

THE GREATEST

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THANKS TO BURT SUGAR, BOXING HISTORIAN, FOR HIS EARLY ENCOURAGEMENT; AND BILLY GILES, MIDDLEWEIGHT, AND JIMMY DUPREE, LIGHT HEAVYWEIGHT, FOR THEIR PATIENCE AND INSIGHTS.

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A BOXER'S DREAM

The heavy black headlines of the *Louisville Courier-Journal* were filled with war news. Pearl Harbor had been attacked the month before, and the United States, which had been at peace since 1919, now found itself at war with both Japan and Germany. Young men across the country were volunteering to join the army, and the young men of Louisville, Kentucky, were no exception.

Louisville, for most Americans, was known for the Kentucky Derby, the annual thoroughbred horse race. Race day at Churchill Downs, the stadium in which the derby was run, was a day of celebration and parties. The race itself was always preceded by the singing of the state song, "My Old Kentucky Home."

*The sun shines bright in my old Kentucky home
'Tis summer, the darkies are gay. . . .*

But on Saturday evening, January 17, 1942, Cassius Clay's mind was not on the war or the Derby. His wife, Odessa, affectionately called "Bird," had just given birth to a baby boy in Louisville City Hospital. Cassius decided to give the boy his own name. He would be called Cassius Marcellus Clay, Jr.

The name Clay was a famous one in Kentucky. Henry Clay had twice run for president and had served in Congress for over twenty-five years. Cassius Marcellus Clay, although the son of a slaveholder, had been part of the antislavery movement. He published an abolitionist newspaper, the *Examiner*, in Louisville. He was also one of the founders of the Republican Party in 1854.

Cassius Clay, Sr., named after the abolitionist, worked as a sign painter in Louisville. He prided himself on his work and had painted murals in many of the local black churches. His wife, Odessa, had been doing mostly domestic work since her teen years and attended a local Baptist church. The Clays lived on Grand Avenue, a quiet street in the west end of the city. While not in the professional class, the Clays were doing moderately well when the new baby arrived. But how well a black family could do was limited by segregation.

Under segregation, black people were not allowed to eat in "white-only" restaurants, or attend the same schools, or even sit with whites on public transportation or in movie theaters. This separation of people by race was legal and was enforced by the law. This did not mean that

whites and blacks did not get along. People, white and black, understood the “rules” of segregation, and both races knew where they were welcome and where they were not. Cassius Clay, Sr., understood that he might never have a real relationship with a white person. He might work for a white man, or have a conversation with one, but the relationship would stop at the end of the day, or at the end of the line, or at whatever breaking off point maintained the status quo between whites and blacks. It was under this system of “knowing one’s place” that Cassius Jr., and his younger brother, Rudolph, would grow up. It would influence both of them greatly.

Cassius was a shy child. His early school days were not particularly eventful. He was not, like some fighters, a childhood bully, but a good kid with a sensitivity to injustice.

In 1954, twelve-year-old Cassius rode his red-and-white Schwinn bicycle to the Columbia Auditorium in Louisville. He and a friend visited The Louisville Home Show, which was a predominately black trade show. There was free candy and popcorn, and a general air of excitement as local merchants displayed their goods. When it was time to go, Cassius found that his bicycle was missing.

The Schwinn company made the most popular bicycles in the country, and Clay was angry and hurt that his had been stolen. The chance of his family scraping together the money for a new bicycle was slight, and Cassius was so upset that he was crying.

He wanted to report the bicycle stolen and was told

that there was a policeman in the basement. Cassius found the officer, Joe Martin, and told him what had happened. He also added that when he found whoever had stolen his bike, he was going to beat him up.

Joe Martin had been a member of the Louisville police force for years. He enjoyed working with young people, black and white, and taught boxing at the Columbia Gym.

“You thinking about beating somebody up, you had better learn to fight,” he told the eighty-nine-pound Cassius. That suited the boy. He wanted to teach the bike thief a lesson and in his twelve-year-old mind he could imagine himself beating up the perpetrator. Cassius started boxing lessons.

