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Sport and stereotype: from role model to Muhammad Ali

Noam Chomsky, a man always prepared to speak truth to power, confessed he was driven to despair by the addiction of working-class people to a popular phone-in sports programme on local radio. How could they waste so much passion and knowledge on something so trivial?

Chomsky's frustration is in keeping with a long tradition of left-wing hostility to commercial spectator sport. Many have dismissed it as a mere palliative for the oppressed, an opiate of the people. Some Marxists in the 1960s and '70s went further. For them, modern sport was 'a prison of measured time', a model of capitalist alienation. Sport, they argued, is not an escape from exploitation, however fleeting, but a reproduction of it.

For many on the Left, boxing exemplifies all that is iniquitous in modern sport. What could more accurately embody the cruelty of the capitalist order, not to speak of the destructive aggression of patriarchal individualism, than boxing? Could there be a more degrading spectacle than two human beings paid to inflict physical punishment on each other?

And yet, even in these depths. resistance can stir, as a look back at the career of Muhammad Ali will confirm.

Sport, modernity and race

Modern, secular, spectator sport – in the forms of boxing, horse-racing

and cricket - first emerged from the womb of parochial ritual and folk pastime in mid-eighteenth century England. Its midwives were rapid urbanisation. the spread of market relations and an ambitious elite with both time and money to squander. Rules for boxing were first codified in 1743. Soon after, national champions were recognised. Newspapers advertised the prize fights and employed the world's first sports writers to cover them. Bouts sometimes drew crowds of 10-20,000. They were usually staged under the aegis of aristocrats, who wagered huge stakes on the results. For the elite, the main purpose of modern sport was gambling: the venture capital that fuelled the industrial revolution also fuelled modern sport. Prize-fighting became a pioneer enterprise in the commercialisation of leisure, a trend which has grown to huge dimensions in our own time.

Like cricket and horse-racing (and sumo, an ancient ritual re-invented for popular consumption in the late eighteenth century), boxing remains among the least modern of modern sports. Even on satellite TV, it is easy to see in any boxing match traces of the pre-modern societies out of which it was born. The ancient gladiatorial contests, the village fair slugfests, the tavern brawls: boxing is a modern, regulated descendant of these. It is sometimes argued that sport is a means whereby we keep alive and display in modern societies the physical skills and attributes which industrialisation has made redundant: running, jumping, throwing, etc. In boxing, hand-to-hand combat lives on in a society which otherwise dispenses with it, even in warfare. Despite the Marquis of Queensbury's attempt to recodify the sport as 'a noble art' in keeping with the Victorian ethos, it remains today a rare example (apart from warfare itself) of the resolution of a contest by the overt use of physical violence.

The aristocrats, under whose aegis the world's first sports revolution was wrought, never themselves entered the prize-fighting ring (unlike the cricket pitch). Professional boxers from the beginning were plebeians, performing at the behest of their social superiors. Such was the gulf between patrons and participants that it seemed natural for slave-owners to enter their property into the competition. The first modern black sportsmen were slaves or ex-slaves, trained and groomed by their masters in the same way that they trained and groomed horses.

From the beginning, boxing was a honey-pot for criminals, not least because it was relatively easy to fix the fights. During the nineteenth century, the English aristocrats were replaced in the United States by politicians and newspaper proprietors, succeeded in this century by businessmen, public relations entreprenuers and satellite and cable television moguls. But the gangsters have been ever-present, expropriating fighters, fans and punters alike. The persistence of gambling and criminality in boxing, despite periodic purges, indicates

that capitalist modernisation, far from being an antidote to criminality, can act as a stimulant for it.

In boxing, slavery's ownership of the human body was transmuted with relative ease into a capitalist commodification of it. Boxing today appears highly individualistic but the individuals involved, the boxers, have less power over their bodies and careers than almost any other sports people. Even successful boxers, with few exceptions, are bound like serfs to promoters, managers and satellite TV companies. If they wish to advance towards a title, they must placate a variety of forces behind the scene. Merit is never enough in itself. If they are disabled in action, they are reliant on charity.

No one knows this better than the generations of black boxers who have sustained the fight game at all levels. For a tiny minority of slaves. boxing was a ticket to individual freedom, just as it is for a tiny minority of black working-class people today. This long history has given boxing a special place in black communities. The triumphs and tragedies of black boxers, dependent on elite white power-brokers to make a living in the ring, expected to subordinate themselves to elite white norms outside the ring, have made black boxing a rich, complex, living tradition. If the strangest fact about boxing is that it has not gone the way of cockfighting or bear-baiting, and has somehow managed to survive under the glare of the electronic media, then the next strangest is that it owes its survival in no small measure to the brilliance of black boxers, the people most exploited and brutalised by it.

The level playing field

Jack Johnson became the first black heavyweight champion in 1908. He won the title in Sydney, Australia, because no American city would stage the fight. A white former champion, Jim Jeffries, who had previously refused to fight black boxers and had abandoned the ring rather than face Johnson, now came out of retirement, vowing to put the black man back in his place. Their Independence Day bout was, at the time, the most widely publicised sporting contest in US history, and Johnson's victory was celebrated by black communities across America. White gangs then launched reprisal attacks in the worst racial violence of the decade.

Johnson was the white man's nightmare come alive. Not only did he beat up white heroes in the ring (always sporting his famous grin), he then went off to dally with white women - and made no secret of it. Hated and hounded by the white press, he was ultimately forced into exile to escape a 'morals' conviction trumped up by the federal government. He was without doubt the most famous black person in America at the time and the black masses followed his adventures closely. However, his antics made the tiny black middle class uneasy.

Booker T. Washington denounced him and his wretched sport, agreeing with the *New York Times* that Johnson was a disgrace to his race. In contrast, Marcus Garvey celebrated him and W.E.B. DuBois argued that Johnson's persecution was not the result of his allegedly lax morals but of his 'unforgivable blackness'. In 1915, a weary and demoralised Johnson fought the latest white hope, Jess Willard, in Havana and lost the heavyweight title to him (or, some say, gave it up in a fix) in the twenty-seventh round.

In his recently published autobiography, Nelson Mandela recalls his time as a boxer. In the 1950s, Mandela (a heavyweight) trained regularly at a black boxing club in Orlando. a township north of Johannesburg. The club manager, Skipper Molotsi, would regale his penniless, ill-equipped, passionately dedicated boxers with a round-by-round account of Johnson's defeat in Havana.

'I did not enjoy the violence of boxing so much as the science of it.' Mandela explains. 'I was intrigued by how one moved one's body to protect oneself, how one used a strategy both to attack and retreat, how one paced oneself over a match.' Here, boxing appears as an ideal preparation for long-term political struggle. But, for Mandela, the sport's main attraction resided at a deeper level. 'Boxing is egalitarian. In the ring, rank, age, colour and wealth are irrelevant. When you are circling your opponent, probing his strengths and weaknesses, you are not thinking about his colour or social status.'

Mandela here invokes one of the defining shibboleths of modern sport: the level playing field. Sports lose their meaning for the spectator - and therefore their place in the market - unless everyone plays under the same rules, shoots at the same size goalposts, is timed with the same stopwatch. The level playing field is far more than a moral or ideological cover for a competitive activity. It is the autonomous logic of modern sport. For a contest to be seen as satisfactory, its rules, conditions and conduct must ensure that the result is determined only by the relative and pertinent strengths and weaknesses of the competitors, not by extraneous factors. The objectivity of sporting contests is like the objectivity of a scientific experiment. To the extent that the extraneous is excluded, the test is regarded as valid.

In boxing, the level playing field acquires particular importance. This raw, elemental contest pits one man's strength, stamina and agility against another's - of the same weight. It was recognised early on that a fight between a heavyweight and flyweight was meaningless as a spectacle or a test of individual prowess.

The logic of the level playing field gives sport an egalitarian premise. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons for its enduring appeal to the masses, and especially the most dispossessed among them. The major cliché about race in sport is that sport offers black people opportunities

denied them in other spheres. In the autonomous realm of sport, equality reigns.

