

MUHAMMAD ALI

HIS LIFE AND TIMES

THOMAS HAUSER

WITH THE COOPERATION OF
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For Howard Bingham, there's no one like him.

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Preface

In October 1988, I met with Muhammad Ali and his wife, Lonnie, at their request to explore the possibility of writing this book. “People don’t know the real Muhammad,” Lonnie told me at our first session. “All they see is the man the media has exposed them to, but there are so many more sides to Muhammad. He has deep personal convictions, and lives up to those convictions every day. He’s gentle and caring with a heart purer than any I’ve ever known. I want people to understand who Muhammad is, what he stands for, and what he’s accomplished throughout his life.”

Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times is an attempt to achieve that goal. There have been more words written about, more photographs taken of, and more attention lavished upon Ali than any athlete ever. Yet for all his years in the spotlight, the true Ali is largely unknown. Stories about him have been embellished and retold to the point where they assume biblical proportions. People worldwide recognize his face. Yet, even as the Ali chronicles grow, new generations are born, and to them Ali is more legend than reality, part of America’s distant past. Indeed, for millions of young men and women today, the name Cassius Marcellus Clay is unknown—and that’s a shame, because to understand Ali, one must understand where he came from.

This book is not an attempt to mythologize Ali. It’s an effort to show him as he was and is: a superb human being with good qualities and flaws. In his twenties, he was arguably the greatest fighter of all time. But more importantly, he reflected and shaped the social and political currents of the age in which he reigned. Ali in the 1960s stood for the proposition that principles mattered, that equality among people was just and proper, that the war in Vietnam was wrong. Inevitably, the sixties passed. Ali evolved from a feared warrior to a benevolent monarch and ultimately to a benign venerated figure. He is today a deeply religious man, who evokes feelings of respect and love wherever he travels throughout the world.

In preparing this book, I’ve had a very special opportunity and also a special obligation. I’ve spent thousands of hours with Ali, the members of his family, his associates, and his friends. I believe Muhammad has been completely honest with me, and to the extent that people have related stories that might be critical of him for use in this book, it’s not a case of telling tales out of school. Rather, Muhammad has personally asked each contributor to this project to be fully candid and open. Like most authors, I relied on a wide range of sources. Space does not allow me to list all

the archival material and publications reviewed. However, I'm particularly indebted to the many individuals listed in the [Appendix](#) who granted interviews for this project.

Throughout the manuscript, a variety of opinions are expressed. I would like to remind readers of the distinction between opinion and fact, and note that I don't necessarily agree with every statement quoted. Rather, I've sought to incorporate as many divergent views as possible. Whenever a quotation appears in the manuscript, I've indicated its source in the Notes at the end of the book unless it comes from an interview conducted specifically for the book. I have often joined separate quotations from the same speaker and excerpted statements to facilitate reporting on a particular thought or event. This editing has been necessary to accommodate the hundreds of speakers whose voices are heard and who cover the full scope of Ali's life. I'm confident that in so doing I've done nothing to distort what was said or otherwise compromise the fairness of the book. In reporting on the early years of Ali's life, I've employed the name "Cassius Clay," not as a sign of disrespect but because it's the name Ali himself used and was known by then. To avoid confusion, I've tried to remain constant in the use of other names throughout the book. For example, Belinda Ali has changed her name to Khalilah Ali and Herbert Muhammad is now known as Jabir Muhammad. But most people I interviewed referred to them by their original names, and I have used those names for reasons of clarity. Again, no disrespect is intended.

Let me also add a word about Muhammad's health. That subject is dealt with extensively in the later pages of the book, but it was a threshold issue for me before becoming involved. Like millions of people, I'd seen Muhammad on television in recent years. Sometimes he looked well. Other times, his face was frozen; he moved slowly; the life seemed all but gone from his eyes. I didn't want to involve myself in this project unless Muhammad wanted it and was capable of making a significant contribution to the recounting of his life. And toward that end, before making a commitment, I spent five days with Muhammad and Lonnie Ali at their home in Michigan. It was the first of many times we spent together, and I was enormously relieved by what I found. Muhammad's speech is not what it once was, but his thought processes are still clear. His memory is good; his mind is sharp. And despite his physical difficulties, Muhammad is healthier, happier, more alert, and more content than most people realize. He enjoys his life; he believes he's doing God's work, and he's as satisfied with each day as anybody I know.

