

MUHAMMAD ALI

The Greatest . . . Martial Artist of All Time!

By Adam James



People often debate who is the greatest martial artist of all time and there are many deserving people from the history of martial arts: Wong Fei-Hung, Gichin Funakoshi, Chojun Miyagi, Jigoro Kano, Keiko Fukuda, Morihei Ueshiba, Ip Man, Bruce Lee, Helio Gracie, Gene LeBell, Chuck Norris, Joe Lewis, Moses Powell, Ronald Duncan and many, many more. However, there is one person who had an international impact on fighting, sports and politics, and in many ways, he completely changed martial arts, while most people would probably not think of him as a martial artist – Muhammad Ali..

To understand and appreciate this notion, we must first look at how we qualify greatness in martial arts and life. There are several factors that most historians will analyze: success in combat or competition, founding a school/style, creating content (books, movies and media) and most importantly teaching and impacting others. We can also break it down to the trinity of martial arts: Body/physical, Mind/mental and Soul/spiritual.

Muhammad Ali is not generally regarded as a martial artist, but if we look at boxing as a western martial art, we will see that he truly impacted the martial arts and the entire world in an unparalleled manner.

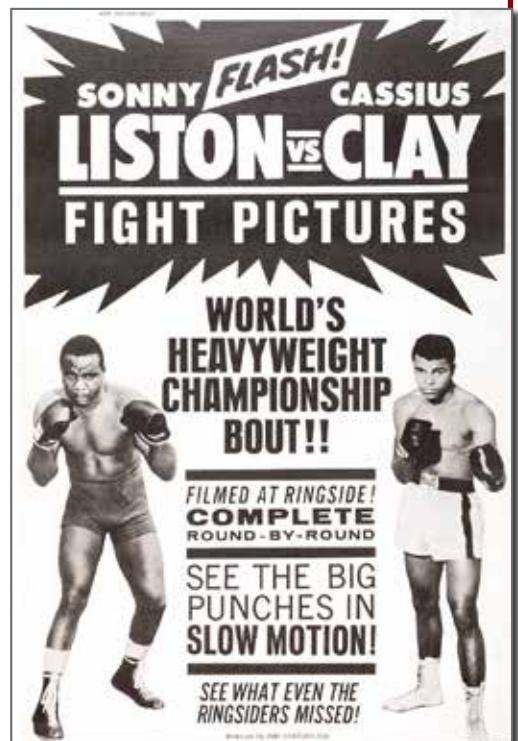
In the physical component of martial arts, Muhammad Ali changed the way people fought not just in boxing but also in martial arts and kickboxing. While Sugar Ray Robinson, Benny Leonard, Gene Tunney and others were the pioneers of “stick and move” boxing, Ali took this approach to a new level. With his speed and razor sharp reflexes, Ali would dance just out of range of his opponent and then move in and strike with lightning fast hands. He also used elusive defense like the “Rope-a-dope” to evade and frustrate his opponent like he was doing Aikido. With the great success of this new approach, Ali impacted Bruce Lee, who used boxing as the bridge from classical Kung Fu to his dynamic new martial art of Jeet Kune Do. Further-



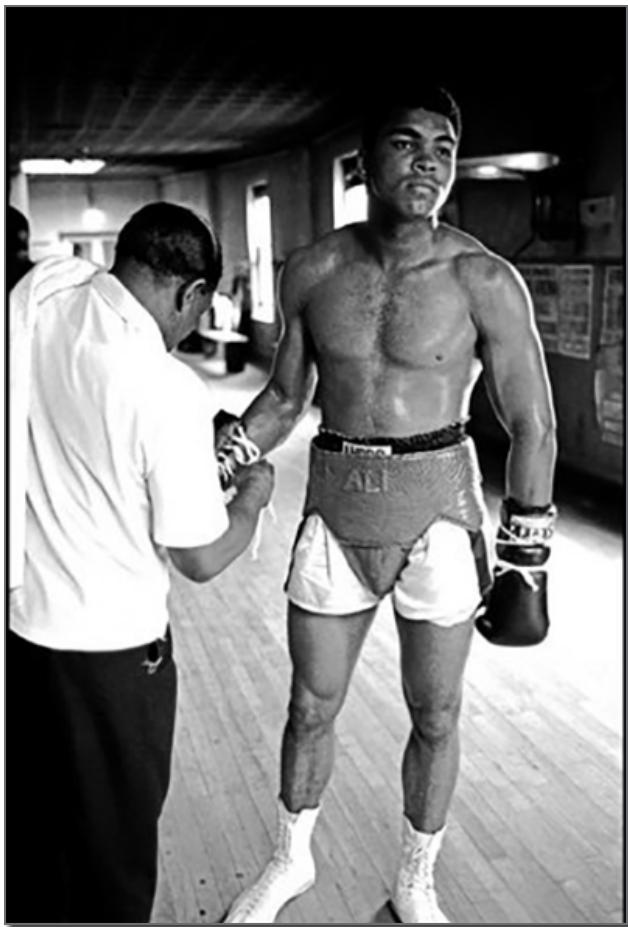
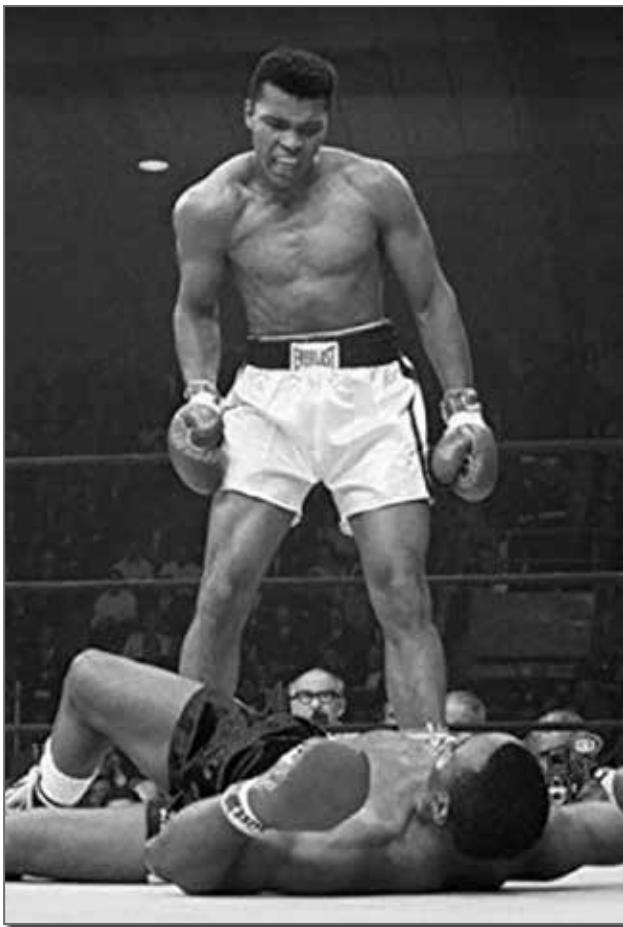
more, Ali participated in a boxing vs wrestling exhibition with Antonio Inoki and refereed by Gene LeBell, which was one of the first Mixed Martial Arts events and helped create more synergy in the martial arts world.

