

# Ali: The Whole Story and When We Were Kings

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Is Muhammad Ali a great athlete? Is he a great person? Is Muhammad Ali dead (yet)? Is he a new kind of American saint? A new kind of American genius?

These are some of the questions that confront the viewer of two recent documentaries featuring Muhammad Ali (*When We Were Kings* (in theatrical release) and *Ali: The Whole Story* (on the TNT cable network)). Together, they remind us that when Ali was at the top of his game, he made boxing palatable to the average person through his social conscience, his way with words, and his physical beauty. He made you laugh, he made you angry, he made you proud—he made you watch him. He made violence a thing of beauty, he civilized it. That was no small accomplishment in the 1960s and 70s with so many examples of how very ugly violence could be—the nightly horrors of the Vietnam War, the bombings and the beatings of African Americans in the South, the riots in the streets. All of these events were pivotal in the epic life of Muhammad Ali.

*Ali: The Whole Story* actually opens mid-story, showing Cassius Clay as he wins the heavyweight championship of the world from Sonny Liston. This vignette briefly lays out for us the elements of his character and his legend: his braggadocio, his charm, his association with the Nation of Islam, and, most of all, his heavyweight championship—his mastery within the sport of boxing. After all, if he had not been the heavyweight champion of the world, he would still have been interesting, but we would not have known him as “The Greatest,” as many of us still do, and he would not have been the most recognized person on the planet, as he once was. The original footage of the pre-fight coverage and of the fighters in action tends to set Ali apart as larger than life, as a true entertainer. It emphasizes the differences between Ali, who wins people over even with his most menacing glare, and the thuggish Liston, or any other of Ali’s opponents, for that matter.

After this introduction, the two-hour biography (a six-hour version, including more extensive fight footage, is available by mail order from Turner Broadcasting)

goes back to the beginning, narrating stories about and showing pictures from the life of young Clay/Ali. It describes how he became involved in boxing (a bully stole his bicycle), his amateur success, his gold medal in the 1960 Rome Olympics, and his irrepressibility. Since we have already seen his fight with Liston, the documentary breezes through that to his subsequent conversion to the Nation of Islam, his name change, and the controversy, anger, and fear his decisions evoked in mainstream America. The narrative *Ali: The Whole Story* deftly interwoven with present-day interviews with Ali associates, sportswriters, celebrities, and the women in Ali's life (more on this in a moment), giving the viewer a good sense of how Ali the athlete and Ali the hero should be remembered.

For the most part, *Ali: The Whole Story* is an entertaining look at how Muhammad Ali transformed the world of boxing with his injection of theology and politics into the ring. He became an international hero with almost universal appeal; he brought the world into Zaire and Manila, and in some ways vice versa. Even many of those who hated him were eventually won over.

However, this film does not present the whole story, as its title insists it does. While we get a good look at the inside of the boxing world, the film's other focus seems only to be Ali's romantic life. It and his four marriages thoroughly occupy the filmmakers. In fact, of the Nation of Islam theology that Ali embraces, the only real discussion focuses on its view of women—how Elijah Muhammad had approval over Ali's choice of wives, how women were expected to be subservient, etc. This cannot possibly give the viewer any insight into Ali or why he held so firmly to his refusal to fight in Vietnam. It also skirts the issue of his reclassification by his draft board from 1-Y, unqualified because of low IQ, to 1-A, fit to serve. Is Ali not the genius he is now acknowledged to be? Was he reclassified because of his celebrity status or because of racially motivated reasons? Had he deliberately failed the written test required of all draftees? Or is he dyslexic, as George Plimpton suggests in *When We Were Kings*? Some examination of the question of race and how it intersected with Ali's life and image would have been welcome although this issue may have been too controversial for a cable television network like TNT.

On the other hand, *When We Were Kings* is fundamentally about race, even as it helps to explain Ali's universal popularity. Made by Leon Gast, who is white, it is a celebration of black racial pride in the form of a music festival that was conceived of as a fitting adjunct to the Ali-Foreman championship fight held in Kinshasa, Zaire, under the watchful dictatorial eye of President Mobutu Sese Seko. Or, more accurately, the music festival was the originally intended subject of the film, before circumstances and Muhammad Ali's sheer charisma changed its direction. The filmmaker was fortunate to be present at an event that brought together so many symbols of Afro-American pride (as it was called in 1974, when much of the film was shot) and, to his credit, he is aware of it, and makes us aware that the "Rumble in the Jungle" was more than just another fight—it had great cultural significance. It contained so many incredible musical performances—the Godfather of Soul, James Brown, at his funkiest and most sexually aggressive (almost as much as his supporting dancers and musicians);

Miriam Makeba; The Crusaders; The Spinners; and B.B. King. They played against the developing drama of the championship. George Foreman was at his physical peak; he was the embodiment of "Negritude," as Norman Mailer says. Muhammad Ali was the more experienced, savvy fighter trying to complete his comeback and win back the heavyweight crown of which he had been stripped in 1967 when he refused to go to Vietnam. Looming over the action was the legendary Don King on his way up the fight game ladder with this \$10-million fight sponsored by Mobutu to gain publicity for Zaire (as one commentator notes, the boxing match was cheaper than the wars other countries fight to gain recognition).

One cannot fail to see the reflection of America in Africa and of Africa in America; one cannot fail to see the aesthetics of music and the grace and violence of boxing. In the figure of Muhammad Ali, these all come together. As he preaches in the film about the unity of African-Americans and Africans, one realizes that Ali himself was helping create unity. He was using one of the few venues open to black Americans in which they could be publicly successful.

Still, even though one is almost entirely won over by these two films in their celebration of an international symbol and legend, an historian of sport must be careful not to embrace too readily the versions of Ali presented in these two films. Although sport historians are often attracted to the field by a love of sport, we should also strive to remain objective in our scrutiny of it. Neither *The Whole Story* nor *When We Were Kings* can even pretend to be objective, even in their use of fight footage, which is sparse and selective. (Apparently, Gast did not originally have permission to use the films of the Ali-Foreman fight; undoubtedly this contributed to the 22-year delay in the films release. The TNT documentary presumably reserves such footage for the longer version in the hope of reaping a bigger profit.) These are inspiring films, and will undoubtedly win Ali many new fans, but subscribers to this journal are more than just fans. That Ali, within his own lifetime, has achieved such popular status illustrates just how difficult it can be to research and write objectively about living legends.