Thomas Hauser

New York, N.Y.

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Origins

Each day at 5:00 A.M., a forty-nine-year-old man rises from bed on a small farm in Berrien Springs, Michigan. Quietly, as mandated by the Qur'an, he washes himself with clear running water. Then he puts on clean clothes, faces Makkah with his hands at his sides, and says to himself, "I intend to perform the morning prayer as ordered by Allah, the Lord of all the worlds." Outside, it is dark. The only sounds are the wind in winter and the blending of birds and insects when the weather is warm. The man changes position. "Allahu Akbar. Pure and glorified are You, O Allah. Blessed is Your Name and exalted is Your Majesty, and there is nothing worthy of worship except You. I seek refuge with Allah from Satan, the accursed."

The man is Muhammad Ali, the most recognizable person on earth. For half a century, he has walked among us, his face as familiar as that of a close friend. Somewhere in time, he captured a blend of mayhem and magic that carried him deep into the collective psyche of us all. The world didn't just see or hear Ali; it felt him. And if he hasn't always been part of the landscape, it somehow seems that way now.

One of life's lessons is that dreams and fantasies aren't bound by the same rules as reality, but time and again Ali made them coincide. In the ring, he was the most beautiful fighting machine ever assembled. One mark of a great champion is the ability to win his title at a young age and hold on to it until he's old. When Ali made his professional debut, Dwight D. Eisenhower was president of the United States, and several countries in which he later fought didn't exist at all. Ali fought through the terms of seven presidents, holding center stage for twenty years. In all of boxing history, only two men won the heavyweight championship at a younger age. And only one prevailed in a heavyweight title bout when he was older than Ali, who at thirty-six years eight months toppled Leon Spinks to recapture his crown. All told, Ali challenged for the heavyweight championship five times and successfully defended it on nineteen occasions. And in the process, he altered the consciousness of people the world over. Ali was black and proud of it at a time when many black Americans were running from their color. He was, to some, the greatest hero to come out of the Vietnam War. With the exception of Martin Luther King, no black man in America had more influence than Ali during the years when Ali was in his prime.

Cassius Marcellus Clay, Jr., as Ali was once known, was born in Louisville General Hospital at 6:35 P.M. on January 17, 1942. His father, Cassius Marcellus Clay, Sr., earned a living painting billboards and signs. According to court records, Ali's paternal grandparents could read and write, and all four of his paternal great-grandparents were listed as "free colored" on Kentucky's census rolls. While historical records offer no proof that members of the Clay family were held as slaves, in all likelihood at one time they were. Ali's mother, Odessa Grady Clay, worked as a household domestic when her children were young. One of her grandparents, Tom Moorehead, was the son of a white Moorehead and a slave named Dinah. Mrs. Clay's other grandfather was a white Irishman named Abe Grady, who emigrated to the United States from County Clare, Ireland, soon after the Civil War and married a "free colored woman" whose name is unknown.¹

MUHAMMAD ALI: "My mother is a Baptist, and when I was growing up, she taught me all she knew about God. Every Sunday, she dressed me up, took me and my brother to church, and taught us the way she thought was right. She taught us to love people and treat everybody with kindness. She taught us it was wrong to be prejudiced or hate. I've changed my religion and some of my beliefs since then, but her God is still God; I just call him by a different name. And my mother, I'll tell you what I've told people for a long time. She's a sweet, fat, wonderful woman, who loves to cook, eat, make clothes, and be with family. She doesn't drink, smoke, meddle in other people's business, or bother anyone, and there's no one who's been better to me my whole life."

CASSIUS CLAY, SR.: "He was a good boy. Both them boys, him and his brother, were good boys growing up. They didn't give us any trouble. They were church boys, because my wife brought them to church every Sunday. She was a good Baptist. I was a Methodist. But my daddy used to say to me, 'Let them follow their mother because a woman is always better than a man.' So that's what I did, and their mother taught them right; taught them to believe in God and be spiritual and be good to everybody. He was a good child and he grew up to be a good man, and he couldn't have been nothing else to be honest with you because of the way his mother raised him. Sunday school every Sunday. I dressed them up as good as I could afford, kept them in pretty good clothes. And they didn't come out of no ghetto. I raised them on the best street I could: 3302 Grand Avenue in the west end of Louisville. I made sure they were around good people; not people who would bring them into trouble. And I taught them values—

always confront the things you fear, try to be the best at whatever you do. That's what my daddy taught me, and those are things that have to be taught. You don't learn those things by accident."

