

‘He shook up the world. We’re all better for it’

The champ: The greatest sports photograph ever taken? Ali’s 1965 defeat of Sonny Liston.

‘He was the Greatest. Period,’ said President Obama. After suffering from Parkinson’s for over three decades, Muhammad Ali has died. How did the ‘Louisville lip’ become such a legend?

‘Muhammad Ali shook up the world,’ said Barack Obama this weekend, hours after hearing news of the boxer’s **death**. ‘And the world is better for it. We are all better for it.’

It was a deeply personal tribute from the fellow African American, who keeps a pair of Ali’s gloves in the Oval Office, just under the iconic photo of the ‘young champ, just 22 years old, roaring like a lion over a fallen Sonny Liston.’

Millions are in mourning. This Friday a funeral procession will wind its way through the streets of Ali’s home town of Louisville so that the world can ‘say goodbye’. Former president Bill Clinton will deliver the eulogy.

Why such an outpouring of grief for a boxer who won only 56 fights, a small feat compared to the 173 of **Sugar Ray Robinson** a generation before?

From the moment Ali first entered the sport in 1960, he challenged Americans’ ideas about what a ‘good’ boxer should be: his skittish style and boastful taunts rattled both rivals and reporters. He befriended **Malcolm X** and began standing up for black civil rights; he once claimed that he had thrown his **Olympic gold medal** into a river after a whites-only restaurant refused to serve him. And soon after he beat Liston to win the heavyweight championship in 1964, he converted to the controversial **Nation of Islam**, changing his ‘slave name’ **Cassius Clay** to Muhammad Ali. He was loathed and loved in equal measure.

Things escalated in 1966, when Ali publicly refused to fight in Vietnam — ‘I ain’t got no quarrel with them **Viet Cong**’ — and was stripped of his titles and exiled from the sport. Only a last-minute decision from the Supreme Court saved him from jail.

And yet when he returned in the 1970s, he won back the public's support — and his titles. 'I'm not fighting for me,' he said before defeating George Foreman in 1974. 'I'm fighting for the black people who have no future.'

'Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee'

He was an impressive man, most will admit. But did he really change the world? Black civil rights were not won in a boxing ring, but by the hard work of ordinary campaigners and the peaceful words of Martin Luther King. Even Ali himself was scornful of boxing; it is 'a lot of white men watching two black men beat each other up,' he once said.

But he had a symbolic importance like no other, fans argue. When black and white people were still segregated, he looked reporters in the eye and said 'I'm free to be what I want to be.' When America was at war, he sacrificed everything for his pacifism. When his career ruined his health, he spent 30 more years agitating for peace and visiting children in hospital. He was a poet, an activist — and his moral strength inspired the whole world.

YOU DECIDE

1. Did Muhammad Ali change the world?
2. The injuries Ali sustained during his career caused him to be diagnosed with Parkinson's aged just 42. Was it worth it?

ACTIVITIES

1. Look through the [slideshow of Ali's most famous lines and photos](#) (there is a link under Become An Expert). Which is your favourite quote? Explain your choice to the class.
2. Choose another inspirational athlete who you believe has changed the world. Write 300 words explaining why.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

"It's not bragging if you can back it up."

Muhammad Ali
What do you think?

Q & A

I don't like boxing.

You don't have to enjoy the sport to appreciate the man: his influence went far beyond the ring, and in later years he was often treated with as much spiritual

reverence as people like Nelson Mandela or Mahatma Gandhi. He had a big impact on other areas as well — he was the original trash talker, and would often write verse slamming his rivals before fights.

What else did he do?

An astonishing amount. In 1990 he negotiated with Saddam Hussein and helped to release 14 American hostages from Iraq. He travelled to South Africa when Nelson Mandela was released from prison. He visited Kabul in Afghanistan as a UN Messenger of Peace. He fundraised for Parkinson's disease and other charities. He raised nine children. 'He belonged to everyone,' wrote the poet Maya Angelou.

WORD WATCH

Death

Ali died in hospital of septic shock and natural causes, surrounded by his family. His daughter said that although his other organs had failed, 'his heart would not stop beating for 30 minutes... A true testament to his strength of spirit and will.'

Sugar Ray Robinson

A professional boxer who began fighting in 1940. He won 91 fights in a row between 1946 and 1951.

Malcolm X

A militant civil rights campaigner who was once described as the most 'dangerous man in America'. He was assassinated in 1965.

Olympic gold medal

Ali won his medal at the Rome Olympics in 1960. He later admitted that he had actually lost the medal, but the story persisted anyway.

Nation of Islam

An Islamic movement which argued that African Americans should govern themselves. Ali left in 1975 to become a Sunni Muslim.

Cassius Clay

This was the name of an abolitionist who freed his slaves in 1844. Ali's father was named Cassius Clay in tribute, and passed it on to his son. 'Muhammad Ali' means 'beloved of God'.

Viet Cong

The Communist guerilla fighters of the Vietnam war, which lasted from 1955 to 1975.

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