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A Defiant Muhammad Ali Was Cherished By Black Men

By Karen Grigsby Bates
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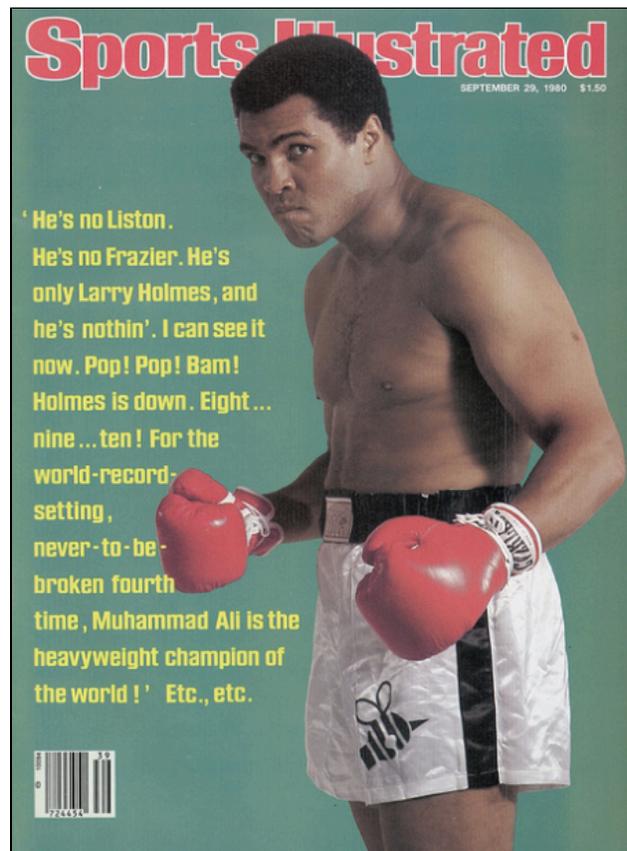
Muhammad Ali (1942-2016) was an American Olympic and professional boxer and social activist. He was a prominent figure in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, urging African-Americans to resist white domination. In 1966, he famously refused to be drafted to serve in the Vietnam War, citing his religious beliefs and his opposition to American involvement in the war. For this, he was arrested and stripped of his boxing titles. Ali petitioned the United States Supreme Court, which overturned his conviction in 1971. As you read, take notes on the characteristics and actions for which Ali was celebrated.

[1] Over the past few days, we've seen image after image of Muhammad Ali: triumphant in the ring, joking on talk shows and shakily lifting the Olympic torch at the 1996 Atlanta games. He's remembered these days as an athlete and a humanitarian, and that was, definitely, Ali. But so was the defiant, incisive¹ Ali.

"I'm sayin' you talking about me about some draft, and all of you white boys are breaking your necks to get to Switzerland and Canada and London!" Ali once said. "I'm not going to help nobody get something my Negroes don't have. If I'm gonna die, I'm gonna die right here, fightin' you."

He was arguing with white college students in 1967 — a time when black Americans were still being denied the vote in some places and where, in many places, perceived disrespect to whites — even students — could still get a black man killed.

Ali's unshakable self-confidence was a revelation to many black men, given those circumstances. "We had not seen an athlete be so brash² and bold and swaggering³ in defining identity in its own terms. That was important then, and it's still important," says Kevin Merida, the editor-in-chief of the sports and culture website The Undeclared.



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1. **Incisive (adjective):** intelligent, analytical, and clear thinking
 2. **Brash (adjective):** bold, strong, and cocky
 3. confident

- [5] Sunni Khalid, a journalist, agrees. He remembers seeing and hearing Ali when he was young and the boxer was in his prime. “That affirmation, ‘I’m black and I’m proud, I’m not going to take a slave name, I’m going to embrace a new religion, I’m going to do things on my terms and my terms alone,’ that resonated very, very powerfully — especially among African-American men,” Khalid says.

“Muhammad Ali is certainly a cultural and political icon,” says Peniel Joseph, a historian at the University of Texas at Austin who is director of the Center for the Study of Race and Democracy. “For black people, especially, he becomes the biggest symbol of black power and activism in the late ‘60s in a kind of defiant black masculinity.”

Joseph says Ali never apologized for his beliefs, even when he was penalized for them, as he was when he opted to become an official conscientious objector⁴ to the Vietnam War.⁵ Nor did he soft-pedal his conversion to Islam. “So Muhammad Ali becomes this person who is unapologetically, you know, at times unforgivably black,” Joseph says. “But in a way that young people, especially African-Americans and the culture really, really embraced.”

Back then, for a public figure at the height of his power to buck the establishment as Ali did was unthinkable, especially when the consequences were so severe. Ali was barred from boxing for 3 1/2 years, when he was in his prime. His income evaporated. Still, he remained unrepentant about his political stance, and his Muslim religion. Sunni Khalid says that was noticed beyond the U.S. borders, as people in several parts of the world embraced Ali as a fellow Muslim.

