

Muhammad Ali and Ken Norton at the National Press Club, August 27, 1976



Muhammad Ali (left) and Ken Norton (right), August 27, 1976. Photo by Stan Jennings. National Press Club Archives

Muhammad Ali (1942-2016), considered the greatest heavyweight champion in history by many in the boxing world, engaged in a verbal sparring match at a National Press Club luncheon on August 27, 1976, with his upcoming opponent, Ken Norton (1943-2013), one month before Ali successfully defended his title in their third and last bout together. In the joint appearance, Ali displayed many of the features that he often employed to define his public image. Ali taunted Norton with wit, rhyme, and braggadocio, promoted their upcoming fight with showman techniques, made news by championing a civil rights cause, and even delivered a serious lecture to the skeptical press on Islamic religious themes. Norton, considered by many to be one of Ali's toughest foes, stood firm when Ali tried to rile him, yet remained in the background as Ali monopolized the spotlight through the sheer force of his engaging personality.

The match with Norton occurred near the end of Ali's boxing career, the 55th of his 61 professional bouts. Born Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr. in Louisville, Kentucky, to a working-class couple, Ali began to box at age 12 to seek revenge after his bicycle was stolen. He fought 108 amateur bouts before winning the gold medal as a light heavyweight at the 1960 Rome Olympics. Dubbed the "Louisville Lip" due to his in-your-face, mile-a-minute clowning harangues against his opponents—a style inspired in part by his admiration of the flamboyant wrestler, Gorgeous George—Ali confounded the then-common stereotype that athletes should exhibit respectful deference. He called heavyweight champion Sonny Liston "ugly" and praised his own good looks and talent prior to their fight for the title on February 25, 1964, a match in which odds-makers deemed him a seven-to-one underdog. Ali wildly proclaimed "I am the greatest" and

dubbed himself “King of the World” after Liston refused to leave his stool at the start of the seventh round complaining that an injured shoulder had left his arm numb. Some skeptics suspected a fix.

Controversy continued the day following his victory when Ali acknowledged to the world his affiliation with the black separatist group the Nation of Islam, a conversion fostered in part by his friend Malcolm X. Ali soon renounced what he called his “slave name” of Clay for the name bestowed upon him by the group’s leader, Elijah Muhammad. “I don’t have to be what you want me to be,” he told the world in defiance. “I’m free to be who I want.” Although Ali was despised by many in the U.S. for his association with the controversial group, he gained acclaim elsewhere when he visited Africa soon after.

Morally opposed to the war in Vietnam, Ali continued to antagonize many after a newspaper quoted remarks he made upon learning that his draft status had been reclassified to 1-A: “I’m a member of the Black Muslims and we don’t go to no wars unless they’re declared by Allah himself. I don’t have no personal quarrel with those Vietcongs.” Denied conscientious objector status, Ali was convicted of draft evasion, sentenced to five years in prison, and stripped of his title. During his Supreme Court appeal, a law clerk advised Justice John Harlan to read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and Elijah Muhammad’s *Message to the Blackman in America*. Gaining newfound respect for Ali’s religious convictions, Harlan changed his opinion and the court voted to exonerate Ali due to a Justice Department technical error.

The 1976 fight with Norton followed two fights widely considered to be Ali’s best: the October 1974 “Rumble in the Jungle” against George Foreman in Kinshasa, Zaire, in which Ali reclaimed the heavyweight title; and the October 1975 “Thrilla in Manila,” when he successfully defended it in a 15-round bout with Joe Frazier, who had beat him in 1971. Norton, who began to box in the Marines, was unknown to many when he broke Ali’s jaw in their first fight in March 1973 and gained a victory. In their rematch five months later, Ali won by a decision that some felt was unjustified. The outcome of their September 26, 1976, bout also proved controversial, when Ali won a close match decided in the fifteenth round. Norton, who along with a number of sportswriters, believed himself the victor, cried uncontrollably upon hearing the verdict.

The Press Club Talk

Ali’s National Press Club lecture, entitled “The Real Cause of Man’s Distress,” was based largely on writings of Islamic thinker Mawlana Mawdudi, who influenced religious revival movements throughout the Muslim world and founded a political movement in India and Pakistan to establish an Islamic state. Mawdudi’s thought proposed a return to traditional Islamic philosophy as an alternative to the ideologies that governed modern

life, both Western liberalism and Marxism, in order to stop the decline he perceived to be facing the Muslim world. After the death of Elijah Muhammad in 1975, the former leader's son, Wallace D. Muhammad, took control of Nation of Islam and adopted traditional orthodox Islamic practices and outlook, abandoning racial separateness and supporting integration. Ali remained loyal to Muhammad when a faction adhering to the group's original tenets, led by Louis Farrakhan, broke off.

Ali's pledge at the Press Club to give \$100,000 from his fight purse to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People reflected his new outlook that championed integrationist civil rights groups over those advocating black separatism. The NAACP faced bankruptcy due to the victory in the Mississippi Chancery Court by white Mississippi merchants, who charged them in a defamation suit with instigating a boycott in 1966. The court awarded the merchants \$1.25 million for seven years' lost earnings. In 1982, the U.S. Supreme Court reversed a Mississippi Supreme Court ruling against the NAACP in a landmark decision protecting public speech and nonviolent boycott activity.

Afterwards

Ali lost his title to Leon Spinks in February 1978. One month later, the World Boxing Council awarded the title to Norton after Spinks planned to fight Ali in a rematch rather than Norton, whom the WBC ranked as number one contender. Norton lost his WBC title to Larry Holmes, Ali's former sparring partner, in June 1978, while Ali beat Spinks in September to regain his title for the third time, according to the World Boxing Association, a rival sanctioning body to the WBC. Ali lost the title in October 1980 when Holmes knocked him out. Both Ali and Norton retired from the ring in 1981.

Ali was diagnosed with Parkinson's syndrome in 1982, a condition that many believe resulted from the punishment he took in his later years of boxing. In 1996, a world television audience of billions cheered as Ali, weakened by the disease, lit the Olympic cauldron to open the summer games in Atlanta. On May 26, 2000, President Clinton signed into law the "Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act," designed to protect boxers from exploitative practices of promoters and sanctioning bodies, such as the WBC and WBA, whom Ali belittled in the Press Club talk. Norton, who later acted in films and worked as an agent for athletes, fractured his skull, jaw, and leg, and suffered brain injuries in a 1986 car accident. Norton told an interviewer that Ali was the first to visit him in the hospital and raised his spirits by performing simple magic tricks.

In an interview in 1975, Ali stated that he'd like to be remembered as "a great boxing champion who became a preacher and a champion of his people." For his part, Norton has remarked, "I just want to be remembered as a man who fought three close competitive fights with Ali, and became his friend when the fighting was over."

-- Alan Gevinson, *Special Assistant to the Chief,*
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