

CHAPTER 8

Show Time

Ali Started It, NFL Exhibitionists Ruined It

Even now, it seems such an unlikely birthplace for trash talking. And in a sense, it was chosen by chance. A major heavyweight championship fight was scheduled to take place in Boston in November of 1964, but an injury to the champ delayed the event, and then the absence of a promoter's license for Massachusetts forced a drastic change of venue. Thus, the second Muhammad Ali–Sonny Liston fight was moved north to the unassuming town of Lewiston, Maine, which, true to its reputation, was mostly sleepy on the night of May 25, 1965, until Ali pierced the air and the ears by running his mouth.

At St. Dominic's Arena, before an attendance of 2,434, which remains the smallest crowd to witness a heavyweight championship fight, a controversial straight right to the head dropped Liston to the canvas in the first round. What happened next was a moment that refuses to be erased by time. The champ did not retreat to a neutral corner and obey the rules of boxing, something that fighters have followed since the bare-knuckle brawl days. On this night, the so-called phantom punch that floored Liston wasn't enough to bring satisfaction to Ali. It could not clinch victory or bring closure. No, on this

night, Ali wanted to inflict more damage on Liston. He wanted to humiliate Liston.

He stood over Liston's body, glowering, gesturing, gloating. He motioned with his twirling right arm and clenched right glove and, further proof that nobody or nothing could keep Ali from talking back then, managed to be heard clearly despite wearing a mouthpiece.

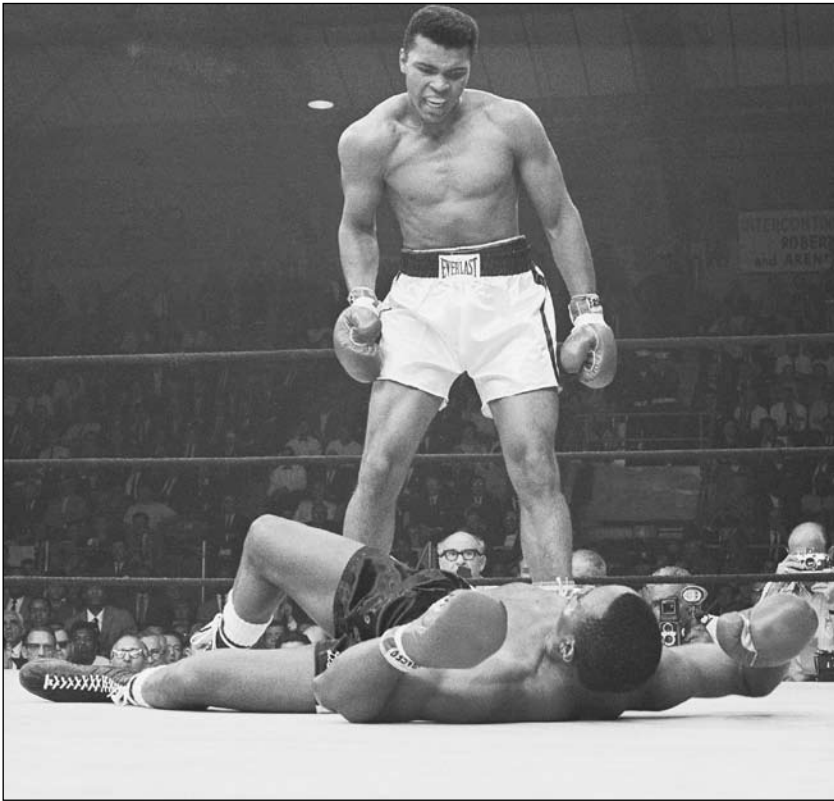
"Git up and fight, sucka."

It was not the first or the last time Ali mocked an opponent, just the most famous. The scene was captured perfectly by the lens of Neil Leifer, a ringside photographer who worked for *Sports Illustrated*, and the still image is perhaps the most famous photo in sports history. The picture is one of the few taken that doesn't need a caption to explain what you're seeing. Amazingly, even those who weren't born in 1965 are well aware of the man standing and the message he was trying to get across that night, even if his exact words have withstood several version changes over the years.

Even more interesting is how the immortalized moment has not only endured time but has been adored over time by millions around the world. From Pakistan to Punxsutawney and Kenya to Kalamazoo, the image of Ali verbally stomping on a beaten Liston brings a flush feeling of admiration and adulation from those who take just a quick, casual glance; no need to stare too long. People are drawn by the strength and the emotion and the sheer overall impact of the photo, and Ali has drawn raves for projecting "courage" and "power" and "conquest."

Nobody, at least to my knowledge, accused Ali of being "unsportsmanlike."

After taunting Liston, Ali still refused to return to his corner. He never did, actually. Next, he began dancing around the ring, arms held high. His legs moved swiftly, with a slight touch of rhythm and a total cockiness about them. Later in his career, Ali would refine the technique and make it an instrumental part of his in-fight strategy and overall ring showmanship. It became the "Ali Shuffle." Before Liston rose from the canvas, the fight was over



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The mouth that roared. Ali, in his famous May 1965 defeat of Sonny Liston, taunts his opponent openly and, rather unknowingly, begins a trend in sports.

and a phenomenon was born. Or, more accurately, it was popularized. Before long, trash talking and showboating were an accepted part of sports, much like uniforms and sweat.

