

Friday, September 14, 2012

Boxing great receives 2012 Liberty Medal



Muhammad Ali is presented the 2012 Liberty Medal by his daughter Laila Ali, with his wife, Yolanda, at left, on the lawn of the National Constitution Center.

DAVID M WARREN / Staff Photographer

For Ali, another kind of gold medal

By Robert Moran
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Muhammad Ali, dressed in a black suit and wearing sunglasses, stood nearly motionless Thursday night as he stared down intently at the Liberty Medal that had just been presented to him.

The 70-year-old Ali, fighting through his Parkinson's disease, briefly lifted his right hand to acknowledge the sustained standing ovation of the audience on the front lawn of the National Constitution Center.

The crowd erupted in a rousing chant:

"Ali! Ali! Ali!"

The world-champion boxer, anti-war hero, and cultural icon was awarded the 2012 medal for his life as a transformative figure personifying the struggle for liberty.

His wife, Yolanda "Lonnie" Ali, delivered a speech on his behalf.

"Muhammad has always believed that he lives within the great circle of humanity. He is, indeed, of the

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people," she said, quoting the Constitution.

"His care, his concerns, his well wishes, are all focused on the people within that great circle — we, the people," she said.

Nicknamed "The Greatest," Ali was considered the most famous athlete in the world at the height of his popularity.

Ali, who was diagnosed with Parkinson's in 1984, had to be held up on both sides as he walked shakily on and off the stage.

He sat with his shoulders slumped, his head tilted, and his gaze fixed, apparently on a large TV screen across the stage showing the speakers and prerecorded video.

A tribute video described the highlights of his remarkable life. He was born Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr. in Louisville, Ky. He won a gold medal in the 1960 Olympics. He converted to Islam and changed his name after claiming the world heavyweight championship in 1964.

Not mentioned was his Philadelphia connection. During the early 1970s, Ali moved to Philadelphia, and he later lived in Cherry Hill.

Philadelphia also was the home of Joe Frazier, who became the world champion after Ali was stripped of the title three years earlier for refusing to fight in the Vietnam War.

His refusal, based on his religious faith, happened in the early days of the antiwar movement and was cited as inspiration for the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to publicly oppose the conflict. On June 28, 1971, the U.S. Supreme Court voided Ali's conviction for refusing to be drafted.

Nearly four months earlier, Ali had fought Frazier for the first time at Madison Square Garden in what was billed as the "Fight of the Century."

To the shock of his counter-culture admirers, Ali lost to Frazier. But he won two subsequent battles, including the "Thrilla in Manila" in 1975.

"Muhammad Ali continues to this day to inspire young people throughout the world," said Mayor Nutter, who introduced four young boxers to the stage.

Other speakers included Joe Louis Barrow 2d, son of boxing great Joe Louis, actor Terrence Howard, who played Ali in a TV movie, and retired NBA star Dikembe Mutombo, who spent two seasons with the 76ers.

"I was 8 years old when Ali came to my country," Mutom-

bo said, referring to the "Rumble in the Jungle," Ali's victorious 1974 fight against George Foreman in Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

"Forty years ago, Ali showed Africans that our lives mattered," Mutombo said.

Ali, who won the world heavyweight title three times, now lives in Scottsdale, Ariz., with his wife.

Earlier in the day, during a forum at the Constitution Center, Mutombo, Lonnie Ali, and a group of distinguished athletes tackled questions about athletes being role models and social activists.

The panel — Mutombo, Lonnie Ali, Ali's daughter Laila Ali, a former professional boxer, and recent Olympic champions Claressa Shields and Susan Francia — addressed a wide range of questions raised by bioethicist Arthur Caplan.

"Muhammad started speaking out at a very early age, at 22," Lonnie Ali said. "He had a strong belief in himself and was confident in his own skin."

Asked whether athletes should be role models, Laila Ali said that even if athletes do not give back to their communities in services or money, they should maintain a positive image. She said athletes should, at least, "be sure not to do anything negative."

Shields, who this summer in London became the first American woman to win an Olympic gold medal for boxing, said it was important to present a positive image for younger people to emulate.

"I'm a positive person," Shields said. "There are a lot of people who look up to me. ... As far as giving back to my home community, it's just something I want to do."

Francia, an Abington resident and a two-time Olympic gold medalist in rowing, said, "As athletes, we do have responsibility, especially being in the public eye."

She said being an inspirational figure for children was very important, especially for those who represent their country.

The Liberty Medal, first awarded in 1989, comes with a \$100,000 prize.

Past recipients include Lech Walesa, Nelson Mandela, Colin Powell, Sandra Day O'Connor, Mikhail Gorbachev, Bono, and Steven Spielberg.

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Inquirer staff writer Vernon Clark contributed to this article.



Retired NBA star Dikembe Mutombo recalled seeing Muhammad Ali at age 8 in what was then Zaire. SHARON GEKOSKI-KIMMEL / Staff