ODESSA CLAY: "I had a pretty hard life when I was young. My mother and father separated when I was a child, so I never saw much of my father or knew much about where he came from. My mother had three children and couldn't raise us all, so very often I stayed with my aunt. I started working to buy clothes so I could go to school. And then, when I was sixteen, I met Mr. Clay. He was walking home from work while I was talking to a friend one afternoon, and my friend—she knew him—called across the street and told him to come over and say hello. He's four years older than I am, so that would have made him twenty at the time.

"We called Muhammad 'GG' when he was born because—you know how babies jabber at the side of their crib—he used to say 'gee, gee, gee, gee.' And then, when he became a Golden Gloves champion, he told us, 'You know what that meant? I was trying to say Golden Gloves.' So we called him GG, and sometimes I still do. When he was a child, he never sat still. He walked and talked and did everything before his time. When he was two years old, he'd wake up in the middle of the night and throw everything from his dresser onto the floor. Most boys run around flat-footed or walk; GG went around on his tip-toes all the time. He used to stuff cake in his mouth and his mouth would be full, but he'd still say, 'More cake, Mommy; more cake.' And by the time he was four, he had all the confidence in the world. Even when he played with older children, he always wanted to be the leader. He'd tell them, 'Okay, today I'm going to be the daddy.' Then his little brother, Rudolph, was born. And if I had to spank Rudolph, GG would run and grab me and say, 'Don't you hit my baby.' One time, he tied a string to our draperies in the bedroom, and ran the string out the window around the house to his own room. Then he waited until we were ready to go to bed, and pulled on the string to make the curtains move. Everything he did seemed different as a child. He even had measles and chicken pox at the same time. His mind was like the March wind, blowing every which way. And whenever I thought I could predict what he'd do, he turned around and proved me wrong.

"He had confidence in himself, and that gave me confidence in him. He started boxing when he was twelve, and we'd sit at night, and he'd tell me how someday he was going to be champion of the world. It made me nervous watching him in the ring, but I believed that he could take care of himself. Then he joined the Nation of Islam, and I felt, well, this is the land of the free; worship as you please. If that's what he

wanted to do, it was all right. The important thing was that he had a belief in God. The controversy with the Army worried me a lot. I wanted him to join, because at the time, I thought that was the right thing to do, but he had to make up his own mind. And now I worry about his health. I think rest is the best thing for him. When he gets his rest, you can tell the difference. But that's in God's hands, and I can't tell you what God is going to do. I always felt like God made Muhammad special, but I don't know why God chose me to carry this child."

CASSIUS CLAY, SR.: "When the boys got older, I took them with me on jobs; taught them how to paint pretty good. Before he started fighting, Muhammad could lay out a sign. Draw letters, do the spacing, mix the paint, and fill it in right. That was my living before I had a heart attack. I can't do too much now. But I was an artist, not just a sign painter. I was born painting, and if it wasn't for the way things were at the time, a lot more people would have known what I could do. I don't have a favorite of the paintings I've done. To be honest with you, they're all good. One time, I had these paintings I did in the basement. They were like snow scenes. I don't know where they are now; I haven't got them anymore. And by having lights turn on them, Christmas lights on a motor, it looked like you had an orange sun, and the sun and clouds were moving across the snow. My paintings are in most of the churches down here. Almost every Baptist church in Louisville, Kentucky, has a mural I done for them."

RAHAMAN ALI (formerly Rudolph Arnette Clay): "Louisville was segregated, but it was a quiet city, very peaceful and clean. There wasn't much crime; no drugs; very little drinking or prostitution.

Things were different from the way they are now. Growing up, the only problems Muhammad and I had with whites were if we were walking in a certain part of town. If we were in the wrong place, white boys would come up in a car and say, 'Hey, nigger, what are you doing here?' I never got into any fights. No one attacked me. It wasn't like in the Deep South, but people would call us nigger and tell us to get out if they thought we were someplace we didn't belong.

