

EMPOWERMENT

THE COMPETITIVE EDGE IN SPORTS, BUSINESS & LIFE



G E N E N . L A N D R U M , P H . D .

Chapter 6

PRINCIPLE #6: BELIEVE IN YOURSELF

I'm the greatest. I'm the King of the World
–Muhammad Ali (after defeating Sonny Liston)

What Research Says about Confidence

A study of Nobel Prize winners published in 2001 reported that optimism was by far the most important trait contributing to the success of these academic superstars—even more important than their professional skills. Why does confidence increase the odds of success? Renowned psychiatrist David Hawkins performed hundreds of experiments in which patients performed strength exercises while thinking positively. These results were compared with their performance while thinking negatively. On the basis of these experiments, Hawkins concluded, “Muscles strengthen and weaken from positive or negative stimuli.” Similar results were discovered by John Diamond in his breakthrough work in kinesiology. For years it has been standard routine for weight lifters to rehearse mentally the *successful* completion of a lift before physically hoisting a heavy weight. The mental and physical components of any athletic movement seem to work in concert.

Recent studies show that we become as we think, based on our positive or negative energy. From optimistic excitement flows positive execution, while from pessimistic thought flows error-prone negative responses. When we believe, we can; when we question, we can't. In the words of self-help writer Lynn Grabhorn (p. 305):

Every time we think of anything, we're flowing positive or negative energy. The litany never changes; as we think, we feel; as we feel, we vibrate; as we vibrate, we attract. Then we get to live the results.

Similar results are found in the field of medicine. Eminent writer Anton Wilson wrote (p. 116):

Patients fed on a high dose of optimism statistically fare somewhat better than those fed only on grim pessimism. If a doctor expects the patient to get well, this has some effect on the patient; if the doctor expects the patient to die, this also has an effect.

Self-Efficacy—The Source of Confidence

Those who believe in themselves always have an edge over those who doubt. Those who sense they will succeed are far more able to achieve. Sports psychologists claim that belief must exceed doubt by at least 50 percent, otherwise performance is reduced by tentativeness. Psychologists have long preached the importance of a positive mental demeanor, no matter the discipline. British statesman Winston Churchill summed up this all-important factor in getting to the top when he said, “A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity. An optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.”

But what is the source of confidence and optimism? Those who rise to the pinnacle of their potential always have a sense of self that is greater than that of the also-rans. This strong sense of self is called *self-efficacy*. In Chapter 3, we met Babe Zaharias whose self-efficacy was often interpreted as arrogance (Cayleff, p. 127):

Old Babe's aggressive self-confidence shone through despite her attempts to appear more feminine. She told one reporter, [before the U.S. Western Open] "They may as well wrap up the cup and give it to me now, for I'm going to take it."

Oscar Wilde, the great British dramatist, once told the media after his play had failed miserably in its debut, “The play was a great success. The audience was a failure.” When a reporter jokingly asked Michael Jordan if he would consider running for the Presidency of the United States, he responded, “I’ve always had so much self-confidence, I think I could do it.” Eminent psychologist Alfred Adler observed over a century ago, “Man’s opinion of self influences all his psychological processes.” Adler’s assertion is given further validation today by psychologist Erik Ericson who noted, “Study after study has shown that children with superior intelligence but low self-esteem do poorly in school, while the children of average intelligence but high self-esteem can be unusually successful.”

The origins of self-efficacy seem often to be rooted in early imprints—those dramatic experiences that reinforce the belief that we can succeed. In the previous chapters, we observed how the early imprinting experiences became springboards to success for several superheroes. Six-year-old Wilma Rudolph resolved to outrun all her friends when they ridiculed her crippled

leg. Babe Zaharias became energized and driven to win after she won a marbles competition at age seven. And Pelé at age 10 vowed to hone his soccer skills so that he could avenge Uruguay's defeat of Brazil in the 1950 World Cup competition. Our formative years are the crucible in which our dreams and self-efficacy are ignited by early imprinting experiences.

Though most easily acquired in the formative years, self-efficacy can be developed later in life by practicing positive behaviors and building an inner sense of self-worth. One of the most powerful positive behaviors involves accepting responsibility for outcomes. When things go wrong, people with low self-efficacy attempt to fix the blame rather than fixing the problem. Fearing consequences of fault, they seek external causes to which they can attribute failure. This exonerates them from responsibility and enables them to retreat to the safe world of the passive innocent victim. Those with high-self-efficacy accept a causal link between what they do and the outcomes that result. Consequently, they take credit for their successes and responsibility for their failures. The credit they give themselves deepens their self-efficacy. The responsibility they accept for their failures provides them with precious opportunities to learn and improve.

When Is Confidence “Overconfidence”?

The superstar profiled in this chapter as the model of self-efficacy is none other than the Louisville Lip, Muhammad Ali. This superstar knew above all that those who believe are destined to win even when they are deluded in their belief. In his words, “To be a great champion you must believe you are the best. If you're not, pretend you are.” In spite of this assertion, Ali understood that one must not allow confidence to erode one's efforts or preparation. He told the media, “They think I'm becoming overconfident, but I will never be so overconfident that it will interfere with my training.”

When we dream big, we must accept that those around us will not share in our belief that we will realize our dreams. Merely announcing our grandiose intentions will cause those around us to regard our aspirations as overconfidence or arrogance. No one would have believed that little Wilma Rudolph with the shriveled leg would become the fastest woman in the world or that shoeless little Pelé would one day be voted Athlete of the Century by the International Olympic Committee. An article in the November 16, 2001 issue of *Investors' Business Daily* reported:

More than 500 studies have been conducted on the self-fulfilling prophecy that you will win when everyone else believes [you] will fail. This research doesn't show that people feel better, it shows that confidence—even misguided confidence—helps people perform better.”

Any level of confidence is justified if it is supported by the psychological characteristics, such as passion, self-efficacy and tenacity, that are embodied in the thirteen principles in this book.

What We Learn from Bluebirds, Sparrows and Crows

A generation ago, many elementary schools in the United States grouped children according to their reading and math scores. The highest performers were placed in a group called “bluebirds” and given the most challenging reading and math resources. The intermediate performers constituted the “sparrows” who basked in the comfort of less challenging instruction. The underachievers, reflecting the regard in which they were held, were designated “the crows,” and routinely assigned to remedial reading and math worksheets. (The group names varied with the distribution of ornithological species in the school district.) A study reported in the *Journal for Research in Mathematics* examined the self-esteem of the members of each group. Who do you think had the highest and lowest self-esteem? Think carefully before you answer.

Surprisingly, the highest self-esteem was not found throughout the bluebird group. Those with the highest self-esteem were those at the top of each group—the top percentiles of bluebirds, sparrows *and* crows. Conversely, those with the lowest self-esteem were at the bottom of these groups. Why was this so? Why would a bottom bluebird have a lower self-esteem than a top crow? Further investigation revealed that the children assessed themselves relative to other children in their group. Our self-esteem, it seems, depends on the reference group to which we compare ourselves. In the absence of an ambitious dream, most high sparrows, content with their sense of achievement, bask in the comfort of their status within their group and do not feel compelled to strive for the lower echelons of the bluebirds.

A recent study of 20,000 Americans from 1972 to 2002 revealed that people tend to measure their level of wealth relative to their friends and colleagues of the same age. Apparently those who earned less than their friends were dissatisfied with their financial status, while those who earned

more than friends their age were satisfied with their level of wealth. The researchers at Harvard and Pennsylvania State University suggested (*National Post*, August 15, 2005, p. A1), “One alternative [to striving for more wealth] would be to ‘hang out’ with poor people.”

