



England's 1966
World Cup Hat-Trick
Hero Selects the
Greatest Sportsmen
of his Lifetime

SIR

GEOFF HURST

Eighty at Eighty

An A-Z of Masters
from Ali to Zola

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MUHAMMAD ALI

*'He floated like a butterfly,
stung like a bee and shook up the world'*

ONLY ONE person slept at Wembley on 30 July 1966, the day that changed my life. As I completed the hat-trick that won England the World Cup, my hero Muhammad Ali was fast asleep in his complimentary VIP seat at the back of the press box, oblivious to the roar of the crowd as he dozed and I danced with my team-mates in celebration of our 4-2 victory over West Germany.

The great man later explained that he was on Pacific Daylight Time and drifted off as the final went into extra time. 'I had no interest in soccer, didn't even understand it,' he later explained. 'I was just there to try to drum up publicity for my world title defence the following month against Brian London at Earls Court. It was one of my few fights that was a financial flop for the promoter but I made sure I got paid up front. Back home, soccer was a game for gals and young boys. I had no idea what a hat-trick was but when it was explained to me as being the equivalent of three home runs in baseball I was impressed by what Geoff Hurst had achieved. But it still didn't keep me awake!'

Ali was into the early days of telling the world he no longer answered to his 'slave name' of Cassius Clay. He had mixed feelings about Wembley Stadium, which was where in 1963 'Our 'Enery' Cooper knocked him down with his hammer of a left hook before he won on a cut-eye stoppage in the fifth round, just as he had predicted.

He was never burned by the flame of fame, but used it to publicise his fights, and – more important to him – his sincere but controversial religious and civil rights beliefs. I was first aware of him as an Olympic champion when I watched the 1960 Games from Rome on a small black-and-white TV set. Back then, I was just starting out on my adventure as a professional sportsman with West Ham, and my main interests were in football and cricket. I considered boxing a brutal game for mugs.

But by the mid-1960s Ali had captured the planet's interest and imagination by taking the world heavyweight title from 'big, bad' Sonny Liston. We all looked on open-mouthed as he seemed to throw away his title and promised riches by refusing to join the US Army for active service in Vietnam. 'I ain't got no quarrel with them Vietcong,' he told the media. 'Why do I want to kill my brown brothers? They ain't never called me a nigger.'

The incendiary words almost set the United States on fire and got Ali stripped of his boxing championship, and he was handed a jail sentence for insisting he would not join the armed forces.

His worldwide fame – or notoriety – transcended boxing and he became even more recognisable and famous than popes, presidents, princes and prime ministers. As he started touring the world fighting all comers after getting his prison sentence turned over in court, I joined the millions who wanted to see him in action.

There was an Ali admirers club at West Ham led by boxing fan Bobby Moore, and we used to go to Gants Hill Odeon for the midnight live screenings of his fights on the revolutionary ViewSport cable shows.

You could not help but be won over by Ali's charisma and larger-than-life personality, and we supported him through his boxing journey that took in the 'Fight of the Century' with Joe Frazier at Madison Square Garden in New York in 1971, the extraordinary 'Rumble in the Jungle' with George Foreman in Zaire, the 'Thrilla in Manila' return fight with Frazier and winning the world title for a third time with a revenge victory over Leon Spinks. My co-author Norman Giller worked as a publicist with Ali on several of his European fights and says he needed a PR like Einstein needed a calculator.

Ali had the world at his feet, but then came the darker moments when he went to the well far too many times, taking a hammering from his former sparring partner Larry Holmes and being stopped for the only time in his glorious career; then, finally, losing a heartbreaking fight against Trevor Berbick, an opponent who would not have laid a glove on him when at the peak of his powers.

Was there a sadder, more moving sight in sport than when, shaking uncontrollably with Parkinson's disease, he lit the flame to open the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta? He had paid a terrible price for his success in the ring, but never once complained about his fate after a career in which he won all but five of his 61 fights.

At his best, Ali was a brilliant and inventive ring craftsman: built like a black Mr Universe and perfectly proportioned, he could move as fast as a featherweight and boxed off a foundation of natural skill and talent. He would use his cutting tongue to give himself a psychological advantage over more powerful opponents, and his Ali shuffle was, for me, like seeing George Best-style footwork in the ring. Unbelievable! 'Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee,' became his anthem of aggression, and for several years he shook up the world.

As age started to catch up with him he adapted his style, and showed he could tolerate pain by adopting kamikaze rope-a-dope tactics and then unleashing two-fisted counter-attacks after his opponents had punched themselves out. I used to watch these

superhuman performances and offer up a silent prayer of gratitude that I had chosen football as my sporting career.

I was supposed to have met the great man along with the rest of the England boys for a photo shoot during the build-up to the 1966 World Cup final. We all gathered at the British Boxing Board of Control gymnasium in Haverstock Hill two days before the final. Only one man was missing, Ali! He had overslept. But he was wide awake against Brian London at Earls Court the following month and knocked him out in three rounds.

From Liston to Frazier, Floyd Patterson, Ken Norton, Earnie Shavers, Larry Holmes and George Foreman, Ali operated in the golden era of heavyweights and emerged – as he continually told us – as ‘The Greatest’.

There has never been a showman to touch him, and I considered it a privilege to have been around on the sports scene at the same time as the ‘Louisville Lip’. He would have greatly approved of the Black Lives Matter movement of recent times and would undoubtedly have been a leading spokesperson, preaching a message that was at the very core of his life.

The world mourned the loss of a unique and universally admired personality when Ali died on 3 June 2016 aged 74. I am presenting my selection alphabetically. If it had been in one-to-80 order of greatness, he would still have been my number one choice.

MUHAMMAD ALI FOR THE RECORD:

- Born: 17 January 1942, Louisville, Kentucky
- Name at birth: Cassius Marcellus Clay
- Olympic light-heavyweight champion: Rome 1960
- Professional debut: 19 October 1970, Louisville, v. Tunney Hunsaker; won on points, six rounds
- World heavyweight champion for the first time in 20th fight, v. Sonny Liston, 25 February 1964, Miami Beach; won when Liston retired in the interval between the sixth and seventh rounds
- Changed named to Muhammad Ali: 1964
- 1967–70 forced out of boxing after refusing to join the US Army
- Loses 'Fight of the Century' on points after 15 rounds v. Joe Frazier
- World heavyweight champion for the second time in 47th fight v. George Foreman, 30 October 1974, Kinshasa, Zaire; won by knockout in eighth round
- World heavyweight champion for the third time in 59th fight, v. Leon Spinks, 15 September 1978, New Orleans; won on points, 15 rounds
- Final fight v Trevor Berbick, 11 December 1981, Nassau, Bahamas; lost on points, 10 rounds
- Total fights: 61; 56 wins (37 inside the distance), five defeats
- Died: 3 June 2016, Scottsdale, Arizona, aged 74