

Eulogy for “The Greatest”

I was moved to tears when I heard the sad news of Muhammad Ali’s passing. In a way, I realized, he was in a better place, where the devastating effects of Parkinson’s disease no longer slow him down. Some men continue to be known for their greatness – during their lifetime on the Earth and then even beyond. In his case, Ali definitely will undoubtedly be the ‘Greatest’ wherever he is.

Ali’s untimely passing brought back memories from the 60’s, which I write below.

During the 1960 Olympics in Roma, Italy, there was this 18 years old, good looking, and charismatic lightweight boxer named Cassius Clay. Even at that early age, he had already become a key topic in the talk of the Olympics. At that time, we did not have TV in Turkey. As an impressionable 6 year-old, I was very curious about this excitement about Clay and tried to participate in the conversations of my older brothers (18 and 23) and their friends. They said that Clay has an unusual boxing style, i.e., dancing around the opponents and knocking them out. In boxing, one needs to channel all the power and energy to nimbly move around the opponent like Clay, at the same time defending oneself and also delivering the hard punches to the opponent. Clay made this entire process look easy, from what I overhead from my brothers and his friends. It came as no surprise when he received the gold medal in the lightweight in 1960 Rome Olympics.

Later, Clay graduated to become a professional boxer and started competing in the heavyweight class. I still remember seeing a huge headline photo on the first page of Turkish newspapers in 1964 (by then, I was already an avid reader!). That image itself became legendary- Sonny Liston lay knocked out on the floor and Cassius Clay stood on top, yelling at him. I knew that Sonny Liston was the world heavyweight champion in those years. He was very strong and aggressive, quite like a provoked bear, and exuded an aura of invincibility. Yet, Cassius Clay had knocked him out in less than a minute and became the new heavyweight champion in 1964.

Shortly after that fight, when I was still in Turkey, I heard that Cassius Clay had converted to Islam and had taken on the name of Muhammad Al. The common sentiment of the people in Turkey was one of joy, and they felt that Ali had now become one of them.

Ali fought against many famous and successful boxers like Floyd Patterson, German Karl Mildenberger, Joe Bugner, Ernie Terrell, and Zora Folley between 1964 and 1967, and many of them he knocked out in the ring. In those years, Ali came up with the “*fly like a butterfly and sting like a bee*” slogan referring to his boxing style. His style was one of a kind- he danced around the opponents and punched them right and left, finally knocking them out, just like my brothers had described many years ago.

In 1967, the US military asked him to serve in Vietnam, which he refused. He questioned as to why he should he go to Vietnam and kill innocent people, who did nothing to him and to his

people. In my mind, his opposing stance to the prevailing military action had deeper meaning than just declining to serve in Vietnam.

That same decade was a witness to tumultuous times. There was a huge discrimination against black people in the USA. Dr. Martin Luther King was leading the Civil Rights movement. Ali's refusal was also a rebellion against the existing injustice within the USA. His statement "I am the Greatest" has also deeper meaning than many people interpret, in my opinion. He was trying to call out to the generations of the White people who had oppressed many of African-American origin. Hence, "I am the Greatest" subtly hinted that the black people could be better than the rest. This is of course only my interpretation but it does merit more thought.

In my opinion, Muhammad Ali shares the pedestal with great reformers and leaders of the Civil Rights movement in the USA, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Jesse Jackson, Andrew Young, and many others. I also believe that Mohammad Ali was the source of inspiration for two athletes, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, for their black power salute during the medal ceremony in 1968 Mexico Olympics. I encourage you to independently investigate that protest that had far flung implications.

As a 13-years old child in 1967, I loved Ali's "I am the Greatest" slogan. I used to write that as a mantra on walls, desks, tables - wherever I was at a given time, with my name signed underneath. I was trying to motivate myself to be the best in the school, soccer, music and in all other activities. Ali had a huge impact on me at that impressionable age. You can imagine how much impact he had on many others, young or old, black or white people, and citizens of every nation of the world.

Unfortunately, ALI was banned from boxing and he was stripped off from his heavyweight champion title in 1967 as a result of his protest. He could not fight until summer 1970. I was then 16, and could speak/understand English, having started to learn the language in 1967. I could find radio channels and listen to the famous Howard Cassel (I did not know how Howard looked like in those years; later I saw him on TV and was amused about his toupee). He was very knowledgeable in boxing and had a soothing voice and engaging speaking style. Ali loved him also, as I could see later in the interviews, sharing jokes and laughs all the time.

In 1970, Ali came back and fought against Jerry Quarry and the Argentinian Bonavena. He knocked out both of them. I had listened to Howard Cassel on the radio for these matches, which was very exciting. (I recall that Bonavena had a tragic life; he struggled in his personal life and got tangled with the Love Ranch brothel co-owner's wife in Vegas. She was 26 years older than him, and tragically, her husband got Bonavena killed. His story is captured in the movie Love Ranch, where the actor Joe Pesci played his character).