In his best-selling book *The Human Zoo*, anthropologist Desmond Morris described how the social classes in our adult community function in a manner similar to the classroom groups (p. 55):

The recognition of distinct [social] classes has made it possible for the members of classes below the top one to strive for a more [satisfying] dominance status at their particular class level...A man at the top of his social class may earn more money than a man at the bottom of the class above. The rewards of being dominant at his own level may be such that he has no wish to abandon his class-tribe.

However, the path to excellence in any endeavor is to rise to the top of your reference group, and then use the self-affirmation of success to move upward to a less comfortable but more challenging reference group, until eventually you are competing with the very best. Pelé began as the best soccer player among a handful of neighborhood friends and grew to become the best player on the Ameriquinha team and then the Santos team, and ultimately the best player in the world.

When Muhammad Ali was training for his fight against Sonny Liston, he woke every morning to a poster of Liston that was hanging over his bed. He would growl at the menacing picture, “I’m gonna whup you, you big ugly bear.” Ali used the poster of the reigning Heavyweight Champion of the World to motivate his daily workouts. (A poster of Woody Allen would not have had the same impact.) The ladder to success is a series of rungs, each more challenging than the one before. We must resist the tendency to settle into the comfort of a rung where modest challenge does not test our abilities or threaten our self-confidence. On the contrary, climbing the ladder of success requires that we scale a sequence of increasingly demanding rungs. The energy to meet this succession of challenges and resist a multitude of naysayers must come from a very strong self-efficacy.

The self-assessment instrument on the following pages will help you determine the extent to which you have developed your level of self-efficacy. As in the other instruments in this book, there are no right or wrong answers. To determine how much you may need to enhance your self-affirmation to achieve your goals, try to respond to the questions as honestly as you can.

SELF-EFFICACY SELF-ASSESSMENT—Can You Get the Job Done?

Choose a number 1–5 (where “1” means “strongly disagree” and “5” means “strongly agree”) to indicate the degree to which the statement describes you. Record for each statement the number you have chosen. The scoring key is at the bottom of the page.

There are no “right” or “wrong” answers. In making your selection, be careful to answer the questions as candidly as possible without anticipating how you will be classified. This instrument is designed to give you insights into your self-efficacy.

	Strongly Disagree		Strongly Agree	
1. When I make plans, I am certain I can make them work.	1	2	3	4 5
2. One of my problems is that I cannot get down to work.	1	2	3	4 5
3. If I can't do a job at first, I keep trying until I can.	1	2	3	4 5
4. I seldom achieve the important goals I set.	1	2	3	4 5
5. I give up on things before completing them.	1	2	3	4 5
6. I like to face difficulties head-on rather than postpone them.	1	2	3	4 5
7. If something looks too complicated, I don't bother to try it.	1	2	3	4 5
8. When I have an unpleasant task, I stick to it until I finish it.	1	2	3	4 5
9. When I decide to do something, I go right to work on it.	1	2	3	4 5
10. When trying to learn something new, I soon give up if I am not initially successful.	1	2	3	4 5
11. When unexpected problems occur, I don't handle them well.	1	2	3	4 5
12. I tend to procrastinate when I face a task that I don't enjoy.	1	2	3	4 5
13. I avoid learning new things that look too difficult for me.	1	2	3	4 5
14. Failure just makes me try harder.	1	2	3	4 5
15. I feel insecure about my ability to do things.	1	2	3	4 5
16. I am a self-reliant person.	1	2	3	4 5
17. I give up easily	1	2	3	4 5
18. People think of me as a person who gets the job done.	1	2	3	4 5
19. When I delegate a job, I fear it will not be done well.	1	2	3	4 5
20. I believe I could learn a new language in a year if necessary.	1	2	3	4 5

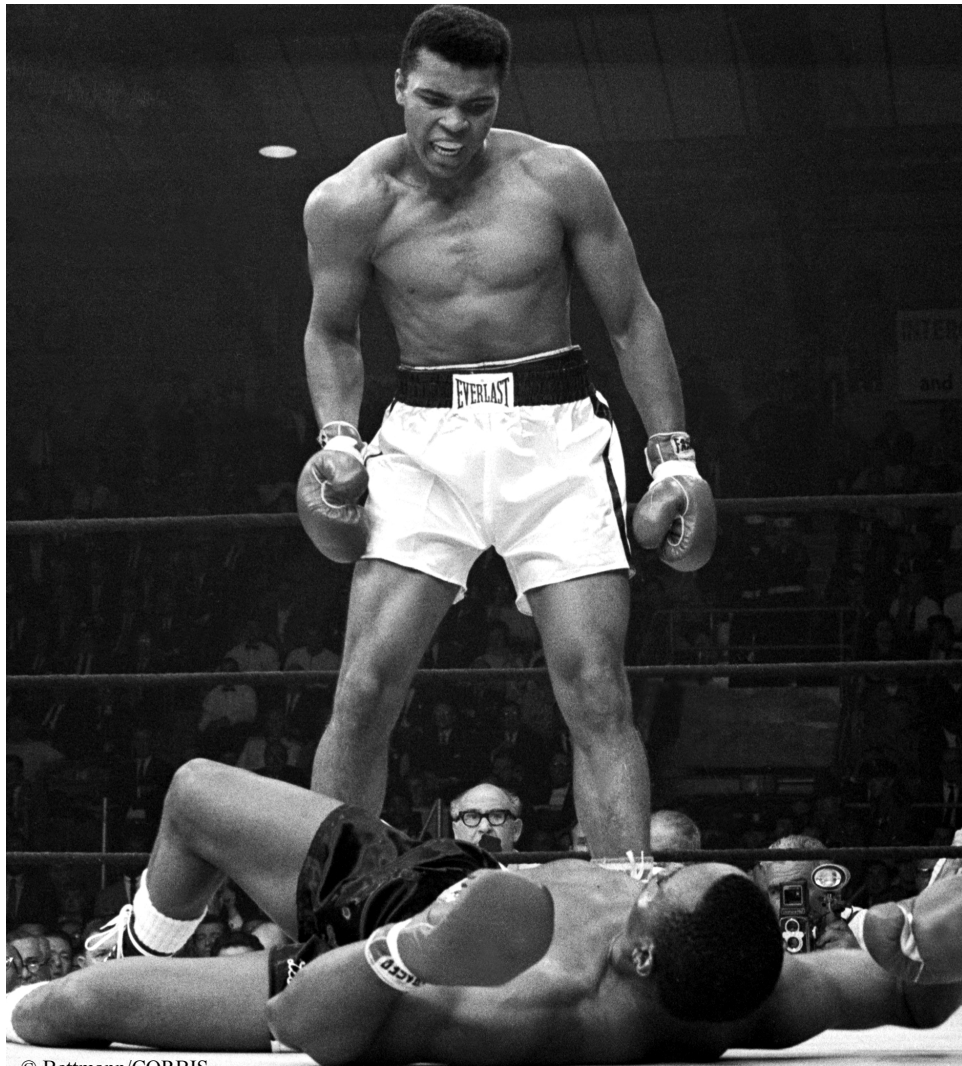
Instructions	Scoring Key
<p>A. Total the numbers you chose for items: #1, 3, 6, 8, 9, 14, 16, 18, 19 and 20.</p> <p>B. Total the numbers you chose for items: #2, 4, 5, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15 and 17. Subtract the B-total from the A-total.</p>	<p>30–40: Strong self-efficacy</p> <p>17–29: Moderate self-efficacy</p> <p>4–16: Low self-efficacy</p> <p>Below 4: Build your self-efficacy by setting modest goals and achieving them.</p>

SELF-ESTEEM SELF-ASSESSMENT-How Do You Feel about Yourself?

Choose a number 1–5 to indicate the degree to which the statement describes you. Record for each statement the number you have chosen. The scoring key is at the bottom of the page.

	Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
1. I often feel superior to others.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I often feel inferior to others.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I often look in the mirror and like what I see.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I seldom feel guilty when I make mistakes.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I flagellate myself over errors that I shouldn't have made.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I tend to defer decisions to others who have more money or prestige.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I believe in my decisions, even when others don't.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I am often defensive about my work.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I feel free to express love, anger, joy and hostility.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I continually compare my self-worth with those who are more talented.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I pride myself on my ability to solve problems.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I tend to boast about my achievements and possessions.	1	2	3	4	5
13. I accept compliments easily without embarrassment or obligation.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I feel comfortable among strangers.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I find new assignments intimidating.	1	2	3	4	5
16. I often blame others for my mistakes or problems.	1	2	3	4	5
17. I prefer to accept responsibility and proceed unsupervised.	1	2	3	4	5
18. I am a perfectionist in most everything I do.	1	2	3	4	5
19. I have an intense need for confirmation of my decisions before I act.	1	2	3	4	5
20. I believe my parents are (or were) proud of who I am.	1	2	3	4	5

Instructions	Scoring Key
A. Total the numbers you chose for items: #1, 3, 4, 7, 9, 11, 13, 14, 17 and 20. B. Total the numbers you chose for items: #2, 5, 6, 8, 10, 12, 15, 16, 18 and 19. Subtract the B-total from the A-total.	30–40: Strong self-esteem 17–29: Moderate self-esteem 4–16: Low self-esteem Below 4: Build your self-esteem by reassessing your strengths and abilities.



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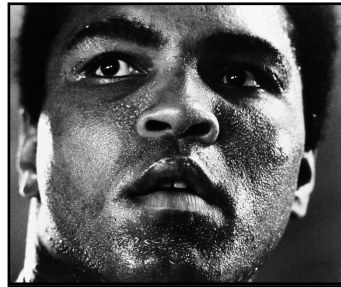
MUHAMMAD ALI

- In 1999, named "Sportsman of the 20th Century" by *Sports Illustrated*.
- In 1988, the UN honored him with a Lifetime Achievement Award.
- In 1987, *Ring Magazine* named him "The #1 Heavyweight of all Time."
- Won the Heavyweight Championship three times: 1964, 1972 and 1978.
- Successfully defended the Heavyweight Championship 19 times.
- Won the gold medal in the 1960 Olympics in the Light-Heavyweight division.

Muhammad Ali: A Model of Self-Efficacy

Physical combat is the ultimate contest. In the animal kingdom it is the life-and-death struggle for dominance among males—a direct confrontation in which the vanquished loses the right to mate and sometimes the right to life. Boxing, its human derivative, is perhaps the only real contest of which all other competitive sports are sublimated, diluted variations. A boxer sprawled prostrate on the canvas suffers the humiliation of total defeat, witnessed by the millions who observe his total helplessness at the hands of the victor. There are no teammates to share the shame and the loser lies impotent and nakedly alone. Muhammad Ali, boxing’s greatest icon, once observed (Ali, p. 27):

© Michael Brennan/CORBIS



Muhammad Ali
born Jan. 17, 1942

...when a fighter is beaten, everybody who believes in him is beaten too—his family, his friends, his children, the people who cheer him on, who give him their love, their hope, their pride...if I’m defeated I have to get up and come back again, no matter how humiliating the loss.

It is a humiliation like no other. To risk a severe beating and possible injury takes courage. To risk both the punishment and the humiliation demands a level of courage that few possess.

When 22-year-old Cassius Clay entered the ring in the Miami Beach Convention Hall on February 25, 1964, few people believed he had even the remotest chance of lasting 15 rounds with bone-crushing Heavyweight Champion Sonny Liston. The reigning champion had demolished every opponent he encountered—most by knockouts in early rounds—and there was a growing consensus in the boxing world that Liston was unbeatable. To paraphrase a song of that era, Liston was “the baddest man in the whole damn town”—and possibly in the world. Sonny Liston was a 6-to-1 favorite and the odds were 3-to-1 that he would injure or kill his young and inexperienced challenger.

At the weigh-in ceremonies a few hours earlier, Clay had launched a verbal assault on the Champion. In a nose-to-nose confrontation that no one else would dare, he had taunted the brutal ex-convict, “I got yo’ now, Sonny;

I got yo' championship now!" In an attempt to intimidate the champion, he lunged toward him yelling, "Let's git it on now!" but members of his entourage restrained him. The physical examination taken immediately after this verbal rampage revealed that Clay's blood pressure was 200/100—he was terrified and had psyched himself into a state of high anxiety for the contest of his life.

Now, just a few hours later he was entering the ring, a heavy underdog, and it was crunch time, literally. The earlier bravado had set up Cassius Clay for the greatest humiliation of his life. When the opening bell sounded, he sprung into action, dancing around the ring using his superior speed and agility to avoid Liston's deadly punches. To keep the menacing champion at bay, Clay fired quick left jabs at his head and followed with the occasional right cross. Unfazed, the champion plodded forward in a relentless attack, launching explosive punches that missed the elusive target and frustrated his attempts to land the killer blow. By the middle of the third round it was clear that the missed punches were taking a toll on the champion's energy reserve. His face showed some swelling from the challenger's left jabs and a cut had opened under his left eye. By the sixth round, Liston was showing the weariness of a cobra whose first few strikes had missed the mark. His punches were slower and his aim less controlled. Like the mongoose waiting its opportunity, Clay moved in for the kill, launching his best punches with reckless abandon. The impact of leather crashing against flesh resounded at ringside, deepening the cut under the champion's left eye and swelling the tissues of his face.

When the bell sounded for the start of the seventh round, the champion failed to respond. He had conceded. Cassius Clay leaped into the air and galloped around the ring like a man possessed, waving his arms and declaring his new status as Heavyweight Champion of the World. He screamed into the microphone at ringside, "I am the king! I am the king! King of the world!" To those who said he would lose he chided, "Eat your words! Eat your words!" He ordained himself *The Greatest*, but the media, irritated by his immodesty and self-aggrandizement, christened him with the monikers *The Louisville Lip* and *The Mouth*.

It would take almost a quarter century for the world to acknowledge that he was, indeed, the greatest. In a recent BBC poll conducted in Britain, he was voted sports personality of the century, ahead of such popular athletes as the beloved Pelé. What series of events catapulted this brash, young braggart from a poor black neighborhood in Louisville, Kentucky to the top of the

athletic world where he became its most beloved icon? His story is a fascinating saga of courage, integrity and character mixed with all the dimensions of human drama. But above all, what emerges as the engine that drove his rise to the top was his deep sense of self that psychologists call self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy is not about self-promotion or personal visions of grandeur; it's about one's ability to stand alone—alone against an adversary, against public opinion, against the establishment and even against the world when those external agents conflict with one's inner beliefs. Cassius Clay, who later took the name Muhammad Ali, stood tall against white prejudice, against the mafia of the fight game, and ultimately against the U.S. Government. He was willing to suffer the consequences of his convictions and in many cases these were severe. Biographer Dr. Ferdie Pacheco observed (p. 46):

[Ali] emerges from any examination as a true individualist. There is only one Ali. He is unique. He is unico. If Frank Sinatra can sing "I Did It My Way," then Ali should have an opera dedicated to him. It should be entitled "The Greatest Fighter of All Time!"

Muhammad Ali was one of the greatest fighters of all time, both inside and outside the ring. He fought for the values he held dear no matter the punishment. This is the true measure of self-efficacy. And that is why I have chosen him as the model of strong self-efficacy.