Of course, the level playing field is enclosed within a society which is anything but level. Access to the level playing field has always been unequal, as has treatment on it, as black boxers have long understood. In 1805, Tom Molineaux, a black American ex-slave, was on the brink of taking the heavyweight title from the legendary English fighter-promoter, Tom Cribb. It was the twenty-sixth round and Cribb was on the floor. The English referee shouted at him: 'Get up, Tom, don't let the Nigger win.' Given four extra minutes to recover, Cribb went on to win the fight. For Molineaux as for Jack Johnson, boxing's level playing field proved an illusion.

It is well to remember that modern sport is a huge commercial enterprise. The level playing field is owned by a capitalist elite and is indeed one of that elite's favourite metaphors. The purpose of the Maastricht Treaty, NAFTA and GATT, we are told, is to create an economic level playing field, to ensure 'fair play' among various nation-states. In reality, these agreements rig global competition in favour of multinational capital and institutionalise the power of the north over the south. There is nothing new in this. By its very nature, the market nourishes and thrives on inequalities. The metaphor of the level playing field is, in fact, a lie about the market, as it is a lie about society as a whole.

But there is a sting in the tail. On sport's level playing field, it is possible to challenge and overturn the dominant hierarchies of nation, race and class. The reversal may be limited and transient, but it is nonetheless real. It is, therefore, wrong to see black sporting achievement merely as an index of oppression, it is equally an index of creativity and resistance, collective and individual. The level playing field can be either a prison or a platform for liberation.

'Uncle Toms' and 'bad Niggers'

No black fighter was given a shot at the heavyweight title for twenty-five years after Johnson lost it. Jack Dempsey, one of the great American sports heroes of the 1920s, refused to meet black challengers. When Joe Louis came along in the 1930s, his handlers and sponsors (black businessmen from Detroit) were determined not to repeat Johnson's experience. Louis was given lessons in table manners and elocution, he was told to so for a knock-out rather than risk the whims of racist judges: he was told never to smile when he beat a white man and, above all, never to be caught alone with a white woman. Louis was groomed to be the ideal role model for black America.

The symbolic burdens that this would involve became apparent in his first fight in New York City, against Primo Carnera, in 1935. At the

time, Mussolini was engaged in highly public preparations for his invasion of Ethiopia. Although neither Louis nor Carnera had said anything about the issue, they were seen by many as representatives of Africa and Italy respectively. Fears that rioting might break out among the fans led to a pre-fight announcement urging all concerned to view the bout solely as a contest between two individuals and nothing more - surely one of the most futile injunctions in the history of sport. Louis finished off the hard-hitting, mafia-backed Carnera in the sixth round.

It was not only Louis's demure behaviour that made him acceptable to the white establishment, it was also the peculiar politics of the times. He won the heavyweight crown in Chicago in 1937, in front of a crowd of 45,000, half of whom were black. But the year before, he had been beaten by a German, Max Schmeling, in a fight that had been hailed by Nazi ideologists as a triumph of Aryan supremacy. The rematch at Yankee Stadium in 1935 was probably at the time the most widely followed sporting contest in history and a huge event in the life of America's black communities. Louis was made aware by the press, the churches, the president and the Communist Party that knocking Schmeling's block off was his duty to America, the cause of anti-fascism and 'the Negro'. Any remaining doubts were removed when Nazis picketed his training camp. Louis demolished Schmeling in two minutes of the first round.

This time blacks could celebrate without fear of reprisals. Louis many have whipped a white man, but he was a German, and, what's more, a symbol of the Nazi regime. Louis was fighting *for America*, or at least for the liberal America of the New Deal. For once 'Americanism' and anti-racialism were congruent. Louis was praised everywhere as 'a credit to his race' - not because he had excelled in the ring but because he had vindicated 'the American way' at a critical time. For the American elite, Louis was a means to rally popular support for a war against Germany and Japan. For American Communists, the Schmelins-Louis bout was a classic contest between 'fascism' and 'democracy'. On the night of the fight, Communists organised Joe Louis radio parties' in black communities. Both the Communists and the elite emphasised the 'dignity' with which Louis represented his people and with which he had uplifted the sport of boxing, which both had hitherto despised.

The symbolism was not, however, completely arbitrary. It arose from the nature of the sporting contest itself. Here, modern sport's level playing field offered laboratory-like conditions in which to test the theory of Aryan supremacy. Louis's victory, like Jesse Owens's at the Berlin Olympics in 1936, was a 'scientific' repudiation of that theory and was seen as such by millions. The symbolism was intelligible to all. because it emerged from the egalitarian presuppositions of modern sport .

This made Louis the spearhead of a popular front, but it was one within which blacks remained subordinate. Louis did everything the white establishment asked of him and still ended up broke and humiliated. He gave the entire proceeds of one fight to the Navy Relief Fund, even though the navy was widely known as the most racist branch of the services. He enlisted in the army for three years and, though denied permission to defend his title, fought ninety-six exhibition bouts for US troops around the world (all of them still in segregated units) for nothing more than his ordinary soldier's pay. That did not stop the US government from stinging him for back taxes and, at one point, he had to take to the wrestling ring to drum up the cash. He ended hobbling around Las Vegas, paid by casino owners to greet the high rollers.

The spectres of these two black champions. Johnson and Louis, haunted the black fighters to come. There seemed only these two equally tragic role models: the 'bad Nigger' and the 'Uncle Tom', as they became known in the 1960s. After Louis, boxing was increasingly dominated by black fighters, especially in the upper divisions, but the sport itself was in the grip of white money-men and officials. Sonny Liston and Floyd Patterson, the two heavyweight champions who preceded Cassius Clay, conformed to the old polarity.

Like Mike Tyson, Floyd Patterson came out of the slums of Brooklyn and, like Tyson, he was trained and guided out of juvenile delinquency by Cus D'Amato, a white Svengali who tried to keep both fighters out of the clutches of the crooks. Unliks Tyson, the studiously inoffensive, frugal and churchgoing Patterson became a hero to white America. Having become the youngest man ever to win the heavyweight title, he was invited to the White House, married a white woman, bought a house in a white neighhourhood, and became a symbol of the integrationist ideal. For several years, D'Amato shielded Patterson from Sonny Liston, widely recognised as the number one contender and the toughest heavyweight on the circuit. D'Amato could get away with this because absolutely nobody wanted Sonny Liston to be the heavyweight champ.

Liston was the most disliked black sports star since Jack Johnson. He was introduced to boxing at the age of 18 in the Missouri State Penitentiary and turned professional soon after his release. In between his early bouts, he provided debt-collecting muscle for local hoodlums. In 1956, he was arrested for assaulting a police officer, following a row outside his house, and was sentenced to nine months in an Illinois workhouse. This not only made it extremely difficult for him to get fights (which, in turn, made him more dependent on the mob), it also made him a marked man for every white cop in the country. By 1962, he had a record of nineteen arrests.

In his new home of Philadelphia, Liston, by now recognised as the

leading, heavyweight contender, was continually rousted by police, who charged him with a wide array of petty offences, including impersonating a police officer (apparently a woman whom he had approached in his car at night thought for a moment that it was a police vehicle). When he left the city for a new home in Denver, he told the press, 'I'd rather be a lamp post in Denver than the mayor of Philadelphia.'

Sonny was illiterate but quick-witted, and more than prepared to stand his ground against bullies in uniform. Despite his police record and his mob connections, used again and again to deny him a title shot, he was generous and sensitive, as well as prickly and wary. His biographer, Rob Steen, was right to observe: 'All Sonny ever got were cheap shots.' One of the most persistent concerned his date of birth, which was shrouded in mystery. For the press, Liston's inability to produce a bona fide birth certificate was evidence of criminality. In fact, Liston was born among impoverished rural workers, with the aid of a midwife, not a doctor - and he was his father's twenty-fourth child. Not surprisingly, his birth went unrecorded. Liston hailed from America's anonymous lower depths - and he was punished for it. Depicted as sullen, violent, ignorant and menacing, Liston was fair game for journalists, boxing authorities and politicians. Black leaders froze him out. This street-brawler simply did not fit in with their clean-cut, moderate, non-violent image. The NAACP urged Patterson not to give him a title shot.

