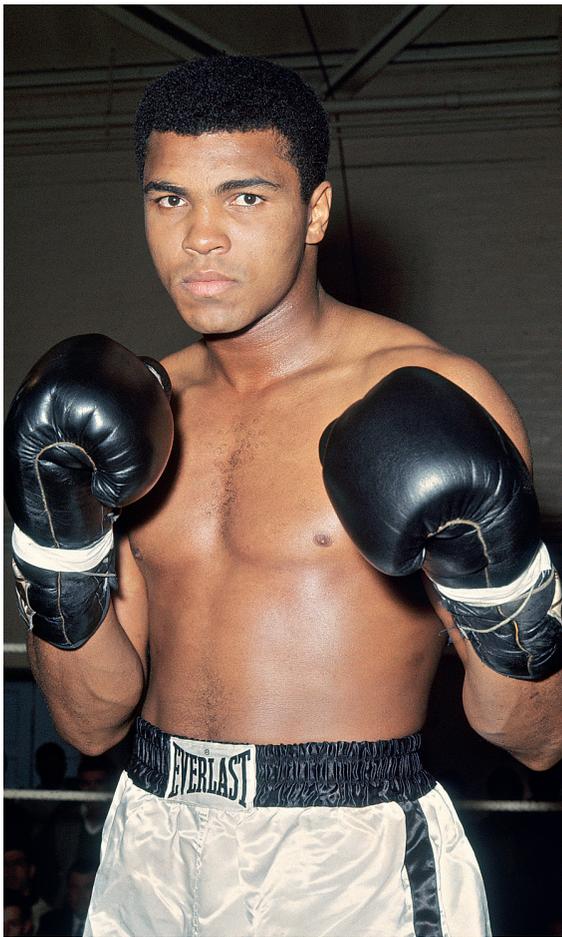


THE 100 GREATEST!



1 Muhammad Ali

Now that Ali's legend gets polished more with every year, it's easy to forget how ill-prepared the general public and media were for such a hyperactive, hypertalented smart-mouth. His wild behaviour in 1964 before the first heavyweight title fight with Sonny Liston was greeted with bemusement; the 1965 rematch

(pictured) took place in front of a scattering of people in Lewiston, Maine, of all places. Six years later, his comeback fight against Joe Frazier ("The Fight of the Century") at Madison Square Garden, was one of the hottest tickets for any sporting occasion in history.

In the intervening years, the heavyweight champion of the world became one of the most loved and loathed people in America: the change in his name and religion, banishment from the sport and near-imprisonment charted alongside battles for racial equality and the Vietnam War. After 1971 came the Rumble in the Jungle, the Thrilla in Manila and other epics, as Ali broadened his global fame and extended his career deep into legend.

At his peak, Ali was a spectacularly effective fighter: fit as a flea and beautifully proportioned, he could move as fast as a lightweight while making up tactics on the spot off a base of carefully honed skills and ringcraft. As he aged, he adapted his strategies ingeniously to prove, perhaps too often, how well he could take punishment, and how much he could tolerate pain. From Liston to Frazier and George Foreman, Ali operated in the best era of the big men and emerged on top of the pile, several times over.

Ali may or may not be "The Greatest", but then "sportsman" is inadequate to describe a man who helped change cultural attitudes, as well as his own sport. He was certainly sport's first and greatest trash-talker; the first to truly take advantage of television's mass-reach; and in terms of sheer impact, popularity and entertainment value worldwide remained untouched until Michael Jordan.

As a historic figure, no sports star even comes close.