MUHAMMAD ALI'S TREK TO THE TOP

Early Imprints

Muhammad Ali entered the world as Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr. on January 17, 1942. His parents, Cassius Sr. and Odessa, provided a loving and nurturing environment for Cassius and his younger brother Rudy. Cassius Sr. was an artist who worked in paints and his mother supplemented the family income serving as a domestic for some of the wealthier families in Louisville. In that segregated society of the south, it was difficult for Cassius Sr. to get work from the wealthier white families. Consequently, money was scarce. The boys' clothes were of the second-hand variety garnered from Good Will. Ali later explained in his memoirs that when there wasn't enough bus fare for both him and brother Rudy, he would race the bus to school. Rather than

admit poverty, he would tell his friends that he was running to get in fight condition.

At age twelve, Cassius and childhood buddy Johnny Willis were caught in the rain. To stay dry, they parked their bikes outside and entered the Columbia Auditorium where the Louisville Home Show was under way. On their return, Cassius discovered that his new red Schwinn bike was gone. Devastated and angry, he complained to policeman Joe Martin that he was going “te whup” whoever stole his pride and joy. The officer suggested he prepare by training in the gym where aspiring boxers were working out. His first glimpse of the gym was a mesmerizing experience. His plan to avenge the bicycle theft immediately metamorphosed into a more exciting vision. Reflecting on his first impression, he said later, “I stood there, smelling the sweat and rubbing alcohol, and a feeling of awe came over me.” At that moment, the passion of the young man who would become the greatest boxer in the world was ignited and a dream was in the making.

As he trained in the gym, Cassius began to idolize the local boxers who were making a name in the ring. Then, one day, on returning from a training session his dream crystallized. He wrote (p. 50):

I was 14 when I heard on the radio, “And still Heavyweight Champion of the World, Rocky Marciano.” A cold chill shoots through my bones. I have never heard anything that affected me like those words...From that day on I want to hear that said about me.

What followed in the next decades was a relentless dedication of time and energy that Cassius Clay committed to his climb toward the dream that gave him goose bumps.

An Early Hurdle

A psychological impediment stood between Cassius and his dream. In high school there was a bully who beat up Ali all the time and intimidated all the other kids in the neighborhood. The king of the street was Corky Baker, a tough gang leader who terrorized the neighborhood. In his autobiography Ali confessed that he always came out on the bottom in his scraps with Corky and felt that if he could beat Corky, then he could beat anyone in the world.

He knew it would be suicide to fight Corky on the streets because Corky had a “chest that burst through his T-shirt and arms like hams.” In a fashion

that was to become his trademark, Cassius began bragging that he could “whup” Corky if he ever got him in the ring. Predictably, Clay’s boasts reached Corky who was so outraged that he had to be restrained from tearing apart his cocky adversary with his bare hands. Those who convinced Corky to save his mayhem for a confrontation in the ring were licking their chops at the prospect of collecting lucrative bets from the slaughter of a defenseless lamb.

The Cassius vs. Corky showdown had all the drama of the shootout at the O. K. Corral. It was a scheduled three-round fight, featured on *Tomorrow’s Champions* and televised from the Columbia Gym, where crazed gym rats screamed for blood and salivated at the prospect of what mayhem Corky’s unfettered hams could wreak on the face of the cocky youth. When the opening bell sounded, Corky rushed toward his opponent and exploded into action, throwing punches in all directions. Cassius leaned back and danced away so that Corky’s powerful punches evaporated in space like misfired missiles. Then he rushed in, stung Corky with left jabs and moved back. It was in this fight that young Cassius learned the art of “dancing like a butterfly and stinging like a bee.” By the second round an exhausted, frustrated and angry Corky conceded the match, claiming “It ain’t fair.” Years later, Ali said that this fight taught him “there is a science to making your opponent wear down.”

The 1960 Olympics in Rome

Cassius Clay continued to train hard in the gym to move ever closer to attaining his dream. He strived relentlessly to build a body that could win him the Heavyweight Championship of the World. Reflecting on the thoroughbred horses he saw in his youth, he said that the sight of their beautifully sculpted muscles inspired him to train harder so his body could be in such condition.

By the time he was 18, Cassius had won 180 bouts. He captured the National Golden Gloves and the National Amateur Athletic Union titles in 1959 and again won the Golden Gloves Championship in 1960. During this period he was tall and lanky and fought as a light heavyweight. In this division he won six Kentucky State Golden Gloves titles, applying and perfecting his “float like a butterfly, sting like a bee” approach to boxing. Years later he reported that his father’s loud and dramatic encouragement spurred him on and he described how his proud dad went around the neighborhood screaming, “I’ve got another Joe Louis!”

Cassius graduated 376 out of 391 in his class at Central High in Louisville when he was 18. Author David Remnick wrote (p. 95), “Clay’s graduation was an act of generosity, the traditional debt of gratitude a school pays to its star athlete.” Though never a dedicated student nor a high academic achiever, he exuded a kind of “street smart” that would enable him to survive the many horrendous challenges that lay ahead. Cassius was already a local boxing legend and about to become a celebrity on the international front at the Olympics.

When he represented the United States at the Olympic games in Rome, Cassius Clay was 18 years old and a man on a mission. Diligent training and a confident demeanor paid off handsomely and he won the Olympic gold medal in the light-heavyweight division. It was a heady time for this triumphant teenager who had fought his way out of a poor black neighborhood in the southern U.S. to the ancient center of civilization where gladiators battled for survival 2000 years earlier.

Cassius Marcellus Clay returned home to a hero’s welcome. Crowds followed him everywhere he went, asking for his autograph, taking his picture and congratulating him on his success. He had become the All-American boy. The porch of his house was adorned with American flags, the steps were painted red, white and blue, and his father gathered with neighbors and sang *The Star-Spangled Banner*.

A short time after Cassius Clay had expressed this innocent patriotic emotion, racial prejudice was to rear its ugly head in a particularly odious form. Cassius and his friend Ronnie were riding their motorbikes in downtown Louisville when they decided to stop for hamburgers. Though this was a hangout for white motorcycle groups, Cassius assumed that his status as an American hero would enable them to be served. However, upon entering the restaurant, it was immediately apparent that they were in territory that was not only hostile but dangerous. A leather-jacketed motorcycle gang and their molls were spread over the booths like menacing black storm clouds. Their jackets displayed Nazi swastikas and confederate flags. The restaurant staff, anticipating trouble, beat a quiet, hasty retreat into the safety of the kitchen.

One waitress who had recognized the Olympic gold medallist was in the kitchen explaining to the boss that this customer was *the* Cassius Clay. The boss, in a loud resounding voice that reverberated through the restaurant, retorted, “I don’t give a damn who he is...we don’t serve niggers!” For one of the first times in his life, Cassius was speechless. Recognizing he was in a no-win situation, he resisted Ronnie’s suggestion that they consider taking on

the gang and instead moved toward the door. Ali said in his autobiography (p. 65), “I felt a peculiar, miserable pain in my head and stomach. The pain from punches you take without hitting back.”

Once outside, Cassius and Ronnie were followed by the gang who began mounting their Harley-Davidson hogs. The gang leader with the moniker Frog called out some insults and then sent his toady named Kentucky Slim to extort tribute. The tribute was to be Cassius Clay’s gold medal that he had worn around his neck since the Olympics and Frog wanted it as a “souvenir” for his girl friend. Cassius and Ronnie, refusing to comply with the request, mounted their motorbikes and departed with an insult to the purity of Frog’s relationship with his mother. Reacting in a white-hot fury, fuelled by racial hatred, the gang launched a pursuit with murder in their eyes. Cassius knew that this lawless horde had previously attacked black youths who had entered their neighborhood, whipping them with chains and leaving them maimed and close to death. Outnumbered and outgunned, the terrified youths fled for their lives.