In the end, however, Liston got his chance, partly because Patterson was embarrassed by the allegations that he was dodging Sonny, but mainly because the promoters and authorities knew that excluding Liston would discredit the heavyweight title even more than giving it to him. The public backed Patterson, but it wanted his supremacy confirmed in the ring.

Thus the scene was set for a fight with almost as many symbolic overtones as Louis-Schmelinz. *Sports Illustrutrated* invoked the Cold War: 'In this day and age we cannot afford an American heavyweight champion with Liston's unsavoury record.' The president of the National Boxing Association made no effort to disguise his bias: 'In my opinion. Patterson is a fine representative of his race, and I believe the heavyweight champion of the world should be the kind of man our children could look up to.' Patterson also received messages of support from liberal icons like JFK, Ralph Bunche and Eleanor Roosevelt, Percy Sutton, then president of the Manhattan NAACP and later a New York Democratic kingpin and millionaire, declared: 'I'm for Patterson because he represents us better than Liston ever could or would.'

In fact, everyone spurned Liston except Malcolm X, who said he hoped Liston would 'shake Patterson up.' Malcolm was angry at

remarks Patterson had made about the Nation of Islam and saw him, and indeed all black boxers, as slaves to white money-men. Later, his encounter with Cassius Clay was to change his mind.

As for Liston himself, he seemed resigned to play his assigned role. 'A prize fight is like a cowboy movie,' he said. 'There has to be a good guy and a bad guy. People pays their money to see me lose. Only in my cowboy movie, the bad guy always wins.' Sure enough, Liston knocked out Patterson in the first round. In the rematch six months later, he did It again. The press now declared him 'invincible'–but they still thought someone else should be champion.

What role? Whose models?

The origins of the role model lie in the Victorian ideology of amateur sport. The Victorians paid tribute to the level playing field ('fair play', 'may the best man win', etc.) at the same time that they justified the domination of sport by a social and economic elite. Sport's egalitarian autonomy was thus overlaid with the prevailing hierarchies. Competitors were now to be judged by criteria extraneous to sport. Winning under the rules was not enough, one also had to uphold certain social and moral standards.

The role model was and is a means of taming the democracy of sport, of neutralising its sublime indifference to the high and mighty in other realms. The level playing field allowed blacks to become successful at sport; that success had to be confined and modified so that it carried messages approved by the white establishment. Black sports heroes were therefore asked, by both the white and black elite, to act as role models for the rest of the black population. They were required to set an example of proper behaviour - as defined by the elite - on and off the playing field. In this way, the elite ensured that, despite its apparent anarchy, the level playing field mirrored their ideas about the world, including their ideas about race.

Ever since the late nineteenth century, the 'gentlemen's code' deriving from amateur sport has been used to qualify or denigrate black success. West Indian fast-bowlers and Pakistani swing bowlers have both been abused, not for breaking the rules, but for playing the game in a different manner from that established by their former colonial masters. In football, the aggressive and immodest black player, Ian Wright, is compared, unfavourably, to the mealy-mouthed (white) Gary Lineker, though both won fame and lucre by doing more or less the same thing.

Because it is shaped from above, the black role model contains a fundamental contradiction. The purpose of the role model is to provide an example to black people of personal success achieved within the laws and customs of the realm. Yet all but a tiny minority of blacks have no

hope of achieving such success within those law and customs. What is more, the black role models offered are mostly male (in the case of boxing, exclusively so). The female black population is assigned a purely passive role; they are not asked to emulate but merely to admire the role model. In reality, they share this impotence with the vast majority of black males.

The more black sports stars remind people of the oppressive realities of black life (like Sonny Liston), the less they are accepted as a role model for it. More often than not, the duties of the role model have estranged black sports stars from their popular constituency. By radically redefining his duties as a role model, Muhammad Ali changed all that. His evolving politics enabled him to embrace his fans in a new way. Transcending the old stereotypical duality - the 'Uncle Tom' and the 'bad Nigger' - he resolved, however fleetingly, the contradiction of the black role model.

Cassius Clay, Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X

It is hard to believe now, but at first Cassius Clay appeared to many Liston-haters as a 'great white hope'. Certainly he was happy enough in the beginning to join in the conventional role-play. At ringside for the Liston-Patterson fight, he shook Patterson's hand, then looked towards Liston, threw his hands up in mock terror and fled.

Cassius Clay enjoyed a more comfortable and stable upbringing than Liston, Patterson or, indeed, any of the black opponents he was to face in the future. At the 1960 Olympics in Rome, asked by a Soviet reporter about the condition of blacks in the USA, Clay had answered 'To me, the USA is still the best country in the world, counting yours.' In those days he was proud of his Christian name: 'Don't you think it's a beautiful name? Makes you think of the Coliseum and those Roman gladiators.' But when he returned home he complained: 'With my gold medal actually hanging around my neck I couldn't get a cheeseburger served to me in a downtown Louisville restaurant.' Nonetheless, he was sponsored by a consortium of white Louisville businessmen and, thanks to his big mouth and showbiz acumen, quickly became the most publicised fighter in the business. Regarded by many as a vaudeville turn, he was still, broadly, thought to be good for boxing. No one in those days thought this crass comedian would one day become a world-wide symbol of black dignity. Indeed, the very idea that he might this without losing his sense of fun and his love of performing violated all the known sports stereotypes. A year before his title fight with Liston, he asked reporters:

> Where do you think I'd be next week, if I didn't know how to shout and holler and make the public take notice? I'd be poor and I'd

> probably be down in my home town, washing windows of running an elevator and saying, 'yes suh' and 'no suh' and knowing my place. Instead, I'm one of the highest paid athletes in the world. Think about that. A southern coloured boy has made one million dollars.

In other words, the clowning was a way of breaking out of the racist stranglehold. Clay first heard Elijah Muhammad speak in 1959 when he was in Chicago for a Golden Gloves tournament. From the beginning, it was Clay who sought out the Nation of Islam, the Muslims never pursued him. Indeed, only gradually did they realise what a prize had dropped in their laps. The black magazine, *Ebony*, was the first to report the real significance of the emerging Clay story:

> Cassius Marcellus Clay - and this fact has evaded the sports-writing fraternity -is a blast furnace of racial pride. His is a pride that would never mask itself with skin lighteners and processed hair, a pride scorched with memories of millions of little burns.

Nonetheless, it was Liston, not Clay, whose contract barred segregated movie theatres from showing their bout on closed circuit television. And: despite his 'racial pride', Clay was happy to deploy the dehumanising language of the oppressors in the build-up to the fight with the man he called 'that big ugly bear':

> Sonny Liston is nothing. The man can't talk. The man can't fight. The man needs talking lessons. The man needs boxing lessons. And since he's gonna fight me, he needs falling lessons ... After I whup Sonny Liston, I'm gonna whup those little green men from Jupiter and Mars. And looking at them won't scare me none because they can't be no uglier than Sonny Liston ... I'm gonna give him to the local zoo after I whup him ... I'm young, I'm handsome, I'm fast, I can't be beaten ... He's too ugly to be the world champ. The world champ should be pretty like me.

Clay here echoed the worst racist stereotype of the black boxer as an uneducated animal, but he did so with a panache quite foreign to the ethos of boxing's traditional black role models. Clay had already dispensed with the modest self-effacement which all professional sports people, especially black ones, were expected to affect and because of this many in the media wanted him put in his place, even by Sonny Liston. Then, weeks before the bout, Clay and Malcolm X were photographed together in New York. The *New York Herrald Tribune* demanded to know if the heavyweight challenger was 'a card-carrying Muslim'. Clay was quick to spot the potential for a role swap and told Liston: 'I make you great. The fans love you because I'm the villain.' Clay may have been amused, but his publicist, Harold Conrad, despaired: 'The whole sales pitch for the fight had been Clay against

Liston, white hat against black hat, and now it looked like there'd be two black hats fighting.'