"Muhammad and I had a few fights between us. All brothers do. But it was nothing serious; more like tests of strength, wrestling. He always had to be the leader, and we let him because he was very intelligent and quick. Outside of boxing, he never played much sports. Now and then, we'd play touch football on the street, and he was fast. It was hard for the rest of us to make a tag on him because of his speed. But tackle football, he didn't like. He wouldn't play because he thought it was too rough.

He was a great marbles player; he loved to shoot marbles. And that was it, except all the time, he used to ask me to throw rocks at him. I thought he was crazy, but he'd stand back and dodge every one of them. No matter how many I threw, I could never hit him."

In some ways, the Clays were a closely knit family, but as with most families, there were problems. Louisville police records reveal that Cassius Clay, Sr., was arrested four times for reckless driving, twice for disorderly conduct, once for disposing of mortgaged property, and twice for assault and battery. His penchant for women led to discord at home, and he sometimes turned violent under the influence of alcohol. On three occasions, Odessa Clay called the police for protection from her husband. Ali prefers not to talk about those times, but they weighed upon him, as did the "ugly etiquette" of the South. Segregation was a way of life in Kentucky, and reminders of second-class citizenship were everywhere.

MUHAMMAD ALI: "When I was growing up, too many colored people thought it was better to be white. And I don't know what it was, but I always felt like I was born to do something for my people. Eight years old, ten years old; I'd walk out of my house at two in the morning, and look up at the sky for an angel or a revelation or God telling me what to do. I never got an answer. I'd look at the stars and wait for a voice, but I never heard nothing. Then my bike got stolen and I started boxing, and it was like God telling me that boxing was my responsibility. God made us all, but some of us are made special. Einstein wasn't an ordinary human. Columbus wasn't an ordinary human. Elvis Presley, the Wright brothers. Some people have special resources inside, and when God blesses you to have more than others, you have a responsibility to use it right."

The saga of Cassius Clay's red-and-white Schwinn bike has been told often over time. In October 1954, he and a friend rode their bicycles to the Columbia Auditorium, which was hosting an annual black bazaar called The Louisville Home Show. For much of the afternoon, they canvassed the floor, eating free popcorn and candy. Then, when it was time to go home, Clay discovered his bike had been stolen. Meanwhile, a Louisville policeman named Joe Martin was at work in the basement, teaching youngsters how to box.

JOE MARTIN: "I was down at the gym one night, and there was something else

going on in the building, a display of merchandise that the Negro merchants put on once a year for their customers. And one night this kid came downstairs, and he was crying. Somebody had stolen his new bicycle, and of course he was very upset about that and wanted to report it to the police. And as I was a police officer, well, someone told him there's a police officer downstairs in the gymnasium, go down and tell him about it. And he was having a fit, half crying because someone stole his bike. He was only twelve years old then, and he was gonna whup whoever stole it. And I brought up the subject, I said, 'Well, you better learn how to fight before you start challenging people that you're gonna whup.' ”²

“To all intents and purposes,” Wilfred Sheed later wrote, “Cassius Clay was born at the age of twelve, the day he entered the gym and started fighting.”³ As part of the Columbia Gym's amateur program, Martin produced a local television show called *Tomorrow's Champions*, which offered instant celebrity status to his young charges. Six weeks after joining the gym, eighty-nine-pound Cassius Marcellus Clay, Jr., made his ring debut, winning a three-minute, three-round split decision over another novice named Ronnie O'Keefe.

JOE MARTIN: “I guess I've taught a thousand boys to box, or at least tried to teach them. Cassius Clay, when he first began coming around, looked no better or worse than the majority. If boxers were paid bonuses on their potential like ballplayers are, I don't know if he would have received one. He was just ordinary, and I doubt whether any scout would have thought much of him in his first year. About a year later, though, you could see that the little smart aleck—I mean, he's always been sassy—had a lot of potential. He stood out because, I guess, he had more determination than most boys, and he had the speed to get him someplace. He was a kid willing to make the sacrifices necessary to achieve something worthwhile in sports. I realized it was almost impossible to discourage him. He was easily the hardest worker of any kid I ever taught.”⁴

MUHAMMAD ALI: “When I started boxing, all I really wanted was someday to buy my mother and father a house and own a nice big car for myself. I figured if I could turn pro and get on Saturday night fights, I could make four thousand dollars just for one night. Then my dreams started to grow. In school, sometimes I'd pretend they were announcing my name over the loudspeaker system, saying 'Cassius Clay, heavyweight champion of the world.' Other times, I'd draw a picture of a jacket on a

piece of paper, like a high school football jacket; only on back of the jacket I'd write 'National Golden Gloves Champion' or 'Cassius Clay, World Heavyweight Champ.'