What followed was a classic motorcycle chase—a flight for survival offering the fugitives the same odds as the fox in a foxhunt. Attempting to outfox his assailants, Cassius avoided the obvious escape route to the black neighborhood, pursuing a circuitous path through a labyrinth of railroad junctions and highways. His plan was to reach the Jefferson bridge that would take them from Kentucky into Indiana. The strategy seemed to work when the sound of the pursuing hogs faded and evaporated in the dismal rainy fog. However, upon approaching the bridge, they heard, Frog’s girl friend cry, “There they is! There them niggers!” followed by Frog’s excited exhortation, “You black bastard! We got yo’ ass.” As Frog’s ominous machine came into view, a high-stakes race for the bridge ensued. Recognizing that Frog was preoccupied with unleashing his rage on Cassius, Ronnie told his companion to go ahead and he would follow. When Cassius reached the bridge, Ronnie was only seconds behind and Frog was closing in quickly from behind. As Frog came parallel to Ronnie, his focus and his rage were fixed exclusively on the Olympic hero. Whirling a chain above his head like a cowboy attempting to lasso a steer, he was about to unleash his fury when Ronnie jumped off his motorcycle and flung it into Frog’s front wheel. In the crash that followed, Frog and his female passenger were slammed against one of the bridge’s cement columns. Screams of pain were heard amidst the sounds of buckling metal and racing engines. As Frog and his girl friend lay injured and bleeding on the bridge, Kentucky Slim arrived on the scene whirling his chain

in a second frontal assault. The vicious weapon missed Cassius' head, but wrapped its steel links around his shoulders. In a quick reflex action, Cassius seized the chain and yanked Frog's faithful sidekick from his motorcycle that took off into the mist like a riderless horse. Kentucky Slim came crashing to the ground. As Slim attempted to regain his upright position, the Olympic Gold Medalist launched a vicious punch that caught Slim flush in the face, sending him first to the ground and then into full retreat. Holding a switchblade to Frog's throat, Ronnie warded off the rest of the gang threatening to slit the throat of their leader unless they abandoned the struggle. A few passes of the knife through Frog's leather jacket opened cuts in the leather and in Frog that prompted him to order his gang to retreat. Following a brief tension-ridden standoff, the gang withdrew to the end of the bridge and then out of sight. Happy to escape with their lives, Frog and his girl friend struggled onto the crumpled motorcycle and fled the scene.

Once the gang had disappeared into the gray rainy evening, Cassius Clay drove his motorbike to the center of the bridge over the Ohio River. Realizing that winning the gold for America had not freed him from the tyranny of racism in his own country, he removed the ribbon with the gold medal from his neck and dropped it into the river. He said in his autobiography (p. 76):

The Olympic medal had been the most precious thing that had ever come to me. I worshiped it. It was proof of performance, status, a symbol of belonging, of being a part of a team, a country, a world. It was my way of redeeming myself with my teachers and schoolmates at Central High, of letting them know that although I had not won scholastic victories, there was something inside me capable of victory.

Cassius Marcellus Clay, who had spent his youth learning techniques of boxing, was now learning about the bigger issues of life. In the process he was coming to discover who he was. Reflecting on this experience, he said, "Whatever illusions I'd built up in Rome as the All-American Boy were gone. I was back in my Old Kentucky Home."

Developing a Public Persona

Two months after the Olympics in Rome, Cassius Clay, no longer an innocent teenager from Kentucky, signed a contract with the Louisville Sponsoring Group and turned professional. Subsequently, Angelo Dundee took over as his manager and began training him for the big time. Under

Dundee, he quickly honed the fighting style that would revolutionize boxing technique. In his own words (p. 51):

I learn to put my head within hitting range, force my opponent to throw blows, then lean back and away, keeping eyes wide open so I can see everything, then sidestep, move to the right, or to the left, jab him again, then again, put my head back in hitting range. It takes a lot out of a fighter to throw punches that land in the thin air. When his best combinations hit nothing but space, it saps him.

While perfecting his fighting style, Cassius was also crafting his public persona. His overt proclamations that he was the greatest and the prettiest emerged as part of an act that was designed to build ticket sales, intimidate opponents and gain the publicity he needed to get a shot at the title. Prior to his becoming a major contender, Cassius Clay had seen the famous wrestler Gorgeous George performing in Las Vegas. He observed how this consummate showman, with his long blonde curls and outrageous self-serving claims, had whipped the fans into a frenzy. Then he watched as Gorgeous George proceeded to enter the ring and destroy his opponent to the “boos” and insults of thousands of hysterical fans yelling for his blood. Clay’s biographer and ringside physician, Ferdie Pacheco, described how Gorgeous George took Cassius Clay aside after the show to give the young boxer some advice on showmanship (Pacheco, pp. 49–50):

You gotta have a gimmick, kid. You got your good looks, a great body; they tell me you can fight like a dream, and you can talk even better than you can fight. You’ve got your act; now you need to polish it. Always dress in white. White robe, trunks, and shoes. Especially white shoes...makes you look even faster, and it’ll make the purists hate you...Now you’ve got a great mouth. Lots of people love your brash, cocky style, and a lot of people will pay to see someone shut your mouth with a leather glove. So, keep on bragging, keep on sassing...and always be outrageous.

The young Cassius Clay was quick to apply Gorgeous George’s suggestions in the design of his own public personality. As Normal Mailer would write later, “He is America’s greatest ego.” Indeed, Clay was so successful in promoting this egomaniacal image that people lined up to buy tickets to see him taught a lesson in humility.

In his first two years as a professional, Cassius Clay won seventeen fights, almost all by knockouts. Normally, boxers needed to win a large number of professional fights to reach top contender status. Impatient to get a shot at the Heavyweight Champion Sonny Liston, however, Clay made outrageous claims that the champ was afraid to fight him. On one occasion he visited Liston's home in the middle of the night and woke up the neighborhood with his loud verbal challenges to the man he called "the ugly bear." He even left a large bear trap on his front lawn. The press reported the event and Clay continued to build momentum for a title fight.

To raise his profile as a heavyweight contender, Cassius was scheduled to fight Doug Jones in March 1963 in Madison Square Garden. In this Mecca of pugilism, he found his way in front of the cameras and on television, poetically predicting the round in which his opponent would meet his demise.

This served to heighten the fans' anticipation and increase the intensity of their desire to see the challenger get "whipped." Though he won the fight against Doug Jones in a split decision, it was a pyrrhic victory, because his prediction failed and sportswriters began to question whether Cassius Clay was a credible contender. Unfazed, Cassius said, "[The fans] booed me all the way to the dressing room and clutched at my robe. I had just made more enemies, and every one of them would find a way to see me fight again."

The next fight, Clay's first professional match abroad, was against British heavyweight champion Henry Cooper. On June 18, 1963, before a crowd of 55,000 screaming fans at Wembley Stadium in London, Cassius Clay adorned himself with a golden bejeweled crown and red robe that bore the inscription, "The Greatest" and was heralded by "royal" trumpets. In his usual poetic fashion, he predicted the demise of the British champion in five rounds, but nearly lost the fight in the third round when knocked down and almost out by a powerful left hook known as "Henry's hammer." He recovered to win the fight with a fifth-round victory, but had sustained another close call in his quest for a title fight. After the fight, he was visited by Sonny Liston's manager who said, "I've flown 3000 miles just to tell you Liston wants you...you've talked yourself into a title fight."

By capturing the interest of boxing fans and the media, Cassius Clay had won himself a shot at the title. However, the outrageous braggadocio that had become his external persona belied the deep inner strength and self-efficacy possessed by the young boxer. The true evidence of Cassius Clay's self-efficacy was only to emerge as his life unfolded, revealing the real character buried deep behind the mask.