Malcolm's brief encounter with Ali was left out of the Spike Lee film, despite the impact it had on both men's lives. Elijah Muhammad instructed his followers against all sports, especially degrading spectacles like boxing. Malcolm had never even heard of Clay when they were introduced in Detroit in 1962. But he was impressed by the young fighter's seriousness about the Nation of Islam. After all, Clay stood to gain nothing from any association with the Muslims. In his *Autobiography*, Malcolm recalled:

> I liked him. Some contagious quality about him made him one of the few people I ever invited to my home. Betty liked him. Our children were crazy about him. Cassius was simply a likeable, friendly, clean-cut, down-to-earth youngster. I noticed how alert he was even in little details. I suspected there was a plan in his public clowning.

As the Liston fight approached, Malcolm was in rapid evolution - en route to a new revolutionary internationalism and early martyrdom. In his *Autobiography*, he depicts his time in Clay's camp as one of distress and isolation. He had been suspended by Elijah Muhammad for ninety days, following his 'chickens coming home to roost' crack about the JFK assassination. As Clay prepared for his moment of glory, Malcolm was coming to grips with Elijah Muhammad's cult of personality and the danger that his apostasy would place him in.

Elijah Muhammad and his coterie were opposed to Malcolm's presence in Clay's camp. They were as convinced as the white sports writers that Clay, the eight-to-one underdog, would lose and feared that their association with him would be damaging. But Malcolm stayed close to Clay because 'it was Allah's intent for me to help Cassius prove Islam's superiority before the world - through proving that mind can win over brawn'. He fortified Clay to face Liston by talking about David and Goliath. For Malcolm, Liston's whole life and career was proof that the struggle for integration was futile and debilitating. Clay, he felt, could represent something different. 'Clay . . . is the finest Negro athlete I have ever known, the man who will mean more to his people than Jackie Robinson, because Robinson is the white man's hero.' Malcolm saw Clay's symbolic power more clearly than anyone else the time, and he helped Clay realise that power in the ring:

> 'This fight is the truth,' I told Cassius. 'It's the Cross and the Crescent fighting in a prize ring - for the first time. It's a modern crusades - a Christian and a Muslim Facing each other with television to beam it off Telstar for the whole world to see what happens!' I told Cassius, 'Do you think Allah has brought about all this, intending for you to leave the ring as anything but the champion?'

Attendance at the fight itself was small but over one million people watched it on closed circuit TV. The *New York Times* reported: 'The general support for Clay seemed to transcend any betting considerations and even the normal empathy for an underdog.' The *Times'* puzzlement brings to mind the lyric written by Bob Dylan at about the same time: 'Something is happening here/But you don't know what it is/Do you, Mister Jones?'

In Miami, Clay danced his way around a lumbering Liston, his speed, footwork and amazing 360 degree ring-vision nullifying the champion's advantages in power and reach. When a bewildered and dejected Liston failed to come out for the seventh round, Clay was jubilant. 'I want everyone to bear witness.' he shouted. 'I am the greatest! I shook up the world!' Nonetheless, many sports writers continued to regard his victory as a fluke. Malcolm was more perceptive: 'The secret of one of fight history's greatest upsets was that, months before that night, Clay had out-thought Liston.' Because of his rejection of the prevailing stereotypes of black sportsmen, Malcolm was able to see in Clay what the sports writers refused to see: a supremely intelligent and inventive boxer inspired by more than just a lust for money.

After the fight, a quiet Clay met privately with Malcolm and Jim Brown, the great Cleveland Browns running back and an early champion of black rights in sport. The next morning, after breakfast with Malcolm, he held a press conference at which he announced:

> I believe in Allah and in peace. I don't try to move into white neighbourhoods. I don't want to marry a white woman. I was baptised when I was twelve, but I didn't know what I was doing. I'm not a Christian any more. I know where I'm going and I know the truth, and I don't have to be what you want me to be. I'm free to be what I want.

No boxing champion, and no black sports person, had ever issued such a ringing declaration of independence. The next day, Clay amplified his views. In place of his usual ingratiating bravado, there was now a steely and even exultant defiance:

> Black Muslims is a press word. The real name is Islam. That means peace. Islam is a religion and there are 750 million people all over the world who believe in it, and I'm one of them. I ain't no Christian. I can't be when I see all the colored people fighting for forced integration get blowed up. They get hit by stones and chewed by dogs and they blow up a Negro church and don't find the killers ... I'm the heavyweight champion, but right now there are some neighbourhoods I can't move into. I know how to dodge boobytraps and dogs. I dodge them by staying in my own neighbourhood. I'm

> no trouble-maker ... I'm a good boy. I never have done anything wrong. I have never been to jail. I have never been in court. I don't join any integration marches. I don't pay any attention to all those white women who wink at me. I don't carry signs . . . A rooster crows only when it sees the light. Put him in the dark and he'll never crow, I have seen the light and I'm crowing.

As Robert Lipsyte observed, Clay was challenging the white establishment's fundamental injunction to all black American sports stars: 'keep our stereotypes in order'. Notice how Clay argued his case. In telling the press that he had never been to jail or court, he was saying? 'I'm no Sonny Liston.' In forswearing white women, he was saying. 'I'm no Jack Johnson.' In denouncing integration, he was saying, 'I'm no Floyd Patterson.' In a bizarre fashion, he was adhering to the contours of the role model favoured by the white press. Therefore, he seemed to be arguing, there was no reason they should be threatened by him. Yet the content of the model was utterly transformed - and that posed a major threat to all the white press held sacred, in and out of sport.

Clay undermined his own attempt to paint his conversion as purely religious by his constant references to American racism. Perusing Clay's statements of the time, it is clear he saw the Nation of Islam as a means of black survival in a hostile racist world. This may have looked like a religious act, but its wellsprings were political. 'I don't believe Muhammad's conversion was a religious experience,' said the born-again Christian, George Foreman, years later. 'I'll believe until the day I die that it was a social awakening ... It was something he needed at the time, something the whole country needed...'

A week after the fight. Clay journeyed to Harlem and checked into the Hotel Theresa, where Malcolm had an office. Later, the two men toured, the UN and were photographed together meeting African delegates. On 6 March, Elijah Muhammad announced that the world heavyweight champion was changing his name. 'Muhammad Ali is what I will give him for as long as he believes in Allah and follows me.'

As Ali himself was quick to point out, name changes were commonplace in American sports and entertainment. Joe Louis and Sugar Ray Robinson had done it, so had Edward G. Robinson and John Garfield. But this was different. This was a black man signalling by his name change, not a desire to ingratiate himself with mainstream America, but a comprehensive rejection of it. It was to be many years before he won his battle to force the media to adopt his new name. The *New York Times* persisted in calling him 'Cassius Clay' throughout the 1960s.

In changing his name. Ali was demonstrating what he meant when he said: '*I don't have to be what you want me to be*.' For the first time, here was a black American sports hero who would not allow himself to

be defined according to white racist categories. He was seizing back his persona. Johnson and Louis, Patterson and Liston had been endowed with their public identities by the white press; Clay was going to create his own identity and shove it down their throats.

Of course, the only way he could have ever hoped to succeed in this, given the forces he was up against. was with the wind of a great movement at his back. Clay tried to make a virtue out of the Muslims' abstention from active participation in the civil rights movement. But if he chose the Nation of Islam as a means of escaping confrontations with white racism, he was to be sadly disappointed. In the end, Clay would fight all the battles he sought to avoid, and on a grand scale. He would 'carry a sign' by becoming a sign - a living symbol of black resistance to white racism.

Clay's renunciation of the old stereotypes infuriated the establishment, white and black. 'Most of the writers, particularly the older ones, felt more comfortable with the mob figures around Liston than with the Muslims around Clay,' said Robert Lipsyte. Boxing pundit Jimmy Cannon called Ali's ties to the Nation of Islam 'the dirtiest in American sports since the Nazis were shilling for Max Schmeling as representative of their vile theories of blood'. Louisville black churchmen pronounced Ali 'a disservice to his race, nation and the world'. Joe Louis joined in:

> Clay will earn the public's hatred because of his connections with the Black Muslims. The things they preach are just the opposite of what we believe. The heavyweight champion should be the champion of all the people. He has responsibilities to all people.