Men who spend their lives teaching boys are a special breed. There is often a tenderness about them that is never expressed but that the child can understand. Joe Martin was such a man. At first, he didn't think much of the new boy's skills. Cassius was skinny and awkward. A lot of the other boys beat him in the ring; some beat him easily. But there was one thing that was different. Cassius would show up at the gym like clockwork — none of the other boys were as dedicated. Whatever work Martin asked of him he did, and then some. Soon, he was training six days a week with Martin and also with a black man named Fred Stoner.

One of the most difficult things for mature black men to see is the downward spiral of young black boys. Some

react by turning away, by denying that it is happening. Others just angrily blame the kids. Still others, remembering the sweet language of youth, reach out and offer a helping hand to the hearts expecting disappointment and to the minds that have learned not to trust. Fred Stoner, at the Grace Community Center in Louisville, was one of the black men reaching out to young boys in the fifties and sixties.

One of the problems for black boys was that there were so few outlets for them. Too many children had nothing to do after school, and trouble waited in the streets. The Grace Community Center gave them a place to be, to hang out, to be safe. It also gave young Cassius Clay a place to learn more about boxing.

Cassius found out about the Grace Center and was eager to see what he could learn from it. He and his brother, Rudolph, began to go to both gyms: the Columbia Gym with Joe Martin, where Cassius would train as hard as he could, and then the Grace Center.

What Fred Stoner learned about Cassius — which Martin already knew — was that the loud-mouthed kid who liked to brag about what he would do to an opponent was absolutely dedicated to boxing. He practiced for long hours, perfecting each move he was taught, learning how to control himself physically in the ring.

Where Joe Martin, the patrolman, was a tough guy and expected his young fighters to be tough, Fred Stoner was more schooled in the ways of boxing. He knew that Cas-

sus Clay's dream depended on more than his determination, even when he saw him training as much as six days a week. Cassius spent a lot of time with Stoner and appreciated what the black man was offering him.

Stoner liked Cassius and his brother. He guessed that the Clay boys, who didn't drink or smoke, came from the same economic background as the other boys who hung around the center. Young black boys, such as Cassius and Rudolph, who had working-class parents, didn't go to symphonies and ballets. They grew up with little exposure to outside cultural influences.

"I suppose Clay was a hungry fighter," Stoner said. "He didn't come out of an affluent family. He didn't have it too easy. We're all out of the same bag."

What Stoner perhaps suspected, and what the world was yet to know, was that boxing would bring young Cassius Clay out of the cultural ghetto. Boxing would change his life forever.

Joe Martin remembered that nothing seemed to discourage Cassius. Once, he was knocked unconscious but returned the next day to train against the boy who had knocked him out.

Martin produced a local television show, *Tomorrow's Champions*, and young Cassius began to appear on it. He won some fights and lost others. Two years later Cassius's

dedication to training and his determination to improve were still there, but he wasn't yet anything special.

To boost his own confidence he bragged a lot. He told other young fighters that they couldn't beat him, that they couldn't hurt him. He wasn't a particularly hard puncher, but that didn't stop him from announcing that he was going to knock out anyone he faced.

By the time Cassius turned sixteen, things had changed. He was still thin, he was still a light hitter, but he had reflexes and a coordination that old professionals in the field had never seen. He still lost fights, but even the officials who ruled against him saw that he was good.

Cassius was devoting more and more of his time to boxing. The winner of two national AAU (Amateur Athletic Union) titles, six Kentucky Golden Gloves, and two Golden Gloves championships, his mind was set on a boxing career. He dropped out of high school in March 1958. Central High's tenth grade was not as attractive as the upcoming Olympics. He was being noticed by fight fans around the country.