A Black Muslim Heavyweight Champion

As Cassius Clay was preparing to fight for the Heavyweight Championship of the World, he met and befriended Muslim guru Elijah Muhammad. Muhammad introduced him to Malcolm X. They became fast friends, allied in their abiding hatred of the enslavement and exploitation of the black race by the whites. The message of hope for a better future through Islam claimed him and he decided to call himself Cassius X. Elijah christened him with the new name Muhammad (one worthy of praise) and Ali (most high). The transformation was complete. Cassius Clay, now Muhammad Ali, was no longer one to be controlled but one in control. Ali the Renegade was born and within a few years his views would be in conflict with those of the American Government and the majority of the American people.

The day before the championship fight that was to resolve the question once and for all as to who was world's heavyweight champion, Cassius Clay announced that he had joined the Nation of Islam and was now named Muhammad Ali. The fight promoters feared that an affiliation with a reputedly militant organization such as the Black Muslims would diminish Ali's image as the force of good against Liston's established underworld image as the force of evil. They vehemently opposed the announcement of Ali's affiliation at this time and threatened to cancel the fight that he had struggled long and hard to obtain. But Ali was prepared to risk it all and announced his conversion to the Nation of Islam, against the wishes of the fight promoters. This steadfastness in the face of such a devastating potential loss was an early indication of the strong self-efficacy that resided in the soul of this aspiring champion.

As noted earlier, Muhammad Ali shocked the world by defeating Liston in a titanic struggle that ended when Liston did not respond to the bell for round seven. Ali was less experienced, smaller and lighter but had outsmarted a stronger opponent. This would not be the last time that Ali's boxing style and instincts prevailed over the dictates of common practice. Even Ali was dumfounded at his remarkable upset victory. When commentator Howard Cosell climbed into the ring, Ali said, "I'm too fast. He was scared. I knew I had him in the first round. I shook up the world. I can't be beat." Though Liston had been regarded by the public as a thug with ties to the criminal element, Muhammad Ali now represented a more sinister threat. He was an avowed member of the Black Muslims, a religious sect associated with people like Malcolm X who preached hate and revenge against the "white

oppressors.” Ali’s allegiance to the Black Muslims touched off a maelstrom of outrage among the American citizenry. In the good-guy/bad-guy scenario of the fight game, it appeared that there was no good guy with whom the fans could identify. Boxing was facing a crisis and the Black Muslim known as Muhammad Ali was becoming an icon for black defiance in America.

In the year following his victorious title match, Ali took advantage of a brief hiatus in his fighting schedule to flee the vitriolic controversy and visit his ancestral roots in Africa. He visited several African countries, chatting with the people and developing a sense of kinship with his contemporaries on that continent. Though Ali often had railed against the sins and atrocities of the white man against the blacks, the sect of Black Muslims to which he belonged preached pacifism rather than militancy. Muhammad Ali was apparently promoting self-efficacy for all. He was subscribing to a religion that he believed recognized the personal self-worth of all individuals, regardless of race, skin color or political affiliation. Though raised as a Christian, his disillusionment with all establishments, especially those founded by whites, had caused him to seek alternatives.

Ali’s Most Formidable Adversary

As Heavyweight Champion of the World, Muhammad Ali fought many powerful contenders. In the three years after his victory in 1964, he successfully defended his title against all comers. In his rematch against Sonny Liston in May 1965, he won in a first-round knock out. But none of his adversaries was more formidable than the Government of the United States. It was early 1967 when he received a letter from Uncle Sam demanding that he appear before the draft board for induction into the army. The United States was at war with Vietnam and he was called into service.

Ali’s recent conversion to the Black Muslim religion carried with it a commitment to pacifism. Though this position may have seemed inconsistent with his profession as a boxer, Ali insisted that he was not prepared to go to war for his country. He described the war in Vietnam as white men sending black men to kill yellow men. In response to public criticism for his stance on the draft, he said (Halberstam, 1999, p. 13), “The newspapers say either I go to jail or go to the Army. There is another alternative and that is justice.” He told the media, “Man, I ain’t got no quarrel with them Vietcong.”

When Ali’s comments were reported in the press, reprisals were swift and widespread. Hate mail, threats and angry telephone calls poured in. There were, however, some calls of support. One elderly gentleman who called from

England asked Muhammad Ali whether he had been quoted correctly. To the delight of the old man, Ali assured him that the quote was correct and that he was intending to stand firm. The old man chortled approval and the two established an immediate rapport. Ali suggested that he might be coming to England to fight Henry Cooper again and asked the old gentleman whom he would bet on? When the old fellow diplomatically answered, “Henry’s capable, you know, but I would bet on you,” Ali responded facetiously, “You’re not a dumb as you look,” and offered him a ringside seat if he were able to attend.

When Muhammad Ali fought Henry Cooper on May 21, 1966, the old gentleman was not at ringside to see Ali win by a knockout in the sixth round. However they continued to exchange cards and notes as pen pals separated by an ocean and two generations. A year or two after the initial contact, Ali was thumbing through a *World Book Encyclopedia* when he came upon a picture of a man with the same name as his pen pal in England. The man was described as one of the greatest mathematicians and philosophers of the 20th century. Ali was horrified to realize that this was the very person to whom he had addressed the flippant comment, “You’re not as dumb as you look.” He penned a quick letter of apology to which he received a response indicating that the old gentleman had enjoyed the remark. A short time later, Ali sent a letter to the old gentleman expressing the desire to visit him on a trip to England if the draft refusal did not result in a confiscation of his passport. Ali received the following response:

I have read your letter with the greatest admiration and personal respect. In the coming months there is no doubt that the men who rule Washington will try to damage you in every way open to them, but I am sure you know that you spoke for your people and for the oppressed everywhere in the courageous defiance of American power. They will try to break you because you are a symbol of a force they are unable to destroy, namely, the aroused consciousness of a whole people determined no longer to be butchered and debased with fear and oppression. You have my whole-hearted support. Call me when you come to England.

*Yours sincerely,
Bertrand Russell*

On April 28, 1967, Ali was ordered to appear at the draft board for induction. When he refused, he was stripped of his title and the State Athletic Commissions across the country revoked his boxing license. On May 8, he was indicted by a federal grand jury in Houston, Texas and released on \$5000 bail on the condition that he not travel outside the United States. (When Ali eventually made it to England to see Russell, he was too late; the old philosopher had died.) The case went to trial the following year; Ali was convicted and given a five-year prison sentence. He managed to stay out of prison by launching an appeal, but the protracted appeals process was draining his financial resources as his precious boxing years were wasting away. Already a pariah for his Black Muslim affiliation, Ali was now regarded as unpatriotic and un-American. His refusal to be inducted had insulted those in the military as well as those who had fought in previous wars for a free America. Public outrage against him had reached gargantuan proportions and hate letters, including death threats, flooded his mailbox. Furthermore, Elijah Muhammad excommunicated Ali from the Nation of Islam for disobeying some edict of that sect. With the prison term hanging over his head, diminishing financial resources and no prospect of re-entering the ring, Muhammad Ali was approaching the nadir of his life. Surviving such an ordeal would be the ultimate test of his mettle.

Returning from Exile

As America moved from the 1960s to the 1970s, the tide of public opinion on the Vietnam War was beginning to shift. Nightly television broadcasts of brutal battles in which Vietnamese villages were torched and soldiers on both sides were seen to be suffering horrendous mutilations and death began to undermine public support for this conflict. Students protesting the war were conducting sit-ins on college campuses. The Watergate scandal had shaken American confidence in its institutions and public opinion was turning to support withdrawal from the Asian conflict. Then in June of 1970, the Supreme Court unanimously reversed its decision and Muhammad Ali became a free man—an event he regarded as his greatest victory.