Acting on a suggestion Malcolm had made before the Miami fight, Ali made a trip to Africa in May 1964. He met Nkrumah in Ghana and Nasser in Egypt. Everywherehe was greeted by huge crowds, who chanted his new name with gusto. On this trip, Cassius Clay was buried and Muhammad Ali superseded him. By now, Malcolm's break with Elijah Muhammad had become public. On his way to Mecca, at a hotel in Accra, he ran into Ali, who snubbed him. 'Nobody listens to Malcolm anymore,' the champ told reporters. According to Alex Haley, 'that hurt Malcolm more than any other person turning away from him'. Ironically, Malcolm was to find that his acquaintance with Ali stood him in good stead on his pilgrimage. In Saudi Arabia, he was often mistaken for Ali ('the Muslim from America'), whose fame was now huge in the Muslim world. For months, the Clay-Liston fight was shown at packed cinemas throughout the Middle East. Ali was becoming a global figure, with tens of millions of supporters outside his native land.

After the Miami fight, Floyd Patterson had declared that, 'as a Catholic', he felt he had a duty to 'reclaim the title for America' from the Muslim Ali. Three weeks later, he was forced to sell his $140,000

house in Yonkers (only a few miles from my own home town) for a $20,000 loss. White neighbours had rejected his attempt at integration, subjecting his family to racist abuse. Nonetheless, Patterson insisted: 'The image of a Black Muslim as the world heavyweight champion disgraces the sport and the nation. Cassius Clay must be beaten and the Black Muslims' scourge removed from boxing.'

Patterson may have initiated the battle of the role models, but Ali met the challenge head on, subjecting Patterson to weeks of verbal abuse.

> Patterson says he's gonna bring the title back to America. If you don't believe the title already is in America, just see who I pay taxes to. I'm American. But he's a deaf dumb so-called Negro who needs spanking. I plan to punish him for the things he said; cause him pain ...The little old pork-chop eater don't have a chance.

According to Arthur Ashe, 'No black athlete had ever publicly spoken so disparagingly to another black athlete.' Ali's doggerel was cruel:

> I'm going to put him flat on his back,
> so that he will start acting Black,
> because when he was champ he didn't do as he should.
> he tried to force his way into an all-white neighbourhood.

At the fight itself, Patterson was hopelessly outclassed. Heedless of the outrage of ringside commentators, Ali dragged the fight out to the twelfth round, punishing Patterson with his fists, then stepping back and allowing him time to recover while taunting him, 'Come on America! Come on white America!'

Over the next three years; Ali's attacks on 'Uncle Toms' and their white sponsors became ever sharper. 'People are always telling me what a good example I could be if I just wasn't a Muslim,' Ali observed. 'I've heard it over and over, how come I couldn't be like Joe Louis and Sugar Ray. Well, they're gone now, and the black man's condition is just the same, ain't it? We're still catching hell.'

Did Ali regret not having Malcolm at his side during these difficult years? According to Jim Brown, even before the Liston fight in Miami, Ali knew he would have to reject Malcolm for Elijah. Perhaps he wanted to prove his loyalty, perhaps he also sensed that Malcolm would place too many demands on him and expose him to too many dangers. Perhaps he was aware that abandoning Elijah could be even more dangerous than embracing Malcolm.

'When Malcolm broke with Elijah, I stayed with Elijah,' Ali explained many years later. 'I believed that Malcolm was wrong and Elijah was God's messenger. I was in Miami, training, when I heard Malcolm had been shot to death ... It was a pity and a disgrace he died like that, because what Malcolm saw was right, and after he left us, we

went his way anyway. Colour didn't make a man a devil. It's the heart, soul and mind that counts.'

Ali was openly delighted when the Nation of Islam abandoned anti-white rhetoric for Muslim orthodoxy in the 1970s. He had always had white friends and associates, and his travels had made him aware that oppression comes in many forms on this earth. In the end, Ali came to stand for more than mere black self-assertion; his Muslim allegiance and embryonic Pan-Africanism gradually led him, like Malcolm, towards a broader, more inclusive vision of his role.

'I don't have to be what you want me to be'

Ali's refusal to fight in Vietnam made him into a hero in places where boxing was unknown. In reply to those Americans who demanded he 'serve his country like Joe Louis', he asserted a higher loyalty and a broader solidarity. In the process, he became an icon of internationalism.

Initially, Ali was excluded from the draft because he scored so poorly in IQ tests - proof that whatever these tests may measure, it certainly isn't intelligence. But as the US escalated the war, the Pentagon's standards were lowered and, in February 1966, Ali was reclassified 1-A, eligible and likely to be called for military service. When told the news, Ali blurted out, 'I ain't got no quarrel with them Vietcong.' It was a spur-of-the-moment remark, but it became Ali's theme in his long battle with the US government.

> Keep asking me, no matter how long
> on the war in Vietnam, I sing this song
> I ain't got no quarrel with the Vietcong.

Reaction from the political and boxing establishments was swift and hostile. The Kentucky legislature, which had honoured him when he won a gold medal, now condemned him for bringing discredit to 'all loyal Kentuckians'. The state of Illinois banned his scheduled title defence against Ernie Terrell. Miami and Pittsburgh followed suit. Sports writers, including Arthur Daley of the *New York Times*, urged a boycott of Ali's fights, a call taken up by right-wing politicians like Congressman Frank Clark of Pennsylvania:

> The heavyweight champion has been a complete and total disgrace. I urge the citizens of the nation as a whole to boycott any of his performances. To leave these theatre seats empty would be the finest tribute possible to that boy whose hearse may pass by the open doors of the theatre on Main Street, USA.

Within days of Ali's remark, 300 theatres across the country pulled out of closed-circuit coverage. The Terrell bout was cancelled. Ali was

forced to defend his title abroad. But he would not recant. Instead, he became more vocal and more explicit in his rejection of the war:

> Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go ten thousand miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs? ... I have nothing to lose by standing up and following my beliefs. So I'll go to jail. We've been in jail for four hundred years.

When he finally fought Terrell, in Houston in 1967, his ferocity shocked the pundits. Terrell, a powerful hitter considered Ali's most dangerous opponent since Liston, had made the mistake of calling him 'Clay' duringt a pre-fight press conference. 'What's my name?' Ali roared again and again as he showered Terrell with punches. 'Uncle Tom! What's my name?' The *New York Daily News* called the fight 'a disgusting exhibition of calculating cruelty, an open defiance of decency, sportsmanship and all the tenets of right versus wrong'. Arthur Daley called Ali 'a mean and malicious man whose facade has crumbled as he gets deeper into the Black Muslim movement'. Another veteran boxing correspondent, Milton Gross, confessed: 'One almost yearns for the return of Frankie Carbo and his mobster ilk.'

Rarely has the hideous hierarchy of boxing's values been so naked. Ali's violence in the ring (and within the rules) was declared reprehensible by the very people who condemned him for not engaging in much more deadly violence in Vietnam. Even the violence of organised crime was considered less discrediting to the sport of boxing than Ali's crime of conscience.

And a crime of conscience it was. The government made it clear that Ali would not be exposed to combat. Like Joe Louis before him, he could box exhibitions and address troops and, in Ali's words, spend his tour 'living the easy life and not having to get out in the mud and fight and shoot'. But he refused all the soft options, including exile abroad.

It has to be remembered that, at this time, opposition to the war, though mounting, was still anything but fashionable. It was to be another year before Bobby Kennedy and the 'liberal' wing of the Democratic Party broke with Johnson. The mainstream civil rights leaders steered clear of the issue. Until the late 1960s, the received wisdom in the white establishment and among many black leaders was that black people would make advances by showing themselves to be 'good Americans'. If they were loyal to their country, their country would be grateful. 'Patriotic blacks', like Joe Louis or Floyd Patterson, were the best blacks. In both politics and sport, the ground rules of Cold War liberalism still applied: if they sought legitimacy, blacks like trade unions, had to be unequivocally 'on America's side'. Robeson and DuBois had placed their loyalty to the oppresed of the world before any loyalty to the US government. As a consequence,

they were driven out of American public life and ultimately into exile. Now, Muhammad Ali was committing the same heresy for which they had been punished. In 1966, he was one of only a handful of black voices publicly opposing the war. Within weeks of making his ‘I ain’t no quarrel’ crack, Ali was placed under surveillance by the FBI, which complained, in an internal memorandum, that he had ‘utilised his position as a nationally known figure in the sports world to promote through appearances at various gatherings an ideology completely foreign to the basic American ideals of equality and justice for all, love of god and country’.

