

The Champ

A star-studded birthday party for Muhammad Ali shows why the boxing legend has transcended the sport



BOB LATHAM

Muhammad Ali. The words are now so poetic that, in an era when the culture quickly assents to Ron Artest's desire to be called Metta World Peace, the present generation may not realize how much the former Cassius Clay had to fight, literally and figuratively, to get the world to accept what later became

the most famous name in sports. But at his 70th birthday party at Las Vegas' MGM Grand Hotel in February, an eclectic collection of actors, musicians, boxers and other athletes paid tribute to the man whose outsized legend can be summed up in one word, "Ali," or several alternates, "the Greatest" or "the Champ." In fact, since there are no numbers to retire in boxing, serious consideration should be given to retiring the word "champ." Thirty-four years after he last held the world heavyweight title and after hundreds of boxers in numerous weight classes have claimed championships, who do you think of when you hear the words "the Champ?"

While in my youth I appreciated Ali as an athlete, there is one moment in my adult life that stands out in revealing what the man meant beyond boxing. On the opening day of the Atlanta Olympics in 1996, I spent the afternoon on a lake in Texas. We docked our boat at a bar on the shore and settled into place to watch the opening ceremonies. No one knew who would light the Olympic flame, but when Janet Evans handed the torch to Muhammad Ali, the entire redneck bar broke into a chant of "Ali! Ali! Ali!" Thirty years earlier, such a scenario would have been unfathomable.

Love him, hate him, or be turned off by his chosen trade, but Muhammad Ali was the most culturally consequential athlete of the 20th century. What does it say about the man that so many of his vanquished foes were in attendance to pay tribute to him at the MGM Grand? Norton, Spinks, Foreman, Wepner, Chevalo, Shavers—they were all there. In fact, it seemed as if half the Boxing Hall of Fame was in attendance: Holyfield, Tyson, Leonard, Hearn, Pacquiao, "Boom Boom" Mancini. Seeing this collection of fighters hearkened back to an era when boxing mattered.

It was not only the style and charisma of these great fighters, but also the fact that they seemed to know that they could not exist in their own right. Ali needed Frazier,

Leonard needed Hearn, and they sought out each other to create indelible images from a golden era of boxing, many of which were shown on the MGM's screens. It was interesting that the only current fighter deemed worthy of being included in this pantheon of greats was Manny Pacquiao, a man who, in addition to his record in the ring, seems to share Ali's desire to stand for something more than just boxing, with his service in the Philippines' Congress.

It is hard to imagine anyone who could have brought a wider mix of people together for his 70th birthday party than Ali. There was Steve Schrippa (Bobby Bacala of "The Sopranos") dining with Aerosmith's Joe Perry. There was Jim Brown seated with the Beach Boys' Mike Love. There were Mike Tyson and Ken Jeong (Leslie Chow in "The Hangover") to remind us that we were in Vegas. At one point I pulled out my camera to capture a particular scene and realized that in one frame I had

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the unlikely trio of Ali, Snoop Dogg and Buzz Aldrin. Stevie Wonder flew across country after performing at Whitney Houston's funeral earlier in the day to close the evening's musical entertainment. Lenny Kravitz sang "Black & White America" and

John Legend performed "Everyday People," each overtly acknowledging one of the overriding themes of the evening: that a man who started out as a very polarizing figure ultimately earned the respect and admiration of his foes in the ring, of his critics, of the sporting public, and of all races.

And then there was Jerry Jones, who is trying to make Cowboys Stadium a preferred title-fight venue, engaged in a live bidding war with Ultimate Fighting Championship co-owner Lorenzo Fertitta for the gloves Ali wore in his 1965 fight with Floyd Patterson. The auction ended with words that I had never before heard: "Mr. Jones, you've been outbid." Along with the gloves (which Fertitta acquired for a mere \$1.1 million) came a poster for the fight billed as "Floyd Patterson vs. Cassius Clay (Muhammad Ali)," with the parenthetical rendered in a smaller font—a reminder of how far the Champ and we have come since 1965. ■

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