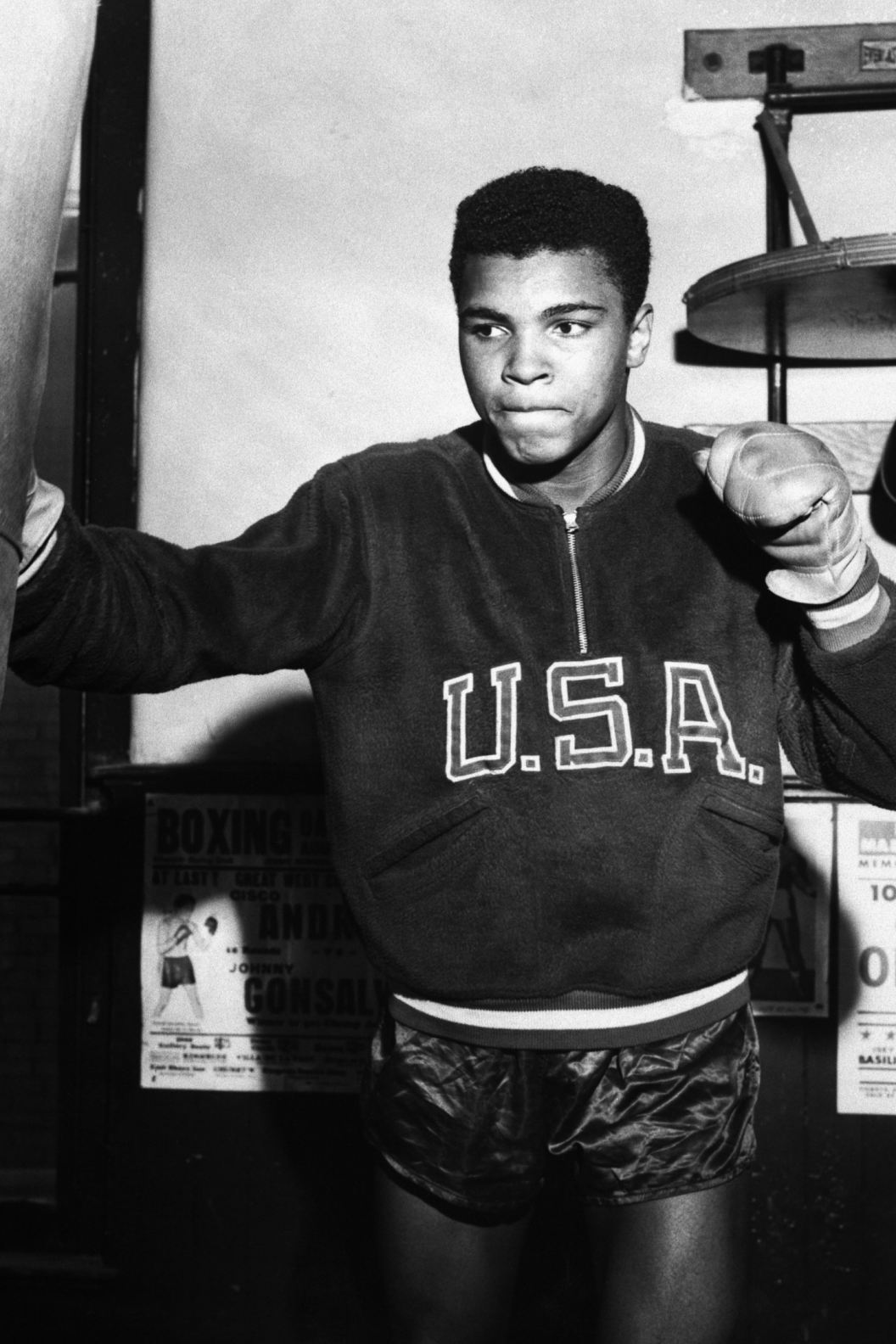
By his eighteenth birthday, in 1960, there was no doubt about Cassius Clay's boxing skills. There were still problems with his technique, though. Instead of moving away from punches the way most fighters did, he would simply lean back, judging the distance and velocity the punch would travel as it came toward his chin. It was a fundamental mistake. If, in the heat of battle, he judged

wrong, he could have been hit hard. But he was fast enough to get out of harm's way: His reflexes were as sharp as anyone had ever seen.

It takes more than boxing skills to be a fighter. It takes the courage to stand up to an opponent, knowing that he wants to use his talent to hurt you as badly as he can. It also takes the ability to deal with two aspects of pain: the anticipation that you will be hurt, perhaps badly, and the knowledge that you can stop more pain simply by quitting. Cassius seemed to have the skills and the courage, and that's what it would take to qualify for the Olympics, which were to be held that summer in Rome.