In fact, Ali was ahead of the established civil rights leaders and more in tune with feeling in the ghettoes, where the real price of the war was being paid. On 29 March 1967, Martin Luther King met privately with Ali in Louisville and then publicly lauded his stand. On 4 April 1967, after much soul-searching, King came out against the war in a major speech in Riverside church in New York City. Three weeks later, Ali reported for induction in Houston. Three times he refused to answer the sergeant's call for ‘Cassius Clay’. Then he signed a statement formally refusing induction on religious grounds. Afterwards, he told the press:

> I am proud of the title 'World Heavyweight Champion' which I won in the ring in Miami on February 25, 1964. The holder of it should at all times have the courage of his convictions and carry out those convictions, not only in the ring but in all phases of his life.

Clearly, Ali had radically redefined his duties as a role model. The boxing authorities could not tolerate it. Without waiting for charges to be filed, no less a full trial, they stripped Ali of his title. *Ring* magazine declined to designate a fighter of the year because ‘Cassius Clay’, the obvious candidate for the award, ‘is most emphatically not to be held up as an example to the youngsters of the United States’.

In June, Herbert Muhammad, Elijah’s son and Ali’s manager, brought together a number of black sports stars for a private meeting with Ali. Some observers were convinced that Herbert wanted the stars to persuade Ali to take the army’s deal. If that was so, Herbert had seriously underestimated his fighter’s determination. The stars, including football players Jim Brown and Willie Davis and basketball heroes Bill Russell and Lew Alcindor (who later changed his name to Kareem Abdul Jabbar), left the meeting deeply moved by Ali’s sincerity and courage. They were also impressed by his ability to break the boundaries within which sports heroes were supposed to act. ‘He gave so many people courage to test the system,’ said Jabbar, ‘a lot of us didn’t think he could do it, but he did and succeeded every time.’ For Russell, Ali was ‘a man accepting special responsibilities’. He told the press:

> I'm not worried about Muhammad Ali. He is better equipped than anyone I know to withstand the trials in store for him. What I'm worried about is the rest of us.

Ali was sentenced to five years in prison and a $10,000 fine. He posted bail and began the three-year process of appeal, which was to take his case ultimately to the Supreme Court. In the meantime, he was forced out of boxing. To make a living, he gave lectures at colleges around the country, winning passionate support among student radicals, despite their disagreements with his homilies on the evils of integration, drugs and sex. ‘Damn the money. Damn the heavyweight championship.’ Ali told the students. ‘I will die before I sell out my people for the white man's money.’ Who could resist a pitch like that?

Symbolism and resistance

Besides inspiring thousands to resist the draft, Ali ignited a wave of protest among black sports stars. During the 1967-8 academic year, black athletes at thirty-seven white-dominated colleges and universities raised demands for more black coaches, facilities, cheerleaders and trainers. Bob Beamon, the future long jump record-setter, was dropped by his university coach for refusing to compete against the Mormon-run Brigham Young University (the Mormon doctrine at the time was explicitly racist). That year, black sports people came together to form the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR), whose first demand was the restoration of Muhammad Ali’s titles’ (second was the removal of the racist Avery Brundage as head of the United States Olympic Committee and third was the exclusion of South Africa and Rhodesia from international competition).

Initially, OPHR advocated a black boycott of the Olympics but, when South Africa was' banned, the focus turned to subverting the event from within. The potent symbolism of the Olympic podium - a celebration of individual excellence at the service of the nation-state - was diametrically opposed to the tenets of ‘black consciousness’ then spreadins rapidly among black American sports people. It had to be challenged.

On 16 October 1968, at Mexico City, a supporter of OPHR, Tommie Smith, the 24-year-old son of a migrant labourer, captured the 200 metres Olympic Gold with a world record-breaking run. In third place was another OPHR supporter, John Carlos, a 23-year-old Harlemite On the winners’ podium, they bowed their heads and raised clenched fists during the US national anthem. Tommie Smith explained then gesture:

> I wore a black right-hand glove and Carlos wore the left-hand glove of the same pair. My raised right hand stood for the power in black

America. Carlos' raised left-hand stood for the unity of black America. Together they formed an arch of unity and power. The black scarf around my neck stood for black pride. The black socks with no shoes stood for black poverty in racist America. The totality of our effort was the regaining of black dignity.

The need to overthrow the old role models had driven Smith and Carlos to invent a complex new symbolism. The rhetoric of individual victory and national glory was replaced by a language of solidarity that amounted to repudiation of the United States and all its works. Thousands of blacks had been lynched for less.

Smith and Carlos were ejected from the Olympic village, banned from the games and vilified at home. The problem for the authorities was that, as far as the public was concerned, Smith and Carlos were the world's number one and number three 200 metres men, just as Ali was the World Heavyweight Champion. They had won these distinctions in open and fair competition. Ali's support grew not only because the tide of opinion swung against the war, but because he could appeal to sport's egalitarian autonomy. Ali was the champ, according to the common understanding of the rules of the game and regardless of what the authorities said. When they staged elimination bouts for his 'vacant' title, Ali warned: 'Everyone knows I'm the champion. My ghost will haunt all the arenas. I'll be there, wearing a sheet and whispering, "Ali-e-e-e-! Ali-e-e-e!"'

Ali was 25 years old when stripped of his crown and he spent twenty-nine months - when he was probably at the height of his powers - out of the ring. In June 1970, the Supreme Court reversed his earlier conviction because the FBI had, it transpired, illegally tapped his phone. By this time, many within the establishment had clearly become reluctant to send Ali to jail, but it was a close run thing. Had it been left to the president, Ali would have served his time. According to Jackie Robinson, a Republican confidante, 'Cassius Clay is Nixon's pet peeve'.

Throughout his ordeal, Ali received little assistance from the Nation of Islam. In 1969, Elijah Muhammad suspended Ali for nine months for saying on television that he would like to fight again. 'Mr. Muhammad Ali has sporting blood. Mr. Muhammad Ali desires to do that which the Holy Qur'an teaches him against. Mr. Muhammad Ali wants a place in the sports world.' And the final insult: 'We will call him Cassius Clay.'

Vindication

Readmitted to the ring. Ali lost to Joe Frazier in March 1971. Officially, Frazier was the champion and Ali the challenger; in reality,

as Frazier himself acknowledged, he would not be recognised as the true title-holder until he beat Ali. It was a brutal battle, the first of three they would contest over the next four years.

By now, Ali had mastered both rhetoric of race and the symbolic power of the ring. He knew better than anyone how to combine the two to mobilise popular support (and sell tickets).

> Frazier's no real champion. Nobody wants to talk to him. Oh, maybe Nixon will call him if he wins. I don't think he'll call me. But 98% of my people are for me. They identify with my struggle. Same one they're fighting every day in the streets. If I win, they win. I lose, they lose. Anybody black who thinks Frazier can whup me is an Uncle Tom.

The irony was that Frazier, who had grown up among the poorest of the black poor in South Carolina, had more genuine street cred than Ali, who treated him with disdain. He called Frazier 'an ignorant gorilla', language which, had it come from a white fighter, would have provoked a bitter reaction among black people.

> Joe Frazier is too ugly to be champ. Joe Frazier is too dumb to be champ. The heavyweight champion should be smart and pretty, like me. Ask Joe Frazier, 'How do you feel, champ?'. He'll say, 'Duh. duh, duh.'

Frazier resented being cast by Ali as another Liston and, these days, is one of the very few people willing to say anything uncomplimentary about Ali in public.

> Calling me an Uncle Tom; calling me the white man's champion. All that was phoneyness to turn people against me. He was helping himself, not black people. Ali wasn't no leader of black people ... A lot of people went to the fight that night to see Clay's head knocked off and I did my best to oblige them ...

