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Muhammad Speaks and the Black Athletes in the 1960s: An Analysis of the Intersection of Sport and Religion

With the first issue of *Muhammad Speaks*, the periodical established itself as the voice of the Nation of Islam's Messenger, Elijah Muhammad. Dedicated to "Freedom, Justice, and Equality of the Black Man," the newspaper was printed in October 1961 and its circulation during the period of the civil rights' movement increased at a rate comparable to the discontent of African Americans. Advocating freedom and separation from whites, the newspaper served a critical role in promoting race pride, as well as disseminating the beliefs and teachings of Elijah Muhammad.

Muhammad detailed these teachings in his 1962 book, *Message to the Blackman*. As part of this message Muhammad addressed the role of sport in Black culture. Although the spiritual leader at first admonished Black athletes and their decision to pursue professional sport careers, he and his newspaper changed their position after one disciple rose to the top of his sporting field. When Cassius Clay wrested the heavyweight championship of the world title from Sonny Liston in 1964, Clay had already been attending meetings of the Nation of Islam. Within days of his victory, Clay announced his conversion to the Muslim religion and his subsequent name change from Cassius Clay, his slave name, to Muhammad Ali, a name that the leader, Elijah Muhammad bestowed on him. *Muhammad Speaks* chronicles the career of Ali in its pages.

This paper explores the meaning of sport in the Muslim religion, specifically the Nation of Islam, in the United States and the role of Muhammad Ali in promoting sport and religion, using the official newspaper of the Nation of Islam, *Muhammad Speaks*. It analyzes the paper from its first issue in 1961 to the final issue of December 1969, paying especially close attention to the career of boxer Muhammad Ali. Ali had a major impact on how the newspaper and the religious sect valued sport and represented it. Ali's use of his religious beliefs as a conscientious objector to his draft status and the Vietnam War are also discussed.

This paper contributes to a growing body of literature focusing on the protests and activities of Black athletes during the 1960s a topic that, except for in the sport history field, has not been duly recognized as part of the broader research on the civil rights struggle of the 1960s.