

muhammad Ali (1942–2016) was an American former heavyweight champion boxer and one of the greatest sporting figures of the 20th century. An Olympic gold medalist and the first fighter to capture the heavyweight title three times, Ali won 56 times in his 21-year professional career. Ali's outspokenness on issues of race, religion and politics made him a controversial figure during his career, and the heavyweight's quips and taunts were as quick as his fists. Born Cassius Clay Jr., Ali changed his name in 1964 after joining the Nation of Islam. Citing his religious beliefs, he refused military induction and was stripped of his heavyweight championship and banned from boxing for three years during the prime of his career. Parkinson's syndrome severely impaired Ali's motor skills and speech, but he remained active as a humanitarian and goodwill ambassador. Muhammad Ali's Early Years and Amateur Career

Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr., the elder son of Cassius Marcellus Clay Sr. (1912–1990) and Odessa Grady Clay (1917–1994), was born on January 17, 1942, in Louisville, Kentucky. It was a red-and-white Schwinn that steered the future heavyweight champion to the sport of boxing. When his beloved bicycle was stolen, a tearful 12-year-old Clay reported the theft to Louisville police officer Joe Martin (1916–1996) and vowed to pummel the culprit. Martin, who was also a boxing trainer, suggested that the upset youngster first learn how to fight, and he took Clay under his wing. Six weeks later, Clay won his first bout in a split decision. By age 18 Clay had captured two national Golden Gloves titles, two Amateur Athletic Union national titles and 100 victories against eight losses. After graduating high school, he traveled to Rome and won the light heavyweight gold medal in the 1960 Summer Olympics. Clay won his professional boxing debut on October 29, 1960, in a six-round decision. From the start of his pro career, the 6-foot-3-inch heavyweight overwhelmed his opponents with a combination of quick, powerful jabs and foot speed, and his constant braggadocio and self-promotion earned him the nickname "Louisville Lip." After winning his first 19 fights, including 15 knockouts, Clay received his first title shot on February 25, 1964, against reigning heavyweight champion Sonny Liston (1932–1970). Although he arrived in Miami Beach, Florida, a 7–1 underdog, the 22-year-old Clay relentlessly taunted Liston before the fight, promising to "float like a butterfly, sting like a bee" and predicting a knockout. When Liston failed to answer the bell at the start of the seventh round, Clay was indeed crowned heavyweight champion of the world. In the ring after the fight, the new champ roared, "I am the greatest!" At a press conference the next morning, Clay, who had been seen around Miami with controversial Nation of Islam member Malcolm X (1925–1965), confirmed the rumors of his conversion to Islam. On March 6, 1964, Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad (1897–1975) bestowed on Clay the name of Muhammad Ali. Ali solidified his hold on the heavyweight championship by knocking out Liston in the first round of their rematch on May 25, 1965, and he defended his title eight more times. Then, with the Vietnam War raging, Ali showed up for his scheduled induction into the U.S. Armed Forces on April 28, 1967. Citing his religious beliefs, he refused to serve. Ali was arrested, and the New York State Athletic Commission immediately suspended his boxing license and revoked his heavyweight belt. Convicted of draft evasion, Ali was sentenced to the maximum of five years in prison and a \$10,000 fine, but he remained free while the conviction was appealed. Many saw Ali as a draft dodger, and his popularity plummeted. Banned from boxing for three years, Ali spoke out against the Vietnam War on college campuses. As public attitudes turned against the war, support for Ali grew. In 1970 the New York

State Supreme Court ordered his boxing license reinstated, and the following year the U.S. Supreme Court overturned his conviction in a unanimous decision. After 43 months in exile, Ali returned to the ring on October 26, 1970, and knocked out Jerry Quarry (1945–1999) in the third round. On March 8, 1971, Ali got his chance to regain his heavyweight crown against reigning champ Joe Frazier (1944–2011) in what was billed as the “Fight of the Century.” The undefeated Frazier floored Ali with a hard left hook in the final round. Ali got up but lost in a unanimous decision, experiencing his first defeat as a pro. Ali won his next 10 bouts before being defeated by Ken Norton (1943–). He won the rematch six months later in a split decision and gained further revenge in a unanimous decision over Frazier in a non–title rematch. The victory gave the 32–year–old Ali a title shot against 25–year–old champion George Foreman (1949–). The October 30, 1974, fight in Kinshasa, Zaire, was dubbed the “Rumble in the Jungle.” Ali, the decided underdog, employed his “rope–a–dope” strategy, leaning on the ring ropes and absorbing a barrage of blows from Foreman while waiting for his opponent to tire. The strategy worked, and Ali won in an eighth–round knockout to regain the title stripped from him seven years prior. Ali successfully defended his title in 10 fights, including the memorable “Thrilla in Manila” on October 1, 1975, in which his bitter rival Frazier, his eyes swollen shut, was unable to answer the bell for the final round. Ali also defeated Norton in their third meeting in a unanimous 15–round decision. On February 15, 1978, an aging Ali lost his title to Leon Spinks (1953–) in a 15–round split decision. Seven months later, Ali defeated Spinks in a unanimous 15–round decision to reclaim the heavyweight crown and become the first fighter to win the world heavyweight boxing title three times. After announcing his retirement in 1979, Ali launched a brief, unsuccessful comeback. However, he was overwhelmed in a technical knockout loss to Larry Holmes (1949–) in 1980, and he dropped a unanimous 10–round decision to Trevor Berbick (1954–2006) on December 11, 1981. After the fight, the 39–year–old Ali retired for good with a career record of 56 wins, five losses and 37 knockouts. In 1984 Ali was diagnosed with Parkinson’s syndrome, possibly connected to the severe head trauma suffered during his boxing career. The former champion’s motor skills slowly declined, and his movement and speech were limited. In spite of the Parkinson’s, Ali remained in the public spotlight, traveling the world to make humanitarian, goodwill and charitable appearances. He met with Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein (1937–2006) in 1990 to negotiate the release of American hostages, and in 2002 he traveled to Afghanistan as a United Nations Messenger of Peace. Ali had the honor of lighting the cauldron during the opening ceremonies of the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta. In 1999 Ali was voted the BBC’s “Sporting Personality of the Century,” and Sports Illustrated named him “Sportsman of the Century.” Ali was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in a 2005 White House ceremony, and in the same year the \$60 million Muhammad Ali Center, a nonprofit museum and cultural center focusing on peace and social responsibility, opened in Louisville. Ring Magazine named Ali “Fighter of the Year” five times, more than any other boxer, and he was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 1990. Ali has been married four times and has seven daughters and two sons. He married his fourth wife, Yolanda, in 1986. Ali died at the age of 74 on June 3, 2016.