Ali's enforced absence from the ring had spanned a period of more than three years—critical years when he would have been at the peak of his youth and vigor. Now those years and that vitality were lost forever. When he met the reigning champion “Smokin” Joe Frazier at Madison Square Garden on March 8, 1971, Ali was no longer the young tiger he had been. He was closing in on age 30 and his punches had lost some of their speed and power. Frazier

beat him in fifteen rounds in a punishing contest that left both fighters looking as though they had been puréed in a giant blender. It was Muhammad Ali's first professional defeat. When asked how it felt to lose, he responded, "Naked...cold...It's not just the blows, it's all them witnesses. Everybody watching you. You sinking...and they roar *him* on."

After his loss to Joe Frazier, Ali realized that his climb back to supremacy, if at all possible, would be long and arduous. Age was taking a toll, but inactivity had exacted an even higher price. If he quit now, he would be remembered as a charismatic boxer who was Heavyweight Champion for three years—a boxer who had defended his title against a lot of second-rate fighters but who was untested in his ability to give or take powerful punches. Reaching from the depths of his resolve, Muhammad Ali decided to pick himself up off the canvas and once again immerse himself in the rigorous training that had brought him to the top of the world. During 1971 and 1972, he fought no fewer than 20 matches, including some exhibition fights and regularly scheduled fights against such heavyweight contenders as Jimmy Ellis, Buster Mathis, George Chuvalo, Jerry Quarry, Floyd Patterson and Joe Bugner. He won all of these bouts, most by knockouts. He was moving ever closer to a title fight when he met Ken Norton on March 31, 1973, at the Sports Arena in San Diego, California.

The fight against Norton was to be a crossroad in Ali's career. Ken Norton was a young, well-muscled ex-marine who was not considered a serious contender for the heavyweight title. This was expected to be an easy victory that would move Ali one step closer to a rematch with Joe Frazier for the title. However, Norton turned out to be a much stronger adversary than anyone had anticipated. In the second round, he unleashed a devastating blow that Ali later described in vivid detail (p. 20):

I think back to the second round when Norton got in through my guard and crashed a left up against my jaw. I know exactly when the blow came. I felt a snap and a sudden gush of blood in my throat. When I come back to my corner I ask Bundini and Angelo [his trainer] "How can you tell when your jaw is broke?"

"When you open it like this"—Bundini demonstrates—"and it clacks, it's broke."

I open it and hear the clack. A sharp pain goes around my face. I spit the blood trickling down my throat into the bucket and wash out my mouth, but more comes gushing in.

“If it’s broke,” Bundini is saying, “we’ve got to stop the fight.”

But he knows I won’t stop. There are thirteen more rounds to go, and I can win.

Realizing that Ali’s jaw was broken, his ringside physician, Ferdie Pacheco, recommended that the fight be stopped. But Ali insisted on continuing and his manager, Herbert Muhammad acquiesced. In his biography of Muhammad Ali, Pacheco recalled (p. 114):

Ali lost a close decision in 12 rounds. His pain was excruciating. A jaw fracture is by its very nature painful; imagine being hit on the jaw by a powerful puncher for ten rounds. My admiration for Ali jumped 100 percent on that hot, painful day.

After the fight, Ali made no excuses. He accepted the defeat and graciously acknowledged, “Norton whopped me.” However, the loss was devastating for him. Many of those who had believed that Ali would make a comeback were now convinced that he was a has-been. They quickly shifted their allegiance to Norton. The morning after the fight, one of Ali’s entourage reported, “Howard Cosell is predicting you’re finished. He’s saying that three and a half years’ exile took too much out of you...Only yesterday he was saying how great you are.” Ali was stoic in his response. He had learned that public opinion runs with a winner and shifts its loyalty with a change in the wind. However, his sense of self was too strong to acquiesce to the judgments of others. Within six months, Ali fought a rematch against Norton. This time he was in top shape and won a 12-round decision by enough of a margin to indicate that he was back in the hunt for a title fight. There remained one man who stood between Ali and his shot at the title—his nemesis, Smokin’ Joe.

On January 28, 1974, just four months after defeating Ken Norton, Ali was fighting his rematch against the only other man to have defeated him, Joe Frazier. Frazier was no longer champion, having lost his title to George Foreman—a formidable bone-crushing fighter who had won the gold medal at the 1968 Olympics in the heavyweight division. Ali had to win his rematch against Frazier if he were to retain any hope of regaining the heavyweight title. The rematch was relatively even, although it was clear that Ali out-pointed Frazier and consequently won a 12-round decision. Ali had avenged the defeats he had suffered at the hands of Norton and Frazier.

The Rumble in the Jungle

Muhammad Ali's unrelenting quest for a title fight against the reigning heavyweight champion George Foreman was now coming to fruition. In an attempt to bring the country of Zaire into the public consciousness, its President, Mobutu Sese Seko, invested \$10 million in a title fight between the Heavyweight Champion George Foreman and challenger Muhammad Ali. This contest, featuring two Afro-Americans in Africa, was soon dubbed the "Rumble in the Jungle." A highly publicized affair, it captured the imagination of fans on all continents and promised to become one of the most widely watched events in the history of sport.

However, logistical problems threatened to terminate the entire event in the early stages. Posters bearing the slogan, "From the slave ship to the championship" were displayed to build solidarity between American and African blacks, but they were quickly banned by a Zaire official who stated, "We are the winners of that struggle. We sold the slaves and stayed in Africa. You were the slaves and were sent to America." The complicity of the Africans in the slave trade had been overlooked by some racist pundits in America who wished to portray the whites as the only devils of history. Ali himself came perilously close to terminating the event when he admonished reporters in the American press to take him seriously or they would be cooked and eaten by Mobutu's people when they arrived in Africa. A hostile telephone call from Zaire's Foreign Minister put a stop to all references to cannibalistic behavior.

After postponements, delays and threats of termination, the much-anticipated event finally took place on October 30, 1974 in Kinshasa, Zaire. Ali was facing the most formidable opponent of his career. The 26-year-old Foreman was bigger, stronger and younger than his 32-year-old challenger. Foreman had scored two-round knock outs against Joe Frazier and Ken Norton—the two men who had beaten Ali. In 40 professional fights spanning a period of three years, no opponent had lasted more than three rounds against him. Boxing experts and sportscasters were in general agreement that Foreman had the most powerful punch in the history of heavyweight boxing. He was not only awesome; he was virtually unbeatable.

How could Ali possibly hope to stay with him for 15 rounds? It was expected that Ali would back pedal around the ring, avoiding the champion until he tired, and then move in for the kill. However, at the opening bell Ali surprised everyone, including the champ, by rushing toward him and

launching a quick left jab to his head. Then relying on his own greater speed, Ali hit and ran, hit and ran and attempted to outbox his stronger adversary. Attempting to conserve his own strength, he used the ropes to help him bounce around and avoid most of Foreman's powerful punches—a technique he later called his “rope-a-dope.” By the eighth round Foreman was too tired to defend himself and Ali knocked him out. Foreman later admitted (Mann, p. 119), “Muhammad amazed me; I'll admit it. He outthought me; he outfought me. That night Ali was just the better man in the ring” Reflecting on his decision to risk a knockout punch on George Foreman, Ali said, (p. 412):

If the price of winning is to be a broken jaw, a smashed nose, a cracked skull, a disfigured face, you pay it if you want to be King of the Heavyweights. If you want to wear the crown, you can play it careful only until you meet a man who will die before he lets you win. Then you have to lay it all on the line or back down and be damned forever.

It was a modern-day version of Macbeth's last stand against the adversary who had come to slay him, “Lay on, Macduff, and damned be him who first cries, Hold! Enough!”