In 1971, Ali finally fought against the then heavyweight champion Joe Frazier (Smoking Joe). Frazier was maybe one of the top boxers in the history. He had a very unique fighting style and incredibly strong left hook. Smoking Joe is the only one who knocked Ali down in his entire boxing career. Ali got up, but at the end, Joe won the fight on points. That was a huge

disappointment for me and many people. It was as if my world had come crashing down like a pack of cards. I had to get up early to listen to the radio live, but then could not sleep afterwards. I had school next day and needless to say, I was half asleep in the classes.

In 1973, I could watch the fight between Ali and Ken Norton on black and white TV in Austria. Again, I had to wake up in the middle of the night (due to the time difference) to view the fight live on TV. Norton won the fight by points. Apparently Norton had broken Ali's jaw in the second round, but the resilient Ali fought until the end, even though he had lost the fight.

Amidst all this activity, a giant boxer called George Foreman lurked in the background. He was so strong that he could knock out all his opponents in trifling short times. Frazier fought against Foreman, but the match came to a premature end. In the very first round itself, he was cleanly knocked out by Foreman.

Foreman became the heavy weight world champion that time. Yet, it would take few more steps for the eventual Ali-Foreman bout. Ali had to first win against Joe Frazier. That fight took place in early 1974. Ali handily won the fight and now was well poised for his revenge. He now had an open path to fight Foreman. The fight should take place in Kinshasa, the capital of Zaire (now Republic of Congo). Ali called the fight as the "RUMBLE IN THE JUNGLE". I vividly remember the rest of that event that occurred on October 30, 1974. I was in Schloss (a castle) at Elmau, a picturesque village tucked away in the Alps (southern Bavaria), where the University had brought foreign students, including me, to that location for a type of retreat. We all woke up in the middle of the night to watch the fight.

I remember feeling that the Ali in the ring was not the Ali we were used to, i.e., there was something different from his trademark style of 'flying like butterfly and stinging like a bee'. Instead, he was defending himself all the time. He would go back to the ropes and just wait Foreman to punch him. Foreman obliged, and continued to punch him right and left for the first 8 rounds. We were worried that Ali would not be able to win this fight. Foreman started to get tired with each round. In the 8th round, suddenly, Ali exploded with a series of right and left punches. It was an unbelievable transformation that knocked out that giant Foreman to the floor. The match was over. Ali became the new heavyweight world champion again for the second time. We students from all around the world shared in the celebrations. We cheered and danced in the middle of the night.

Ali then fought against Smoking Joe (Frazier) for the third time. This fight for me was the BEST EVER fight in the history of boxing. The fight took place in Manila in October 1975. Ali called it "THRILLA IN MANILA". I watched the match in Germany and it was an incredible fight. Both boxers gave their best to the match, and furiously tried to beat each other. Ali continued to relentlessly punch, but Frazier refused to be beaten. Frazier retaliated with very strong left hooks, which managed to hurt Ali badly. This was likely the most vicious fight that one can imagine. At the end, Ali won through points. Many said that this fight was the underlying source of his later Parkinson's disease. I highly recommend you to watch this fight on YouTube. It's a tale of human endurance and a desperate passion. It's simply an incredible fight!

After a short retirement phase, Ali came back in 1978 and fought against Leon Spinks, who was the prevailing world champion then. He won against Spinks and became the heavyweight world champion for the third time (1964, 1974 and 1978; first time ever a boxer won the title three times).

Back in summer 1978, I toured USA on a Greyhound bus. I remember how keen I was to visit those places where Ali had made history. There were many such locations, such as the Superdome in New Orleans Louisiana, where Ali secured his last professional win against Spinks earlier that year, and the Madison Square Garden in New York City, where Ali had many matches including the first with Joe Frazier in 1971. When I visited these sports complexes around August-September 1978, scenes from Ali's fights flashed through my mind. The entire experience gave rise to deep nostalgic feelings.

After his retirement from boxing, Ali became a committed humanitarian with deep compassion for the suffering of the world. He travelled extensively and helped inspire the populations of many countries. He became an ambassador for the poor and suppressed people. Ali was not only a boxer but also a great person and human being. His active life, unfortunately, was impacted when he was diagnosed with Parkinson disease in 1982.

I vividly remember the opening ceremony of the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, exactly 20 years ago. There were many US athletes carrying and passing on the Olympic torch. TV commentators kept guessing who would be the last athlete to carry the torch, (it is always kept secret as it is the highlight of the Olympic events). Then the spotlight suddenly shows the GREATEST holding the torch, despite trembling badly due to his illness. It was a well-deserved honor that Ali was chosen to light the fire for the 1996 Olympics. No one in my family in Atlanta managed a dry eye that day, for this was close to home in many respects. It was the best memory I had for the Atlanta Olympics.

Ali was a superhero for many of us. He was a role model for many of us. He embodied the message of thriving to be the best; never giving up; keep trying; fighting until the end. He left a gigantic mark in this world. During his time, boxing was very popular due to his charisma and style. Now the world of boxing does not hold that meaning to me.

When Ali passed away, he left an indelible impression on all of us. Mankind will never forget him. Rest in Peace the GREATEST...

IAN F. AKYILDIZ
June 7, 2016