from boxing, Ali traveled around the United States and gave lectures at college campuses. The topics included everything he knew about boxing, the Nation of Islam, the Vietnam War and racism in America. Ali, nicknamed “The Lip” back in his younger days, had the

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gift of gab and it showed.

The public at large was split on Ali. For young people growing up in the late 1960s, Ali became a symbol of rebellion against both the Vietnam War and authority itself. For the establishment, Ali was another harrowing reminder of an ever-advancing subculture of people whose values differed quite significantly than their own.

Pulitzer Prize winning author David Remnick, who authored a biography of Ali entitled *King of the World*

, noted, "As he had before and would again, Ali had showed his gift for intuitive action, for speed, and this time he was acting in a way that would characterize the era itself, a resistance to authority, an insistence that national loyalty was not automatic or absolute. His rebellion, which started out as racial, now had widened in scope."

Ultimately, the Supreme Court would overturn Ali's conviction and his life inside the ring would begin again.

As the 1970s progressed, so, too, did Ali's public reputation. Back in his element, the sweet science, Ali solidified himself as one of most successful boxing champions in history. As a heavyweight, only Joe Louis's reign of 25 title defenses over nearly 12 years rivals that of Ali. Unlike Louis, Ali faced the most remarkable group of heavyweight contenders in the history the sport. There is simply no heavyweight in history that defeated as many fellow all-time greats as Ali.

Upon his return, Ali was unable to reclaim his heavyweight title from newfound rival Joe Frazier when the two met in 1971, in a bout dubbed by promoters "The Fight of the Century," losing a 15-round unanimous decision.

But Ali went 13-1 until he got his next title shot in 1974, amassing wins over Floyd Patterson, Jimmy Ellis, Bob Foster and a revenge match against Joe Frazier, who had since lost the title to a young and menacing slugger named George Foreman. Ali's lone loss during this time came against Ken Norton. The two fought back-to-back bouts in 1973, winning one each by split decision. Ali would later take the rubber match in 1976 unanimously.

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Ali defeated Foreman in 1974, employing what became famously known as his “rope-a-dope” strategy of luring the champion in close while having his back up against the ropes to encourage the younger, stronger Foreman to tire himself out by throwing punch after punch while Ali miraculously evaded them. Despite being a heavy underdog to the 40-0 Foreman (who had blasted out Ali rivals Norton and Frazier within two rounds each) Ali defeated Foreman by knockout in the eighth round.

By the time he defeated Joe Frazier again 1975, the Vietnam War had finally ended and the fruits of the civil rights movement were in full swing. Ali was now the most popular boxing champion since Jack Dempsey ruled boxing in the Roaring 20s.

Ali retired from boxing in 1981. His final ring record stands at 56-5 (37 KOs). Ring historians consider him one of the top heavyweight champions ever, most often being placed in either the first or second position. *Ring Magazine* ranked him number one among all-time heavyweight champions in 1998 while the International Boxing Research Organization ranked him second (to Joe Louis) under the same criteria in 2006. Moreover, Ali was named “Fighter of the Year” by *Ring Magazine* more times than any other fighter in history.

Ali’s legacy has continued to have a lasting impact outside of the ring. Not only was Ali the most famous athlete of his time, he was also named *Sports Illustrated’s* Sportsman of the 20th Century as well as the British Broadcasting Company’s Sports Personality of the Century. He has been the subject of countless books, films and magazines, and he has continued to be a human rights activist even as Parkinson’s disease has stolen his voice.

On January 8, 2005, Muhammad Ali was presented with the Presidential Citizens Medal by President George W. Bush. Later that year, he accepted the Otto Hahn Peace Medal in Gold from the UN Association of Germany (DGVN) in Berlin for his work as a civil rights advocate.

It is perhaps too easy to say any one thing contributed to his lasting appeal. Instead, one might say Ali has been many things to many people. As a member of the Nation of Islam, Ali was a voice for those seeking religious freedom. As a champion in exile, Ali became a lasting and impactful force for the burgeoning civil rights movement. In his return to the ring after exile, Ali became one of the finest heavyweight pugilists who ever lived.

And so maybe, in the end, it's simply safer to say that Ali's transformation from radical to icon was not one thing or another, or even two or three things put together. Rather, it was all things put together, his life, the things he said and did, and the man he came to be to both for himself and others.

Epilogue: Strange Public Careers of Other Heavyweight Greats

Muhammad Ali wasn't the only heavyweight champion to enjoy a radical shift in public perception during his career. The first African-American heavyweight champion, Jack Johnson, was virtually despised during his fighting days. Johnson deliberately inflamed white animosity during the days of Jim Crow segregation by appearing in public with white girlfriends at his side. He defeated a caravan of "white hopes" during his seven-year title reign, most famously besting former heavyweight champion James J. Jeffries in 1910. Johnson's resurgence in popularity continues to grow to this day, made most apparent by numerous bipartisan posthumous pardon attempts for his 1913 conviction of crossing state lines with a woman for "immoral purposes."

Jack Dempsey's image underwent stark changes in the 1920s. Now regarded as one of the most popular fighters in boxing history, Dempsey was dismissed as a draft dodger during the first part of his title reign. Dempsey was mostly reviled by boxing fans until he lost his title to Gene Tunney in 1926. After which, he became somewhat of a folk hero. By 1950, AP sportswriters liked him enough to vote him the greatest boxer of the half-century.

"Big" George Foreman retired from boxing in 1977. Despite winning a gold medal at the 1968 Olympics and becoming heavyweight champion in 1974, Foreman was largely considered a big, mean nuisance of a man when he retired from boxing in 1977. Foreman had a religious epiphany and became a Christian minister. Big George came back to boxing a changed man in 1987. Instead of his trademark scowl, Foreman was a smiling man now. He went on to become the oldest heavyweight champion in history when he knocked out Michael Moorer in 1994 at age 45. Foreman's popularity has endured, and he's had quite the third career selling his George Foreman grills.

Mike Tyson was the youngest and perhaps most feared heavyweight champion ever when he burst on the scene in the early 1980s. He's ferocious style inside the ring and tremendous success made him popular if not well-liked, but a lot of that crumbled when he was convicted for

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rape in 1992 and sent to prison for three years. His return to the ring afterward was marked by more controversy, perhaps most famously biting off a chunk of Evander Holyfield's ear during their 1997 title fight. After retiring in 2005, Tyson's popularity has risen to all-time highs. He's been featured in numerous books and films, and he travels around the world giving his one man show to rave reviews.

Kelsey McCarson is a boxing writer for The Sweet Science and Bleacher Report. Follow him [@KelseyMcCarson](#)

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May we have another?