The Thrilla' in Manila

With his defeat of George Foreman, Muhammad Ali had regained his title as Heavyweight Champion of the World. He was back on top—almost eight years since he was stripped of his title for refusing the draft. In the year that followed, he defended his title against Chuck Wepner and Ron Lyle whom he knocked out, and Joe Bugner against whom he won a decision. But the real test of his title was his rematch against Joe Frazier. He called it the Thrilla' in Manila, because it was situated in the capital city of the Philippines. Ali and Frazier had each won once in their two confrontations; this was to be the match to decide who was the better fighter. But it was more. Pre-fight animosity between the two fighters suggested that this was also a “grudge match.” Ali had taunted and attempted to humiliate Frazier in pre-fight rhetoric and both fighters came to the match ready for war.

The fight was boxing at its most dramatic. Both fighters delivered and received crushing punishment that tested the limits of human endurance. Ali dominated in the early rounds, then Frazier dominated. Finally, Ali scored a knockout in round 14 when Frazier's blurred vision in one eye prompted his

manager to throw in the towel. It was the most punishment Ali had ever sustained in a fight and he later said to his trainer, Angelo Dundee, “This is the closest I’ve come to dying.”

While in Manila, Ali was accompanied by his mistress, Veronica Porsch. Though he was still married to second wife Belinda with whom he had four children, his feelings of invincibility had made him feel somewhat impervious to consequences. During an interview with President Marcos, the Philippine President spoke of Ali’s lovely wife (referring to Veronica) on live television. A subsequent article about the Thrilla’ in Manila that referred to Ali’s “other wife” was the trigger that led to Belinda’s suing for divorce. The strong ego that had served Ali so well in all his conflicts would also be his undoing. It is yet another example of the adage, “What makes us is often what breaks us.”

The Final Round

The Thrilla’ in Manila marked the peak of Muhammad Ali’s career—a time when he had proved that he was a real champion and arguably the best heavyweight boxer who had ever lived. Even more, he was an icon not only for black equality but for individual freedom against the establishment. It was the ideal time for the champ to retire and use his celebrity to promote worthy causes. However, a reluctance to sit on the sidelines and a strong ego impelled Ali to postpone retirement plans for just a little longer. Through 1976 and 1977, he defended his title against several contenders, mostly of the second-rate variety. In spite of this, his victories were less decisive than in the past. Finally, his close 15-round decision against Earnie Shavers at Madison Square Garden on September 29, 1977 convinced Ali’s supporters that it was time for the old pro to hang up his gloves. Resigning as Ali’s physician, Ferdie Pacheco announced that Ali had suffered kidney damage from the body punches. He had also sustained serious damage to his legs a year earlier in his exhibition bout with Japanese wrestler Antonio Inoki.

In spite of all the pressure to retire, Ali pressed on. He agreed to fight Leon Spinks, a relatively undisciplined 24-year-old Olympic gold medal winner who had only five professional fights to his credit. It was not expected that he would offer much challenge to Ali, but the champ’s passion for winning and maintaining a rigorous training regimen had faded. He entered the ring as a listless shadow of his former self. Spinks won the title in a 15-round decision. However, Ali’s reluctance to be second to anyone led to a

rematch exactly six months later, when he regained the Heavyweight title for the third time in his career—a feat never achieved before or since. Ali lost the title for the last time to his former sparring partner Larry Holmes on October 2, 1980. It had been a great run but Ali's fuel tank was running low. A year later, on December 11, 1981, Ali hung up the gloves for good after a humiliating defeat by Trevor Berbick in Nassau in the Bahamas. He was almost 40 years of age and had been a professional fighter for more than half his life.

Just five years after his last boxing bout, Ali was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. General consensus is that the disease, sometimes referred to as "fighter's Parkinson's," is the result of cumulative damage to the middle brain from punches to the head over a prolonged period of time. Ferdie Pacheco described Ali's demeanor when the former champ was 50 years old (p. 45):

[Ali's] chatterbox, rapid-fire doggerel [is] no longer delivered in an electric voice, but spoken in a deep rumble, slowly and hesitantly. The animated, childlike, gleeful, mischievous face of the young champion is now round and flat, emotionless, the facial nerves no longer transmitting their rapid orders to muscles that then translate them to expression...What a ghastly price to pay for staying "on" too long, for pleasing the public, for giving it, and all of us what we wanted: the Ali Circus to ride on forever. We thought he would never grow old, would never slow down, would never stop being fun—would never stop being Ali.

Legacy

In 1987 *Ring Magazine* ranked Ali the #1 heavyweight of all time. In 1988 the United Nations honored him with the Lifetime Achievement Award. Then in 1999 *Sports Illustrated* saw fit to name him Sportsman of the 20th Century. Muhammad Ali was to boxing what Ruth, Gretzky and Jordan were to their sports. He dominated the ring for so long that his name became synonymous with boxing.

However, Muhammad Ali has been eulogized not only for his prowess in the ring but as much for his defiance of others who might decide for him what he could or could not do. Standing alone when you are outnumbered, outgunned and outrageous demands self-efficacy of the highest order. But

bragging, self-promoting and taunting non-supporters until they wish to see you pummeled to the canvas takes self-efficacy to an entirely new level.

When Howard Cosell taunted Ali about his braggadocio, he retorted, “I don’t think it’s bragging to say I’m something special.” Indeed, he was someone very special and his recognition of this enabled him to achieve at levels beyond what most humans ever dream. The values in our culture have been strongly influenced by religious teaching that would have us believe we are unworthy and that pride is a sin. Yet pride in oneself is the cornerstone of high achievement. Great things are not achieved by those with low self-esteem. Pride only becomes a liability when it clouds our vision of reality and overrides our better judgment. It was a strong self-efficacy that enabled Muhammad Ali to challenge the establishment. When the draft board told him that he had no choice but to fight against a cause that was not his, he declined, saying, “I don’t have to be who you want me to be.” Did he pay a price for such audacity? You bet he did. But in the long run he became an icon for those who stand firm against institutional decree and deal with the consequences.

Muhammad Ali appeared at the right time for his role as a lightning rod of defiance against a world grown too tight and too controlling. The turbulence of the ’60s proved to be his time to fight both the system and his opponents. He appeared on the scene during that era when people said no and “tuned in, turned on, and dropped out”; when Tim Leary and Fritz Perls were the darlings of rebellious intellectual set. Cassius Clay had grown up in a southern city where racial discrimination was deeply ingrained in the culture, a place where he was told where he could eat and where he could go to school. He, like millions of others, said no. He tuned in to an inner sense of his being and turned on to his own religious and cultural belief in Islam. Rejecting his name “Cassius Clay” as the slave name of his ancestors, he embraced the Black Muslim religion and took on the name Muhammad Ali. His contribution to the fight for equal rights was acknowledged by Howard Cosell (Mann, p. 85):

Muhammad Ali is transcendental to sport. He’s important to the history of this country because his entire life is an index to the bigotry lodged deep within the wellspring of this nation and its people. Ali had the advantage of coming in the 1960s. That time period was incredible, and Ali understood it; he was at the heart of it; he helped shape it all.

Few athletes walk on to the field of battle with the brashness of Muhammad Ali. Long before he was the king of the ring, Ali was telling all who would listen “*I am the Greatest.*” That mentality went a long way towards beating opponents who were physically superior, or later in his career, who were years younger. Both George Foreman and Joe Frazier had superior skills but Ali believed in himself, and that belief took him beyond his limits. In his autobiography, Ali commented (p. 363):

Champions are made from something they have deep inside them—a desire, a dream, a vision. They have to have last-minute stamina, they have to be a little faster; they have to have the skill and the will. But the will must be stronger than the skill. Many fighters have lost to less skillful opponents who had the will to win, who were determined to keep going.