“We were watching a football game in a hotel lobby back in 1997 on Thanksgiving Day,” recalled Thomas Hauser, Ali’s biographer. “One of the players on the Lions scored and started dancing. And then Muhammad turned to me and said, ‘I started that.’ He loves the fact that he started it.”

Truth be known, the seeds of this culture weren’t planted by Ali. He wasn’t the first boxer to provoke the

other corner. In this regard, Jack Johnson was decades ahead of his time. Even more dangerous than publicly flaunting his white women in an era in which black men were shot just for looking at one, Johnson constantly teased and taunted the “White Hopes” who tried to steal his championship belt. After pummeling them to the floor, Johnson would often release a deep, hearty laugh. Then he’d warn those fighters about the potential hazard of rising to their feet, according to the historians, and enduring another beating. He did this at great risk of being lynched by a racist mob, which means Johnson was either crazy or courageous or both.

But Johnson fought before the video age, so his bombast in the ring was limited to a grainy and flickering silent movie. Unlike Ali, he was hardly a photogenic national sports hero, either, at least beyond the black community; therefore his words and gestures did not stand the test of time, nor did they make more than a ripple in overall sports society at the time. Boxing historians rarely mentioned Johnson’s trash talking in their reports from the ring. Anyway, boxing, while known today for being half-sport and half-spectacle, safely returned to stability and serenity soon after Johnson left for good, with only the occasional lapse of bombast.

The other sports during that era were rather tame, too, with athletes collectively and obediently following a certain standard of conduct, Ty Cobb being one of the few exceptions. As an unabashed racist and all-around bad guy, Cobb had a prickly personality, and baseball historians have more than once noted his eagerness to speak his mind during the game. But again, he was a rarity, and for the most part, athletes in the pre-Ali days played their sport with few or no public acts of verbal unprofessionalism or sensationalism. That behavior was totally frowned on and greeted with disgust by the athletes themselves, who policed one another. One of the worst things in sports then was to be called a “hot dog.” If someone celebrated or teased another player or team, they were an instant outcast. Many would rather live

their professional life as a benchwarmer than carry that burden and reputation. Only the Harlem Globetrotters could get away with it, and only because they played for laughs.

That all changed when Cassius Clay won an Olympic gold medal. Even as a teenager, Ali was brash, but again, he was largely unknown and had no media panting after him and recording every boastful word. Even when Ali slowly rose in the heavyweight ranks in the early 1960s, he was seen as a novelty, a goofball, nothing more, and hardly taken seriously by the public and the sporting press. He wasn't even considered a threat to the championship belt, just a squeaky wheel who was desperate for attention.

Two events changed Ali and sports forever. The first came when Ali, about a year before the first Liston fight, listened to a radio interview with Gorgeous George, the Liberace of pro wrestlers, whose career was winding down (and also his life; he died two years after the interview). George Wagner was a white man from Nebraska who was rather mediocre in the ring; he stood only 5 feet, 9 inches, and wasn't terribly strong, nor much in demand in the world of wrestling, which had only a limited audience in the 1940s and '50s. Wagner tried to change that. He grew his hair long, dyed it blond, and tied it back with gold bobby pins. He had friends act as valets, and their job was to escort him from the dressing room to the ring while music blared over the loudspeakers. He wore sequined robes and became a smash hit as wrestling's original ring villain. His theatrics made pro wrestling a mild if infectious hit on the relatively new medium called television.

Gorgeous George also talked a good game, which only created interest in his matches, and he screamed and bragged and ranted in this particular radio interview overheard by a young and impressionable Ali. At that point, Ali was hooked. He was already famous for predicting the round of his knockouts, but after taking a cue from Gorgeous George, he turned up the volume on

his prefight taunts. And that led to the second and final event that changed Ali and sports forever: Ali started backing up his talk.

Had Liston given Ali a whipping either in their first fight or the second, trash talking would have died a rather quick death, and maybe Ali's career would have as well. Had Liston gotten up from that canvas in Lewiston and rammed his Everlast down Ali's throat, which was nearly hoarse from overuse, then perhaps a sports culture would have ended before it began. But it all came together in Lewiston: the skill, the mouth, the showmanship. Ali was a lot closer to being "the greatest," his boast, than the boxing experts originally thought. The complete package was rather irresistible, especially to TV and the media, and it conspired to turn Ali from a boxing champ to an international icon and today, a saint, especially after his dramatic lighting of the Olympic flame in Atlanta. That wasn't so bad; for the most part, Ali did his shtick with a tongue firmly planted in his cheek. What followed decades later, however, was a trend that sank deep into the fabric of black culture. What Ali unknowingly did by shouting "git up" in Lewiston was cause the decay and decline of sportsmanship. He did this by inspiring poor imitators, with black athletes making up a disproportionate amount, to the point where today, talking smack and shuffling and dancing is shrugged off by the public as part of the black experience.

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