

Muhammad Ali: How the Greatest Black Athlete in History Fought against Racism and War

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Friday last week marked the death of arguably the greatest and most beloved Black athlete in history: Muhammad Ali.

No sport has exploited athletes, particularly Black athletes, quite like boxing. The very first boxers in America were African slaves. White slave owners would amuse themselves by forcing slaves to box to the death while wearing iron collars.

Even after the abolition of slavery, boxing became the first sport to be desegregated so that white boxing promoters could continue to exploit Blacks and make money from the deep racism in American society.

Eugenics was used to justify slavery, and the pseudo science of the time “proved” that Blacks were not only mentally inferior, but also physically inferior to whites.

Ironically, early white fight promoters unwittingly created a space where Black boxers could destroy white supremacist ideas of society and racial hierarchy.

The 1910 victory of Jack Johnson against “The Great White Hope” launched one of the greatest nationwide race riots in U.S. history. Out of that embarrassment, in which a Black man defeated a white man, Congress passed a law outlawing boxing films.

With a brief look at the history of boxing, it is abundantly clear that the races and cultures that have suffered the most at any given time always tend to produce the greatest champions.

Boxing has a tendency to both attract and indeed prey upon talent from underprivileged minority communities. Through boxing, one can read a direct chart of the underprivileged in America. The sport highlights the line of minorities who struggle to make it up the ladder, until they succeed, and then disappear from the boxing scene. Tellingly, the minorities that remain in the ring today are a consequence of still being on the bottom rung of America’s economic ladder.

You had the waves of underprivileged Jewish boxers, then Irish boxers, Italian-American boxers, African American boxers, and now, increasingly Hispanic boxers.

In a society that is so violently racist, the sport of boxing became an escape valve for people’s anger. Boxing symbolized a twisted manifestation of the American dream, where minorities have to, literally, fight their way out of poverty.

The modern image of Muhammad Ali, portrayed by the establishment, is one of a Black man

dancing in the ring and shouting, "I am the greatest!" His image is now used to sell everything from luxury cars to soft drinks.

Despite the establishment's whitewashing and Santaclausification of Ali's image, history shows that the true Muhammad Ali was a staunch Black Nationalist, who was good friends with Malcolm X, and a member of the Black Power group, The Nation of Islam.

Ali was unquestionably the best boxer in history, not simply because of his achievements in the ring, but because he brought the fight against racism and war into professional sports.

Muhammad Ali grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, as the Black freedom struggle was heating up and beginning to boil over. Born in Louisville as Cassius Clay to a house painter and domestic worker, Ali was immersed in America's racist nature from birth.

After winning the Olympic gold medal at the age of 18, Ali was so proud of his medal that he said he wore it round his neck almost all the time. Fellow Olympian W. Rudolph remarked, "He slept with it, he went to the cafeteria with it. He never took it off."

Days after returning from the Olympic games, Ali was eating in a restaurant with the medal swinging around his neck and he was denied service by the white restaurant owners. Ali then threw the gold medal into the Ohio river.

Ali found answers to America's racism in friend and mentor Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam. "X and Ali were one in the same," journalist J. Tinsley wrote. "Both were young, handsome, intelligent, outspoken African American men who scared the crap out of White America during a time period when racial tension was the norm."

With the Nation of Islam, Ali rejected the name Clay and explained how, "Cassius Clay is a name that white people gave to my slave master. Now that I'm free, that I don't belong to anyone, that I'm not a slave anymore, I gave back their white name, and I chose a beautiful African one."

At a time when most of the country were in favor of the Vietnam war, Ali asked, "Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go 10,000 miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on Brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs and denied simple human rights? So I'll go to jail, so what? We've been in jail for 400 years."

The typical sentence for refusing to go to war was 18 months, but an all-white jury convicted Ali and he was sentenced to 60 months, or five years, in prison for standing up to America's most violent racism at home and abroad. Despite having been invited to the White House later in his life, the white establishment loathed Muhammad Ali and his phone was bugged by the Johnson and Nixon administrations.

Perhaps Ali's greatest legacy is his voice. Ali's voice was uncompromising in its Blackness. His voice was just as uncompromising in its rejection of the trappings of wealth and fame, as it was in the rejection of a system that unleashed German shepherds on Black children. Ali's voice did not seek acceptance. It simply demanded to be heard.

To begin with, the American press viewed Ali's voice as a refreshing change to professional boxing's un-poetic violence. His antics and doggerel enhanced newspaper columns.

However, that editorial stance suddenly changed in 1964 when Ali, immediately after claiming the heavyweight title, revealed that he had become a Black Muslim. The American press then began to use Ali's voice to portray him as a racist hothead.

The New York Times continued to print the slave name Cassius Clay for years and called him a "nauseating and childish loudmouth braggart". White sports writers certainly preferred their Negro athletes tough, quiet and docile.

White America hated his voice, the white press sought to denigrate that voice, and the U.S. government tried to silence his voice completely. White America only embraced the most outspoken Black athlete in history after he was unable to speak anymore because of Parkinson's disease.

Boxing changed American history. The sport of boxing had more to do with the advancement of the civil rights movement than any other sport, from Jack Johnson to Joe Lewis to Muhammad Ali.

History has never produced an athlete more persecuted by the U.S. government, more vilified by the American media, or more respected globally than Muhammad Ali.

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