

THE BLOG

Rosenzweig: Muhammad Ali Showed How One Man Can Transform The World



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Stringer. / Reuters

A smiling Muhammad Ali shows his fist to reporters during an impromptu news conference in Mexico City in this July 9, 1987.

True transformational leaders defy conventional stereotypes and societal boundaries.

No one illustrated this better than the late, great Muhammad Ali.

Born Cassius Clay in the racially segregated city of Louisville, Kentucky, he didn't just break the mould of what it means to be an African-American athlete and role model -- he blew it to smithereens.

His best known boxing predecessor, Joe Louis, had been described by a white news media as "a credit to his race" -- meaning he knew his place and didn't make waves.

Ali, on the other hand, created tsunamis. As President Obama put it, Ali was not without his flaws, but there is no doubt he shook up the world.

Ali -- black, Muslim, superbly athletic and so physically perfect he was seemingly sculpted by Michelangelo -- was an inspiration for me growing up in Montreal.

He was initially backed financially by 11 white Louisville businessmen, who together formed a syndicate much as they might have done for a promising thoroughbred (this was, after all, Kentucky). Today we might think of them as angel investors. These particular angels got 50 per cent of Ali's winnings.

It didn't last, nor did the name Cassius Clay. Immediately after defeating Sonny Liston for the heavyweight title, the new champ announced he had joined the Nation of Islam. A few days later, he announced his new "non-slave name," Muhammad Ali.

Ali -- black, Muslim, superbly athletic and so physically perfect he was seemingly sculpted by Michelangelo -- was an inspiration for me growing up in Montreal. He remains one today. Let me put that in perspective -- I am white, Jewish, Canadian and marginally athletic.

My point is that Ali, even as he provided African-Americans with a sense of pride, place and redefined the palate of beauty to include brown and black, also inspired millions of others of every race around the world. He also revolutionized his sport, redefining the very tactics and strategies a boxer might employ.

Typically commentators point to his refusal to heed an induction notice to serve in the U.S. military during the Vietnam conflict as a watershed moment in the Ali saga. And that is undoubtedly true. He took a principled stand, one that not only cost him his title, but almost four of his prime boxing years (and the purses that would have gone with them).

But as someone who identifies and seeks out executive talent for a living -- often looking for transformational leaders on behalf of my clients -- it was Ali's ability to radically upend conventional boxing wisdom that intrigued and inspired me.

Conventional wisdom held that heavyweights did not float and dance, and have the speed of great middleweights. Think of a battleship. Ali could no more hold his feet still than he could hold his tongue. He was a sleek, fast-moving destroyer, literally running circles around opponents.

If circumstances changed, he changed strategy and tactics. Take his fight with the formidable (and younger) George Foreman, the so-called "Rumble in the Jungle." Ali in this instance chose to allow Foreman to pummel his arms and body while he stood against the ropes and covered up. This went on round after round -- until Foreman was so exhausted (in part because the temperature was in excess of 30 degrees Celsius) that he could no longer lift his gloves. Ali then knocked him out.

Transformational leaders are individuals who don't accept conventional wisdom or confine themselves to past practices. Certainly in my own life, whether in business or beyond, I have always felt motivated to have a mind of my own and to not simply accept convention on its face. I likewise challenge my children to be bold and to think for themselves. I have been fortunate over the years to have had great mentors who were close to me. But even though I never met Ali, his example always loomed large, especially in my earlier years.

Where are the transformational leaders of tomorrow? We see them everywhere. I am proud to be on the Board of the next One Young World Summit, which will take place this fall in Ottawa. One Young World is the premier global forum for young leaders under 30. Forbes magazine has their top 30 under 30, which highlights 600 of the brightest young entrepreneurs, breakout talents and change agents in 20 different sectors. And those are just two examples of amazing young talent positioned to change our world for the better.

Nelson Mandela famously declared that sport has the power to change the world. Muhammad Ali understood this notion well.

Toronto is proud to have Toronto Raptors President Masai Ujiri, inspired by Mandela's call to action, carrying the torch. Ujiri established an amazing organization called Giants of Africa, whose mission is to use basketball as a means to educate and enrich the lives of African youth. Every summer, Ujiri travels to Africa to train young players and help transform the continent. Slowly but surely his bold ambitions are being achieved.

We can't all be Muhammad Ali. He was without a doubt one of a kind, perhaps one of the two or three most iconic figures of the 20th century. But each and every one of us can honour his legacy by committing to do at least one more good deed, big or small, so that we can transform our world for the better.