“Ali could really walk into any African country, many Asian countries, countries in the Middle East, and he would be mobbed, immediately. He was like a member of the family,” Khalid says.

- [10] Crowds loved Ali and he loved them back. Kevin Merida believes that accessibility is part of why Ali is being so deeply mourned now. Today’s star black athletes, like all star athletes, have a retinue⁶ of handlers and a roster of jealously guarded endorsements. They have managers and publicists who carefully curate⁷ their appearances. They have little spontaneous contact with normal people. They are as inaccessible as movie stars.

Ali, Merida says, stood in sharp contrast to all that. People — especially black people — got used to seeing him out and about. They looked forward to it. “Ali was somebody who would have no problem being in a rec center or playground, a corner in a difficult neighborhood, a barbershop,” Merida says.

Ali’s openness as a person was irresistible. His visibility as a Muslim also had an effect on his admirers in this country. When Ali joined the Nation of Islam, it was considered more of a black nationalist cult than a branch of orthodox Islam. But when Ali’s patron, Elijah Muhammad, died in 1975, his son Warith quickly converted the organization to an orthodox Sunni sect. Ali exposed many black Americans to the religion — and Sunni Khalid is one of those.

4. A person who refuses to serve in the armed forces due to their religious or ethical beliefs.

5. Instead of recognizing Ali’s status as a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War, the United States government elected to prosecute him for refusing to serve. A jury composed entirely of white people convicted him in less than half an hour.

6. A group of advisors or assistants accompanying an important person.

7. **Curate (verb):** select, organize, and present in a thoughtful and careful way

"I became a Muslim in 1978," Khalid says. "And I question whether I would have become a Muslim today were it not for Muhammad Ali, and if not for Malcolm X⁸ and you could almost say, almost, Elijah Muhammad."⁹

For many people, including African-Americans, this was a first glimpse of a non-Christian religion that is practiced in much of the world. And that religion's ambassador just happened to have been one of the world's best-known black men: Muhammad Ali.

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8. Malcolm X (1925-1965) was an African-American Muslim minister and human rights activist. He emphasized black self-determination and separation from white institutions.
 9. Elijah Muhammad (1897-1975) was the leader of the Nation of Islam in the United States for over 40 years. Scandal came to his organization after he was accused of plotting to assassinate Malcolm X.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. How does the author develop her point that Muhammad Ali was an inspirational figure for black Americans during his career? Cite evidence from the text in your response. [RI.3]

2. PART A: Which of the following best identifies the central idea of this article? [RI.2]
 - A. Ali's refusal to be blindly driven by a desire for financial gain, as was common of athletes in the United States, earned him the status of a beacon of integrity.
 - B. Muhammad Ali is most celebrated for his introduction of many African-Americans to the religion of Islam.
 - C. Muhammad Ali's self-confidence, accessibility, and unrelenting commitment to his principles and the fight for equality made him a powerful and inspirational public figure.
 - D. The United States has changed immensely since Muhammad Ali's rise to fame, particularly in the treatment of African-Americans throughout the country.

3. PART B: Which phrase from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. "...a time when black Americans were still being denied the vote in some places and where, in many places, perceived disrespect to whites...could still get a black man killed." (Paragraph 3)
 - B. "Muhammad Ali is certainly a cultural and political icon...he becomes the biggest symbol of black power and activism in the late '60s..." (Paragraph 6)
 - C. "Ali was barred from boxing for 3 1/2 years... His income evaporated. Still, he remained unrepentant about his political stance, and his Muslim religion." (Paragraph 8)
 - D. "I became a Muslim in 1978," Khalid says. "And I question whether I would have become a Muslim today were it not for Muhammad Ali..." (Paragraph 13)

4. PART A: Which of the following most closely matches the meaning of the phrase "soft-pedal" as it is used in Paragraph 7? [RI.4]
 - A. to downplay
 - B. to dispute
 - C. to preach about
 - D. to dismiss as unpopular

5. PART B: Which word/phrase from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
- A. "official conscientious objector" (Paragraph 7)
 - B. "conversion to Islam" (Paragraph 7)
 - C. "unapologetically" (Paragraph 7)
 - D. "embraced" (Paragraph 7)

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. What characteristics do you think fans and devotees of Ali prized in him the most? In what ways was he different from modern athletic superstars?
2. Why do you think Ali's status as a conscientious objector and his refusal to fight in the Vietnam War are so central to his legacy? Do you see this act as a demonstration of his commitment to the principles he espoused?
3. Ali famously framed his unwillingness to perform military service on behalf of the United States in the context of racism and discrimination against black Americans: "I'm not going to help nobody get something my Negroes don't have. If I'm gonna die, I'm gonna die right here, fightin' you' (Paragraph 2)." In the context of this article, how has America changed over time? Use evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
4. Ali's unapologetic activism inspired a generation of African-Americans to fight for equality. In the context of this article, how do people create change? Use evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
5. If Muhammad Ali were alive today and in the prime of his career, what cause would he most likely support or fight for? What would he say about that issue?