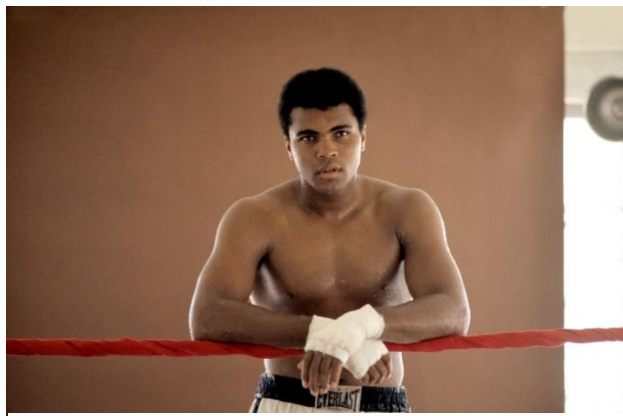




Stories in Stone: Muhammad Ali

By: Alex Luken

This year marks the fourth anniversary of the passing of Muhammad Ali. He is unquestionably beloved world-wide, not only for his boxing ability, but for being a vocal champion for civil rights and peace. Each year, thousands of visitors from across the globe pay their respects to The Champ at Cave Hill Cemetery, often pausing to share what Ali means to them with cemetery staff members.



Muhammad Ali

A city-wide celebration of Muhammad Ali's life, organized by The Muhammad Ali Center, is curtailed this year due to Covid-19 restrictions. However, the next few weeks are still a great time to visit the cemetery over the next few weeks to pay your respects and reflect on Ali's Six Core Principles that shaped his life:

Spirituality – A sense of awe, reverence, and inner peace inspired by a connection to all of creation and/or that which is greater than oneself.

Giving – To present voluntarily without expecting something in return.

Respect – Esteem for, or a sense of the worth or excellence of, oneself and others.

Conviction – A firm belief that gives one the courage to stand behind that belief, despite pressure to do otherwise.

Dedication – The act of devoting all of one's energy, effort, and abilities to a certain task.

Confidence – Belief in oneself, one's abilities, and one's future.

Muhammad Ali was born Cassius Clay, the oldest son of Cassius Clay, Sr. and Odessa Grady Clay on January 17, 1942, in Louisville, KY. A pivotal point in Clay's life, when he was 12, was when his bike was stolen. A local police officer, Joe Martin, answered Clay's distress call and listened to the young man's lament, as he claimed to beat up whoever had stolen his bike. Officer Martin answered, "You better learn how to fight first."

Just six weeks after he began training, Clay won his first fight. Two of his earliest victories included the 1956 Golden Gloves Beginners Tournament and the 1959 National Golden Gloves Tournament of Champions, as well as the Amateur Athletic Union's national title. Fast with his hands and light on his feet, Clay made boxing an art.

Not long after, Clay won a gold medal on the 1960 U.S. Olympic boxing team in Rome, Italy. Prior to his win against Sonny Liston in 1964, Clay began attending Nation of Islam meetings. Not long after his famous fight with Sonny Liston, Ali announced that he accepted the teachings of Islam and changed his name to Muhammad Ali, denouncing “Cassius Clay” as a slave’s name.

In 1967, he refused to report for induction after being drafted into the US military, citing religious beliefs and opposition to American involvement in the Vietnam War. He also pointed out that Black men were disproportionately drafted and killed in Vietnam, while those who returned after fighting heroically still faced racism in their own country. Ali was found guilty of draft evasion, stripped of his boxing titles, and banned from boxing for three years.

In 1970, Ali began boxing again, and in 1971 the Supreme Court overturned his conviction. After regaining his boxing license, Ali fought against championship boxers, including Joe Frazier, Leon Spinks, George Foreman, and Larry Holmes. The media called Ali “The People’s Champion” and “The Greatest”.

Ali’s first professional loss was against Joe Frazier, whom he had publicly taunted and insulted. But, Ali won the heavyweight title back at the age of 32 against George Foreman. “Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee, his hands can’t hit what his eyes can’t see,” Ali said before his fight with George Foreman.

He lost to Leon Spinks in 1978, but later defeated him in a rematch, making Ali the first boxer ever to win three heavyweight championships. After losing a bout to Trevor Berbick, Ali hung up the gloves for good in 1981, retiring with a professional record of 56 wins, 5 losses.

In 1984, three years after retiring from boxing, Ali announced he had Parkinson’s disease, a degenerative neurological condition. He turned his attention to philanthropy and making life better for others. He supported Parkinson’s research and became active in the Special Olympics and the Make a Wish Foundation. In 1990, Ali helped negotiate the release of 15 American hostages from Iraq. In 1998 he became a United Nations Messenger of Peace for his work overseas, and was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2005.

Muhammad Ali’s funeral service brought a sense of public peace and an outpouring of respect and sentiment that was seen as his funeral procession wound throughout the city of Louisville. Tens of thousands of citizens stood along the route to pay their final respects to “The Greatest,” a fitting tribute to the values he strove to exemplify.



Muhammad Ali’s funeral procession entering Cave Hill Cemetery. Photo courtesy of Courier Journal.

Ali monument in Cave Hill Cemetery