"Joe Martin was the man who started me in boxing, but sometimes I trained with a black man named Fred Stoner. I trained six days a week, and never drank or smoked a cigarette. The only thing I ever did like drugs was twice I took the cap off a gas tank and smelled the gas, which made me dizzy. Boxing kept me out of trouble."

JOE MARTIN: "Only once did I ever see him knocked out, knocked cold, and that was in the gymnasium, working out with an amateur named Willy Moran. Moran was a good hitter. Later he turned pro. Anyway, he really flattened Cassius that day. Cassius had been talking to me about wanting a scooter, and when he regained consciousness, he said to me, 'Mr. Martin, which way was that scooter going that hit me?' The scooter was on his mind. That was the only time I ever saw him knocked cold, and it didn't faze him. He was back working out with Moran again the next day."⁵

One of Clay's contemporaries in Louisville was Jimmy Ellis, who later held the World Boxing Association heavyweight championship during Ali's exile from boxing.

JIMMY ELLIS: "When I met Ali, he was about fourteen. I saw him fight on television against a friend of mine and he beat my friend, and I said, 'I can beat this guy,' so I started going to the gym. That's what got me into boxing. We fought twice against each other in the amateurs. I was older, by two years, but he was bigger than me even then. The first time we fought, he won. It was close but he got the decision, and it was the first time I ever got beat in a fight. Then we fought again; it was close, and I won. I knew it was a good guy that beat me the first time and it didn't bother me, and I think he figured the second time it was a good guy that beat him. After that, we became friends. Boxing is that way. You know, you can run together, talk together, and wind up fighting each other the next night; but when the fight is over, you shake hands and be friends. And I can tell you, Ali spent all his time in the gym. That's where he lived. He wanted to box and he wanted to be great, and that's what his life was all about. I never saw him fight in the streets. I never saw him pushing or shoving outside the ring. But in the gym, he took his boxing very seriously. Even then, he did a lot of talking, telling guys they couldn't beat him, saying he was gonna knock everyone out. But he learned about what went on in the ring, because he was working at it constantly and had the desire to fight. I mean, he was a fighter. Even when he was young, he had a fighting heart. I saw him get knocked down and get up to knock other guys out. He

could be in a hole, getting beat, and still come back to win.”

Chuck Bodak, an amateur boxing official, recalls Cassius Clay in the ring at that time.

CHUCK BODAK: “I was on the Golden Gloves coaching staff for the *Chicago Tribune*, which conducted the National Golden Gloves Tournament in Chicago. When Cassius first came in, he looked like a young colt, very spindly legged and wiry. Framework was just about all he had, but even then there was an aura about him. People would stop and look and not know what they were looking at, but they were looking at him. He lost that first year to a kid named Kent Green, who was an older, seasoned amateur from Chicago. But Cassius had talent; he made an impression. And each year after that, the improvement was obvious. The more he matured, the sharper he got. I mean, you’d of had to be blind not to see how good this kid was. I told his mother once, ‘Cassius must be from outer space, because I’ve never seen anyone like him in my life.’ ”

Bob Surkein, an Amateur Athletic Union referee and judge, supplements Bodak’s recollections.

BOB SURKEIN: “I’d been refereeing boxing since 1943, and the first time I stepped in the ring with this kid, I didn’t know who he was. I knew he was a young fighter from Louisville with a white police officer who was handling him. And I saw him with his hands down, standing there, looking like he was going to get bombed out, and all of a sudden realizing that God had given this kid reflexes like no one had ever seen. Because even in the amateurs, he had the same reflexes and skills he had later on. Normally, you saw an amateur fighter jump out of harm’s way. Cassius would stand there, move his head two inches, turn his body another six inches, and just slide over. I said to myself, it can’t be, but after watching him in the ring many times, I knew this kid had it.

