

Ali

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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Looking back on this remarkable life, it seems to me that Muhammad Ali changed nearly everything. He and I are nearly the same age and so our lives ran in parallel paths that seldom crossed but often swept across similar territory. Ali in full public view, a hero and a villain, to different people at different times, he was often both, at one and the same time. Where you sat in time and space and in the American social and political landscape shaped how you viewed this remarkable bellwether of American life.

In many ways nothing in my first decade and half prepared me for him, and yet in some ways nearly everything did. By the time I reached adolescence I saw Cassius Clay on the periphery, out of the corner of my cultural eye. He flashed by here and there with appearances on talk shows following his Olympic success. He was funny in a way that seemed new, daring, and challenging to the middle class world that David Zang in *SportsWars* labeled, "The American One Way."

In the world of the 1950s I learned the rules of society that laid out in unflinching terms the right way and the wrong way, and that meant there was only one way. Reinforced by the Cold War demands for conformity, the American One Way was clear. There were rules, values, and ways of doing things that did not allow for deviation. Yet there were doubts being exposed on the edges. One sensed that not everything added up.

Sport was one area where many of these rules and lessons and values were taught. Coaches instilled the basics within something called "sportsmanship." Be gracious in victory or defeat and don't taunt your opponents. Play fair and work hard and victory will be your reward. Don't "showboat" or "hot dog." Right will out in the end. Good character and great skills were of equal significance and usually were found together. And on and on and on.

In the early nineteen-sixties change was pushing its way to center stage and in perhaps the most startling form of all it appeared in the person of Cassius Clay, Olympic gold medalist. He was a winner but a different kind of winner. He was brash, irreverent, extremely funny, and about as clever a person as had ever been seen. The one-liners, the proclamation of greatness,

and the focus on being pretty was redefining masculinity apart from muscle and bone.

Moving to professional sport Ali understood the need for marketing himself and his product. Once he took the heavyweight crown from Sonny Liston the processes accelerated. Self-praise reached new heights and his identity took a decidedly different turn. Cassius Clay became Muhammad Ali, a loyal son of the Nation of Islam that religious movement so little understood and often demonized in the white world. And so it began, this presentation of the sports hero totally different from the world of the 40s and 50s. The likes of Mantle, DiMaggio, and even Robinson seemed to be fading, and the world according to Ali was moving ahead.

If you were part of the Sixties generation of cultural revolt, dissenting politics, and skepticism towards authority, then how could you not love Ali? He seemed to defy everything and everybody, even if he didn't, and so took on heroic qualities in the struggle for civil rights, racial equality, and the counter culture. Old standards were obsolete, made so by this amazing man from Louisville who started boxing because someone stole his bicycle. How improbable is that.

Then came the major event of his career and of his public life. In the middle of the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War with growing protests and defiance of authority Muhammad Ali was chosen to carry a large public burden on these issues. He was reclassified by his draft board and ordered to report for induction. He refused to step forward when his name was called and the explosion was heard in all directions from all quarters. For Ali it was a matter of principle and he paid dearly with nearly four years out of the prime of his career.

For me it was a heroic act done with full knowledge of the consequences. Across part of the society he was a hero and about to become a martyr. In another part of the society he was a devil who now must be made to pay for his defiance. The authorities in boxing, encouraged by the guardians of the American One Way, stripped him of his title and his livelihood in defiance of the rule of law. It was a racial act layered with political intolerance.

When this act of official lawbreaking was reversed by the U.S. Supreme Court Ali returned to the ring and pursued his career with improbable success. Each triumph seemed a blow against the established order and the legend grew.

What followed was another improbable journey that transformed Muhammad Ali into a national and international icon, a man of peace and tolerance, a diplomat and ambassador. In an interesting twist he was an international hero before he became a national hero and those two positions contributed to choosing Ali to light the Olympic cauldron at the games in Atlanta.

Anyone who had witnessed the attacks on Ali in the Sixties could not quite believe what happened in Atlanta three decades later. When Muhammad Ali lit the flame while showing the signs of Parkinson's disease, people watched in amazement and quietly wept in the sadness and the triumph of that moment.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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