But this was precisely Joe Frazier's dilemma, the people who wanted him to beat Ali were the die-hard racists and the old-guard boxing establishment, both of whom had always resented Ali's uppityness. Frazier was a magnificent athlete whose tragedy was that he came along at a time when his only public profile was as a foil to Ali. His bitter complaint against Ali - that the latter stole his blackness from him - reveals how much had changed since the days of Liston and Patterson, not to mention Joe Louis and Jack Johnson. Blackness had become a positive attribute: a selling point for professional sports figures, a key to success on and off the level playing field. It was a tremendous achievement, and one that belonged in no small measure to Muhammad Ali.

The crown of that achievement was the Ali-Foreman fight in Zaire

in October 1974. After losing to Frazier, Ali had been written off, by enemies and friends alike, as a spent force. But his extraordinary resilience enabled him to come back, against the odds, to beat Frazier in another epic, exhausting contest in January 1974. He thus earned a title shot against the new heavyweight champion. George Foreman, widely thought to be the most formidable puncher in decades. Ten years after the Liston fight, at the age of 32, Ali once again found himself a no-hope underdog against a supposedly unstoppable powerhouse.

> This man is supposed to annihilate me, but ten years ago they said the same thing about Sonny Liston. George Foreman don't stand a chance. The world is gonna bow down to me, because the stage is set...

Kinshasa was chosen as the venue for Africa's first heavyweight title fight. It became a self-consciously African affair, in keeping with the Africanism then fashionable among the black American middle class. It was also Don King's first venture into heavyweight boxing promotion. The ex-numbers' runner and mafia lackey had capitalised on his blackness to interpose himself between the fighters and the Mobutu government in Zaire. Ali loathed King and a few years later. Muslim members of his entourage treated the crook to a richly deserved beating. But it was the Zaire fight which gave King his entrée to heavy-weight promotion, a market he was able to corner after Ali's retirement.

Mobutu's purpose in staging the fight was, first, to strengthen his own grip over the country and, second, to promote it as a modern, go-ahead society that welcomed foreign capital. Pre-fight publicity emphasised the city's gleaming new skyscrapers, government buildings and boulevards, as well as the country's mineral health (diamonds and copper) and bright economic prospects. David Frost, hired by King to MC the closed circuit TV coverage, invoked the dynamism of technological advance by breathlessly repeating at every opportunity that the broadcast was coming 'live via satellite from Zaire, Africa'.

Fifteen thousand people turned up just to watch the weigh-in, where Foreman tried to steal Ali's thunder by entering in an African robe. The fight itself was preceded by a lengthy exhibition of state-sponsored 'tribal' dancing. The Mobutu regime presented this as an affirmation of African tradition on the new global media stage: but it was also, like the fight that followed it, a commercial display of black bodies for the entertainment of a largely white television audience. The Zaire fight was one of the pioneer events in the creation of today's global telecommunications-based sports industry. It helped integrate Africa (just as Ali's later bout against Frazier in Manila helped integrate Asia) into the world system of modern sport, but, of course, it was integra-tion as a subordinate. Looking back on the propaganda surrounding

the fight, its optimism about the new, post-colonial Africa taking a proud and independent place in the world market seems to belong to another world.

As an Ali fan, I saw the 'rumble in the jungle' (as Ali dubbed it) as a last, probably forlorn, attempt by my hero to recapture past glory. Subsequently, I learned that my feelings were not unique; the fight meant a great deal to many people on the Left. One friend of mine, an Asian community activist with no interest in boxing, came into central London to watch the fight at a cinema because Ali, to him, embodied a 'political concept of blackness'; another friend, a Jewish Trotskyist. did the same - because Ali and Khrushchev had been his boyhood heroes. Reading the sports pages in my furnished flat in Notting Hill Gate. I realised that only the most dedicated wishful thinkers gave the ageing ex-champ and '60s martyr any chance against Foreman. Ali, as always, was quick to exploit the lack of expectations:

> You think the world was shocked when Nixon resigned?
> Wait till I whup George Foreman's behind!

And so it came to pass. A 62,000 crowd (mostly Zaireans) watched Ali come out attacking in round one. After that, he spent most of his time leaning against the ropes - the 'rope-a-dope', he called it later - and covering his face as Foreman punched away at his body to little effect. Between rounds, Ali led the crowd in its simple deafening chant: 'Ali! Ali! Ali!' Taunting and gabbing to Foreman throughout, soaking up punishment that would have finished off almost anyone else, Ali blunted Foreman's offensive.

It was an astonishing display of total ring awareness. Ali hardly danced at all after the first round, but somehow he managed to lead the ever-advancing Foreman round and round. Even as ringside critics puzzled over his tactics, he was in complete control. At one point, as he took a fearsome pummelling in the ribs, Ali winked at the TV camera. Never was his supreme gamesmanship - holding, clinching, pushing, tying up and frustrating Foreman, while always staying just the right side of the law - better displayed. His blows were fewer than Foreman's, but they counted for more. The punches were swift, economical and accurate. One might almost call them delicate were it not for the telltale swellings on Foreman's face.

With thirty seconds left in round eight, Ali moved out from the ropes and suddenly nailed the tiring Foreman with a perfectly executed left-right combination that sent the champion tumbling to the floor. For a moment, Ali stood over him, bouncing on his toes, fists cocked to deliver more punishment if needed, snarling and supreme, his eyes afire with victory. David Frost was beside himself: 'The most joyous scene in the history of boxing! Muhammad Ali has won! Muhammad Ali has won!'

In Zaire, Ali lived up to and beyond every boast he had ever made. As sports writer Mike Katz said, it was 'the ultimate sports fantasy of all time'. Ali explained its appeal: 'People like to see miracles. People like to see underdogs that do it. People like to be there when history is made.' But there was more to it than that. This was a triumph of intelligence and sheer intensity of personality over impersonal brawn. It was also a triumph for principle and solidarity over expedience and selfishness. Because of that, all over the world, people felt Ali's triumph as their triumph.

In the wake of the Zaire fight, even Ali's old enemies had to admit he was truly 'the greatest'. *Ring* magazine finally named him 'fighter of the year'. *Sports Illustrated* declared him 'Sportsman of the Year'. He was invited to the White House to meet president Gerald Ford in what was widely seen as a symbol of post-Vietnam, post-Watergate national reconciliation. As the wave of protest receded and the black liberation movement stuttered to a halt, Ali seemed a less threatening figure. After Zaire, he became, according to Jim Brown, a 'darling of the media' and 'part of the establishment'.

In 1975, at the Frankfurt Book Fair, I finally saw Ali in the flesh. He was by no means the only celebrity to turn up at the fair to promote a book, but he attracted more attention than the rest of them combined. The publishing crowd does not form one of boxing's traditional constituencies, but they swarmed around the heavyweight champ like star-struck teeny-boppers. This is one of the few times in my life I have queued for an autograph. Like most of the others who surrounded Ali that day, the autograph was only an excuse to get close to the man, a chance to pay him homage. This was just as well, because the next day the autograph itself was pinched from my hotel room.

As I drew closer to Ali, I marvelled at the hugeness of his neck and shoulders. In the midst of what had rapidly become a mob scene, he sat quite stilll scribbling his name over and over again. I realised that this must happen to him everywhere. At the time, he was probably the most famous human being on earth, adulated nearly everywhere as 'the Greatest'. Yet he seemed a modest man, bored but patient, accepting the duties of celebrity with good grace. Could it be that the most notorious boaster in the history of sport was, at the bottom of it all, a humble man? Certainly, that is what many of his closest friends have always insisted.

Boxing damned

Ali's last hears in the ring were tragic. Some said he kept fighting for so long to make up for the time lost because of his opposition to the war in Vietnam. Others that his ego would not let him recognise the truth. that he was long past his best and could only tarnish his image.

However, no one can doubt that one of the main reasons Ali stayed in the fight game through the late ’70s was that he needed the money. He had earned millions, but he had also given away millions. Ali was the original soft touch.