“Personality-wise, I don’t think he ever changed. I remember, one time we were staying at a hotel for a tournament out-of-town. Cassius had won his first bout on a knockout. The next morning, I went down to the hotel coffee shop for a newspaper. I bought one, took it up to my room, and couldn’t find the sports section. So I went back downstairs and there were ten or fifteen papers there; no sports sections. And I got to thinking. I said, ‘I know where the damn sports sections are.’ So I went up to Cassius’s

room, and he was sitting on the floor with a pair of scissors, cutting his picture out of all the sports sections where it had been that day. But he was always a likable youngster. A couple of years later, when we were training at Fort Dix for the Olympics, we went to Atlantic City for a day, just to relax. We were walking along the boardwalk, and he was so innocent, so in awe of everything. He looked out at the ocean and said, ‘Man, that’s the biggest damn lake I’ve ever seen.’ I still see him from time to time. And to this day, I carry a picture in my wallet of him and me together when he was seventeen.”

FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION REPORT (dated May 31, 1966): “[Name deleted by the United States Government] of Central High School, 1130 West Chestnut Street, Louisville, Kentucky, furnished the following information from records of the school. [Person X] emphasized that he was furnishing information for the assistance of the U.S. Government and did not want the data made public.

“Cassius Clay entered Central High School in the 10th grade on September 4, 1957, having completed the 9th grade at DuValle Junior High School. Clay’s record contained a notation that he had attended elementary school in Louisville, Kentucky, at the Virginia Avenue School, and there was a notation that he had a special interest in art.

“On March 31, 1958, Clay voluntarily withdrew from Central High School. No reason for the withdrawal is shown on the records, but the records reflect that during the 1957-1958 school year Clay made poor grades, receiving a 65 in English, 65 in American history, 70 in biology and a 70 in general art. Clay re-entered Central High School in September of 1958, and remained until he graduated June 11, 1960. He ranked 376 out of a graduating class of 391. His average grades for the 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th years was 72.7.

“On January 3, 1957, Clay was given the Standard California Intelligence Quotient Test and attained a rating of 83. On February 15, 1960, he took a College Qualifications Test and scored a percentile of 27. That is, 73 percent of those taking the test scored better than Clay.

“At the time Clay attended Central High School, it was necessary for a student to earn 16 units during his 9th through 12th grades in order to graduate. Clay earned 16 units, earning them in the following subjects:

| Subject | Units Earned | Grades Attained |
|---------|-----------------|--------------------|
|---------|-----------------|--------------------|

| | | |
|--------------------|----------|-------------|
| English | 4 | 75 70 73 74 |
| Mechanical drawing | 2 | 70 71 |
| Choral music | 2 | 70 71 |
| Social studies | 1 | 75 |
| General science | 1 | 70 |
| Biology | 1 | 70 |
| General art | 1 | 70 |
| American history | 1 | 75 |
| Algebra I | 1 | 70 |
| Foods | 1 | 83 |
| Metal work | 1 | 93 |
| | 16 Total | |

“[Person X] advised that, during the time that Clay was attending high school, a passing mark was 70. Clay’s record also reflected that he was rated as follows with respect to the following:

| | |
|----------------------|---------------|
| Emotional control | Fair |
| Intellectual ability | Average |
| Leadership | Fair |
| Health | Above average |
| Initiative | Average |
| Social attitude | Average |
| Effort | Average |
| Honesty | Average |
| Scholastic zeal | Average” |

Devoting his energies almost exclusively to boxing, Cassius Clay fought 108 amateur bouts, winning six Kentucky Golden Gloves championships, two National Golden Gloves tournaments, and two National AAU titles by the time he was eighteen. Still, to the public at large, he was unknown. Then came the 1960 Rome Olympics—although after prevailing in the Olympic trials, Clay almost didn’t go to Rome.