In regard to the mental aspect of martial arts, Ali was a master of the mind game in sports. In many ways, he is the pioneer of “trash talking” to get into the opponents head and get them off of their strategy to success. Throughout Ali’s life and boxing career, he was brimming with confidence, intelligence and confidence. He would tell his opponents that he would beat them with a joke, a rhyme and a smile, and this would be very frustrating to them. During his first shot at the world heavyweight title, Ali faced Sonny Liston, a fighter that many people at the time thought was unbeatable, and who was quite possibly tied to organized crime. However, Ali showed no fear leading up to the fight and this reportedly had a major impact on Liston. During the fight, Ali used his superior speed and footwork to defeat Liston, and he even had to overcome a possible attempt at cheating to affect his vision. This showed tremendous heart, but also demonstrated Ali’s mental strength. Later in his career, Ali battled two of the greatest heavyweight champions in boxing history George Foreman and Joe Frazier, and these fights were great examples of Ali’s physical skills but also his mind games, which didn’t always work. There were two very interesting verbal exchanges that happened in these fights. George Foreman said in the movie When We Were Kings that during the Rumble in the Jungle fight with Ali in Zaire, he hit Ali as hard as he could and Ali whispered to him “That all you got?” Foreman admitted in the interview for the movie that he thought to himself “Yeah, that’s pretty much it.” This had an impact on Foreman’s confidence and may have contributed to his defeat. Another example, and one that shows how to push back against these mind games, is a verbal exchange Ali had with Joe Frazier in the Fight of the Century. During a clinch, Ali whispered to Frazier, “Don’t you know I’m god.” However, Frazier said back “Well god, you’re in the wrong place tonight.” Even for those who dislike trash talking and how it’s impacted sportsmanship, people will all agree that Ali had a great impact on sport psychology and how we mentally prepare and perform.

Quick side note: Ali loved to tell jokes with rhymes and even predictions for the outcome of his fights with short poems. “If you want to lose your money, bet on Sonny.” “We can’t get along so we’ve got to get it on.” And of course the iconic “Float like a butterfly; sting like a bee. The hands can’t hit what the eyes can’t see. Rumble, young man, rumble!” Then in 1963, Ali did an album called I am the Greatest, which featured his rhymes and was a pioneer of rap and hip-hop music.



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With the spiritual component of martial arts, Muhammad Ali had a very unique, powerful and controversial impact. During the height of his boxing career, Ali was drafted in the US Army and expected to serve in the Viet Nam War, however, he refused to enlist due to his religious and political beliefs. Unfortunately, many Americans held Ali in contempt and thought that he was cowardly and unpatriotic for refusing to serve in the Army. However, Ali stayed true to his religious convictions and philosophy of non-violence, and he refused to be a soldier for the US Army. This decision cost him dearly, and he was found guilty of draft evasion and stripped of his boxing championships. During this time, Ali was invited to speak at colleges and he greatly impacted the Civil Rights Movement. Ali appealed the conviction to the Supreme Court and eventually won his case and was able to return to the ring. In many ways, Ali's predicament and the resolution was a reflection of the significant political and cultural factors transpiring in America at this time, and he became a symbol of strength to overcome the challenges that many Americans had to face.

For these reasons, Muhammad Ali has to be considered one of the greatest martial artists of all time. He has greatly impacted the physical aspects of fighting with his sensational boxing skills. He also affected the mental aspects of combat, sports and overcoming challenges. However, his greatest accomplishment may have been his conviction to non-violence and changing our society through his words and deeds, which is the mark of a truly great martial artist. al dojo equates with cleansing one's mind, the ultimate battleground between Light and Dark.