At one point, he even condescended to take part in a gimmick match against a Japanese wrestler. This was primarily a money-spinner, but it was also one of Ali’s many efforts to make the ‘world’ in World Champion mean more than the ‘world’ in baseball’s World Series. It proved an undignified spectacle, a humiliating falling-off from the rigour of true sporting competition. Ironically, here was Muhammad Ali, the man who had remade the image of the black sports hero, reduced to the depths of Joe Louis’s wrestling exhibitions or Jesse Owens’s races against horses. When Ali was subsequently vanquished by the inarticulate, inelegant Leon Spinks, it was clearly time to end the saga before it turned to farce. Instead, Ali returned to defeat an under-trained, coked-out Spinks in a fight that embarrassed all who saw it. His later come-back bout against Larry Holmes was even worse, not least for Holmes, an Ali devotee who tried his best to keep the 38-year-old former champion going through eleven rounds.

With the rollback of the social movements that had made Ali what he was in the 1960s, his politics lacked focus and became ever more confused. In 1980, president Carter sent him on a mission to Africa to drum up support for the US boycott of the Moscow Olympics. African politicians informed Ali, in no uncertain terms, that they regarded the US position as so much Cold War hypocrisy. Ali came back perplexed and embarrassed. In 1984, he backed Ronald Reagan for president, but was photographed with Jesse Jackson in 1988. In November 1990, he visited Iraq and persuaded Saddam Hussain to release fifteen of the US hostages he was holding in the build-up to the Gulf War. Over the years, Ali's Islam became more conventional and more devout.

Ali now suffers from Parkinson's syndrome, a motor disability which affects his speech and movement (but not, it is said, his intellectual capacities). This is a result of damage inflicted on the brain stem in the ring. If boxing is redeemed by having given us Muhammad Ali, then it must be damned by what it has done to him.

Ali’s secret power

Racial, hierarchical symbolism has always been overlaid on sporting contests, especially boxing. This symbolism is imposed on the contestants from outside, by the same elite forces which shape public perceptions in other areas. As we have seen, Ali turned the process upside down. He became the master, rather than the servant. of boxing’s symbolism and he did this by seeing himself as the servant of a greater cause.

In 1978, journalist Hunter S. Thompson suggested that Ali take on a white South African heavyweight in South Africa. Ali considered the proposal, thinking aloud before rejecting it. His reasoning was revealing. Yes, he would like to undertake the fight, provided that 'on that day there'd be equality in the arena' (i.e., he would not fight in front of a segregated crowd). Then he added another rider. 'If the masses of the country and the world were against it, I wouldn't go.' He was intrigued by, but also wary of, the symbolic dimensions of such a fight. 'What worries me is getting whupped by a white man in South Africa ... That's what the world needs ... me getting whupped by a white man in South Africa.' On the other hand, 'If I beat him too bad and then leave the country: they might beat up some of the brothers.' He concluded: 'I wouldn't fool with it. I'm a representative of black people ... It's too touchy - it's more than a sport when I get involved.'

This insight was the key to Ali's achievements. The politics were not an afterthought. They informed Ali's approach to his fights and ultimately his performance in the ring. According to Gary Smith of *Sports Illustrated*:

> Ali understood that in order to be great you need something outside of yourself to flow into . . . If you fight for yourself, maybe it's you against the world and that gives you fuel, but it will never give you the strength Ali had. Muhammad was fighting for more than himself. He fought for God; his mission was huge. And that's why, in places like Manila, he was able to prevail when other men would have lost.

Here is the source of the intense drama of Ali's fights. His whole personality was engaged and, through it, many of the great historical forces of the age made themselves felt in the ring.

The decline of the black sports star

Surveying contemporary black celebrities, Jim Brown, Ali's old ally, cannot disguise his contempt:

> Take a look at black superstars today - Michael Jackson, Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy - and look at them hiding behind the bushes with all the power they have. Watch them twist their mouths and make money and pretend, yet do virtually nothing but pay tokenism to black freedom. If Ali was Michael Jackson or Richard Pryor or Eddie Murphy, he'd risk everything for black people.

As for sport, it does indeed seem a steep decline from the days of Ali, Brown and Kareem Abdul Jabbar to those of Mike Tyson, Charles Barkley and Carl Lewis, from the black Olympians of 1968 to the elitist millionaires of the 'Dream Team' at Barcelona in 1992.

One reason for this decline has been the continuing growth of sports as big business and with it the escalation of financial rewards. This has placed an ever greater distance between the black masses and their heroes. Black stars have continued to make advances in sport, while the black community as a whole has suffered one reverse after another. Instead of acting as the cutting edge in the struggle for equality, the disproportionate black presence in major American sports merely reflects the increasing marginalisation of black people in the US economy. In 1992, an NCAA survey revealed that 40 per cent of college football players and 60 per cent of college basketball players were black. However, only 6 per cent of all students were black and 20 per cent of these were enrolled as athletes.

In the USA today, a young black male is murdered every fifty-five minutes. One in three black men aged 14-35 is in prison, on probation or waiting trial. Black communities are gripped by ever-deepening economic and social crisis. At the same time, explicitly racist ideology has returned amid an orgy of victim-bashing. The 1960s have been repudiated and caricatured. In this context, both the white establishment and black 'identity' politicians of various stripes have called on black male sports to perform, once again, as patriarchal role models. Accordingly, the heroes of the '90s wrap themselves in the flag and declare their Christian faith, while selling themselves to the highest bidder, Nike or Reebok. Nothing matters but the quest to win. There is no gospel but that of individual success.

Over the years, many black sport stars have emulated Ali's manner, but very few share his mission. We have the shadow of Ali's magnificent arrogance, without the substance of his inspirational rage. Take the black British fighter, Chris Eubank. In his vanity and play-acting, he seems the disciple of Ali, but his insistence that boxing is only a way to make money, and a nasty, unpleasant way at that, has made him something else, a kind of anti-boxer. By declaring openly that he will only fight really dangerous opponents if the price is right, he devalues his own title. In thus exposing boxing for what it is, he may be doing a service, but his message to the black communities is ambiguous. He poses as an English gentleman and the only goal in life he recognises is the acquisition of wealth. Where Ali was generous, Eubank is miserly; where Ali identified himself with the black poor, Eubank wants to be seen as having risen above his racial and class origins. Confronted in a television studio by a number of black youths from Moss Side. Eubank told them the secret of success was to 'be good'. One of the youths replied. 'I can't box. So I can be as "good" as anyone else and still not have a job and still get harassed by police.' Eubank, for once, was silent.

Recently, at what appeared to be a well-rehearsed, pre-fight press conference, the Irish boxer, Steven Collins, accused Eubank of ignoring

his roots. Eubank retorted by charging Collins with racism and threatening a ‘fight to the death’ - an unfortunate choice of words given the brain damage Eubank inflicted on Michael Watson. Eubank may or may not have been trying to rebuild his bridges to the black population, but he was certainly trying to boost interest in the Sky TV-sponsored bout with Collins by invoking the spectre of racial conflict. The stereotypes and role models that Ali shattered and reconstructed have become mere playthings for the likes of Eubank, no different from his monocle and cravat.

Today, boxing is sliding back into the second rank of modern sports. A bewildering variety of title-conferring authorities have stripped any meaning from the designation ‘World Champion’. Fights are made for the convenience of promoters and media executives and their quality is often poor. Fighters still run the risk of death and disability. The most important black person in boxing is Don King, a role model embodying the morals of a ghetto crack lord. But it is important to remember that the rapist Mike Tyson, King's prize possession, is as much the creation of those two white gentlemen of the ring, Cus D’Amato and Jim Jacobs, who discovered and trained him, as of the Brooklyn ghetto or Don King himself. As Barbara Koppel’s film on Tyson makes clear, his perception of women as commodities, as objects purely for his pleasure, was a product of boxing’s big money culture and its glamorisation of individual, male power.

Modern sport liberated physical play from the chains of ritual and religion, but ultimately encased it in another prison, of money and status and the global market-place. If modern sport is not to descend into mere post-modern spectacle, in which a Chris Eubank fight is much the same as an episode of ‘Gladiators’, then perhaps we need a second liberation, in which the egalitarian premise of modern sport is truly fulfilled. In the struggle for that second liberation, I am sure that much inspiration will be drawn, in the years to come, from the story of Muhammad Ali.

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