To get to the Olympics he had to go through a series of fights, meeting the best amateur fighters from around the country. Only one fighter from each weight group would be sent to represent the United States. The finals of the trials were to be held in California. But Joe Martin, still working with Clay, discovered a problem: Cassius was afraid of flying. Martin convinced Cassius that there wasn't time for a long train ride across the country. During the turbulent flight, Martin had to work hard to calm the young man down. It worked. Clay won the trials and qualified to go to Rome.

Clay wasn't heavy enough in 1960 to enter the Olympics as a heavyweight. Instead, he was entered in the 178-pound light heavyweight division. He won his first three fights fairly easily. Clay had trained hard for the



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BOXING
BY LAST! ONLY WITH
DISCO
AND
48 Rounds
JOHNNY GONSALES
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BENJAMIN YILLAGER
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BASIL

Olympics. Even in the Olympic village he stayed up late at night to shadowbox in his room while his boxing teammates slept. His style — straight, crisp punches and avoiding being hit — impressed the international judges. But the fourth fight proved difficult.

Olympic matches only have three rounds. A fighter is scored by how many times he hits his opponent cleanly and by his ability to avoid being hit. The fighter who wins two rounds almost always wins the match because it is extremely difficult to knock out an opponent in three rounds.

The Polish challenger, Zbigniew Pietrzykowski, was a European champion and had won a bronze medal four years earlier in the 1956 Olympics. Pietrzykowski was tough and plowed into the inexperienced Clay. The left-handed Polish fighter's strength and mauling style made Clay look bad. He clearly lost the first round.

Clay tried the same quick jab-and-move tactics in the second round and realized that he was receiving as much punishment as he was giving. He had dreamed of the glory of being a champion, and this was his chance. He didn't want to lose.

He made a small change in style, setting his feet more firmly in order to throw harder punches. He had to stop the Pole's oncoming rush. At the end of the second round it wasn't clear who was ahead.

Clay came out in the third and final round with the determination that was to become his trademark. He used every bit of the skill and nerve he had to take control of the

fight. The end of round three left Pietrzykowski battered and helpless against the ropes.

The 1960 games in Rome were a turning point in Olympic coverage with the emergence of two black stars. One was the tall sprinter from Tennessee State University, Wilma Rudolph. An outstanding athlete, Rudolph was a hit with Americans across the country as she won gold medals in three events. The other star was Cassius Clay.

At the medal ceremony, eighteen-year-old Cassius Clay looked like a child next to the older men he had beaten. The fight had been broadcast on television all over the world. People who knew next to nothing about the sport now knew about a young man from Louisville named Cassius Clay.

The Olympic team flew back home from Rome to New York. When Clay returned to the United States, his world had turned completely around.

What was happening to him? The young man from the segregated South who was used to being banned from certain restaurants and parks because he was black, was now being celebrated. In New York he visited Harlem for the first time and met Sugar Ray Robinson, considered by many to be the greatest fighter, pound for pound, who had ever entered a ring.

Sugar Ray Robinson was handsome and flashy. He liked to drive his lavender-colored Cadillac convertible slowly through the streets of Harlem, stopping now and again to spar with young boys, shaking hands, and

generally accepting the enthusiastic appreciation of his fans. Before the Olympics and the gold medal, Clay had glimpsed the kind of attention a famous boxer could receive. When he returned he was getting much of the same attention.

At eighteen, the world seemed his for the taking.

Back home, a group calling itself the Louisville Sponsoring Group agreed to back Clay in his professional career. The group consisted of eleven men. They were white and southerners, but they were also people who were willing to look out for a young black man from their home state.

Clay received a \$10,000 signing bonus from the group and was guaranteed a \$333-per-month draw against his future earnings. In addition, 15 percent of his income would be put into a pension plan for him.

At the time, for boxing, and for professional sports of any kind, this was a great deal for Clay. Most beginning fighters were lucky to clear \$200 a fight at the start of their careers, and none of them got a signing bonus. Very often they would have to take menial jobs that would interfere with their training. Clay, through the help of the Louisville Sponsoring Group, could concentrate solely on boxing.