

SPORT, RACE, AND CULTURE

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Muhammad Ali in Chicago: Main Bout Inc. and the Nation of Islam

Although much has been written about Muhammad Ali's attempt to foster social justice and black self-determination through his resistance to the Vietnam War, little work explores his January 1966 formation of a Nation of Islam-led promotional corporation named Main Bout. At a time when the professional boxing industry was almost entirely under white control, Ali's formation of Main Bout transferred the sport's richest prizes, the ancillary and closed-circuit television rights to the world heavyweight championship, into black hands. Main Bout's assumption of Ali's management sent shockwaves through the sport and engendered fierce resistance from elements within prizefighting that could no longer access the multi-million dollar purses which accompanied Ali's fights, and from state and municipal officials fearing an electoral backlash if they allowed Ali to fight within their jurisdictions. As a result, these interests initiated a de facto boycott of Ali within the United States. In response to these challenges, Ali and Main Bout capitalized on the champion's global popularity and influence by setting up a series of overseas contests. When rivals of Ali and Main Bout realized that this left them unable to wrest control of the rights to the heavyweight championship, they decided to cooperate with the fighter and his promotional corporation, allowing Ali to return to the United States for a number of lucrative title matches. In doing so, Ali demonstrated unprecedented professional and personal autonomy for a black boxer.

Ali's actions remind us that the scope of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements extended beyond politics and the pulpit into the realm of popular culture. Although most examinations of the era concentrate on political events – "I Have a Dream" speeches, Voting Rights Acts, fire hoses and police dogs in Birmingham – that have become hallmarks of the era's iconography, we can learn just as much about these movements through cultural phenomena like professional boxing. Within this

model, Muhammad Ali emerges as a race leader alongside such figureheads as Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, Stokely Carmichael, Fannie Lou Hamer, Rap Brown, and Bob Moses.