JOE MARTIN: “He was afraid of flying. We had a rough flight going to California

for the trials, and so when it came time to go to Rome, he said he wasn't gonna fly, and that he wouldn't go. I said, 'Well, you'll lose the opportunity of being a great fighter,' and he said, 'Well, I'm not gonna go.' He wanted to take a boat or something. Anyway, I finally took him out to Central Park here in Louisville and we had a long talk for a couple or three hours, and I calmed him down and convinced him if he wanted to be heavyweight champion of the world, that he had to go to Rome and win the Olympics. ”⁶

So Cassius Marcellus Clay, Jr., went to Rome. Before the games, *Sports Illustrated* declared him “the best American prospect for a gold medal [in boxing],” adding, “Clay likes to display supreme confidence by doing intricate dance steps between passages of boxing.”⁷ Other observers were less impressed, but concurred with the view that Clay was “one of the best-known, best-liked athletes in the Olympic Village.”⁸ “You would have thought he was running for Mayor,” one teammate opined. “He went around introducing himself and learning other people’s names and swapping team lapel pins. If they’d had an election, he would have won in a walk.”⁹

Clay won his first three fights in the 178-pound division, scoring two unanimous decisions and a second-round knockout. Then, in the finals, he faced Zbigniew Pietrzykowski of Poland—a three-time European champion and bronze medalist from the 1956 Olympic Games. British journalist John Gottrell described the bout:

In the first round, it seemed that Clay would be badly mauled. He was confused by his opponent’s southpaw style, took some heavy punishment, and once showed his inexperience by closing his eyes in the face of a barrage of blows. Clay managed to keep out of trouble in the second round, and in the last minute he abandoned his show-off style with the fancy footwork and dropped hands, and stood his ground to throw four hard rights to the head. Even so, he was still behind on points at this crucial stage. “I knew,” he explained afterwards, “that I had to take the third round big to win.”

Clay did finish big. In that final round he suddenly found his top form, moving in and out with expert judgment, punching crisply and with perfect timing. This sharper, better coordinated Clay stormed back with a torrent of combination punching that left Pietrzykowski dazed. He no longer relied too much on his left jab, but made equal use of his right to penetrate the southpaw’s guard. Ripping into the stamina-lacking Pole, he drew blood and came preciously close to scoring a knock-out. At the final bell, Pietrzykowski was slumped

helplessly against the ropes. There was no doubting the verdict. All the judges made Clay the points winner.¹⁰

Clay's roommate at the Rome Olympics was Wilbert "Skeeter" McClure, who won back-to-back National Golden Gloves and AAU championships, and gold medals at the 1959 Pan American and 1960 Olympic games. Now a psychotherapist and president of a Massachusetts consulting firm, McClure puts young Cassius Clay in perspective.

WILBERT "SKEETER" MCCLURE: "I first heard of Cassius Clay back in 1959 at the National Golden Gloves Tournament in Chicago. All the fighters were staying at the same hotel. I was in the lobby, and there was this kid there, and I heard him whispering to some other guys, 'There goes Skeeter McClure.' That's because I had won the Nationals in '58 and was coming back for more. Anyway, he and I both won the Nationals, and were part of a team that represented Chicago in an inter-city tournament against New York. We trained together, and I remember Cassius kept bugging everybody on the team, saying, 'Man, there are all these pretty girls on the streets; all these pretty girls walking around; we got to meet some of these girls.' And the rest of us weren't interested in that. We were just there to fight. But he kept agitating and asking and saying, 'Come on, let's put on our jackets and go someplace to impress the girls.' So finally the coaches set it up. It was all Cassius's doing. They took us to Marshall High School, which was a huge school in Chicago. We had pretty girls as hostesses to show us around. Then we went into the cafeteria for lunch, which was filled with more pretty girls. There were pretty girls sitting everywhere. And the guy who'd been agitating just sat there, staring at the food on his tray the whole time. He didn't say a word. I mean, he was so shy. We teased him about it for days afterward, and all he did was look at us and shrug his shoulders. He was very, very shy around girls.

"After that, maybe a month later, the National AAUs were held in my hometown of Toledo. He was there. Both of us won, and I invited him home to meet my parents and brother and sister. And we were together again for the Pan American trials at the University of Wisconsin, where he lost to Amos Johnson. Johnson was a grown man, a Marine, and a southpaw. I think that was the last fight Ali lost until Joe Frazier beat him twelve years later. And what I remember most about that time was, my dad had driven over from Toledo and a bunch of us went out for dinner afterward. We were in this restaurant, and Cassius was philosophical. All he said was, 'I just couldn't figure