

BLACK NARCISSUS

Before the strictures of the Black Muslims, there was sex. And lots of it. Here Ali's personal doctor explains why the champ's body was perfectly attuned to the ring, why women found him irresistible and why a man who only dated black women became a symbol of the demolition of racial and sexual taboos





It's almost unnecessary to explain why Muhammad Ali, the extraordinary athlete of his century, is considered one of the sexiest men of his time. It really boils down to this: just look at him!

His sensuous appeal starts visually. He is a superb athlete to whom God gave a perfect body. As his doctor – and as a painter – I have never seen anyone with more perfect proportions. I first saw and examined him when he was 18 years old. At the time, he was Cassius Clay, still a man in development.

Cassius had a huge body, but his large head and sleekness disguised his size. He had a baby face, eyes twinkling with good humour and an infectious grin. He did not look in the least bit dangerous. This changed as soon as he got into the ring. All his opponents would come back to their corner after the first round and say something like: 'Man, I didn't know he was that big! He looks like a pussy, but he is mean in that ring.'

He had huge shoulders and a broad back which tapered to an extraordinarily small waist. The effect was stunning. People seeing him for the first time commented on his skin. He was very smooth and soft, and was a gorgeous golden colour, a trait he could attribute to his mum Odessa, who was very light skinned. In the sunlight, covered with sweat, Ali was a photographer's dream.

His legs were long and beautifully formed. Framed by the bottom seam of his white trunks and the tops of his white socks and boxing slippers, they were the equivalent of Betty Grable's legendary gams. In the ring, they gave the impression of speed and stability. An opponent would take one good look at those legs and know he couldn't knock him down. Standing still, Ali gave the impression of motion – fast motion, dizzying back and forth, side to side, ever in swift, non-stop movement.

In my 40 years in the business as a fight doctor and as a TV analyst, I can say without fear of contradiction that Clay was, anatomically, the most perfect fighter in boxing history. Compare his photo to the old-time champs – Sullivan, Corbett, Jackson, Dempsey, Willard, Primo Carnera and the like – and the comparison is laughable. Remember Clay was 6ft 3in, a tall mountain to climb. His arms were long cords of steel, permitting him to land a jab with rapidity and great accuracy. What made Cassius Clay a sexy man at 18? As I said, just look at him. There's your answer.

Male sexual attraction has various components. First off, there is power. In the twentieth century, sex idols had been primarily in the entertainment business. But there was always one place where women were drawn to power: the boxing ring. Here it was clear-cut. It was back to the fascination of cave-dweller *mano a mano*. Boxers are scantily dressed for combat. A small pair of trunks is all they wear. They are clearly visible as they sweat

THE WATER BOY

Flip Schulke's series of underwater photographs were published in *Life* in 1961. It was the first time Ali had featured in a general interest magazine.



OSM ALI: THE BODY

**I'M SO
PRETTY
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MYSELF**
MUHAMMAD ALI, 1965

and pound one another. The thrill of the combat is clearly seen and heard.

Ali in the ring was something to behold. No one had ever carried such power with such apparent effortlessness. Muhammad Ali had sexual power in abundance.

Then there is self-confidence. At 18, before he had had a single fight, Clay would come into my medical clinic in the Overtown black ghetto in Miami and loudly proclaim to my patients: 'I'm going to be the next heavyweight champion of the world – the whole wide world.'

My nurse, Mrs Mabel Norwood, would shake her wise old grey head and cluck her tongue: 'You know, that boy is going to be the next heavyweight champion of the world, or he is just plain crazy.'

Self-confidence was brimming over in Clay. The young Ali could not swim, dance, throw a football, make a basket, hit a baseball, or play other sports. What he could do was box. He defied all the old rules of boxing. 'Look at the way he holds his left hand down after he jabs. He gonna get killed when he turns pro.'

Well, all the pros in the gym – champs, contenders, four-round fighters – all tried to hit Clay over his dropped left hand. None succeeded. Why? Because he was too tall, too quick and had that certain radar for incoming punches that boxers are either born with or not. And that combination is called self-confidence.

Clay had very little trouble understanding that the same self-confidence that carried him to victory could attract the ladies. Anyone who would get close had their flirtations: Diana Ross. Gladys Knight. After the first Liston fight, Cassius started to enroll in the school of sex. Prime time.

Sonji was a pert, very pretty gal. She had a sister who was even better than her, with an outrageous Anita Ekberg body to go with her face. But she was too much woman for the boy-wonder Clay. He was still looking for a high-school romance. Kissing and petting, going to the movies and eating ice cream. Sonji was a party girl and lower-level singer-cum-entertainer.

The country bumpkin slowly learnt the

CHECKING OUT THE FORM

'I get 25 calls a day from pretty girls...' This training session in Miami in 1970 confirmed Ali's sex appeal. Thomas Hoepker/Magnum

OSM ALI: THE BODY

ABCs of the horizontal rumba. Lord, Clay was stricken. Like all first timers, Clay wanted to marry the source of sexual wonderment. Clay had to have Sonji. Had to.

Clay began to feel the pressure created by his huge sex appeal. Angelo Dundee, his manager, innocent to the ways of the ghetto, had boarded Clay in the Mary Elizabeth Hotel, a den of thieves, drug dealers, pimps and prostitutes. Clay would go to the Sir John Night Club to drink orange juice, listen to jazz and watch the seething mass of sexy dancers. This took his sex appeal to stratospheric heights. He became that hottest of aphrodisiacs – forbidden fruit. So when Sonji nailed him to the bed, great was the wailing in the Overtown ghetto. They weren't the only ones. Angelo and Chris Dundee awoke to the reality that a party girl was now sharing the sheets with Clay. The conventional sexual taboo of the gym's grey men held that a piece of ass will take your title, but a blow-job will take your life. In that respect, at least, Clay's life was in danger.

Sonji wasn't the only change in Clay's life that year. The Black Muslims were moving to Miami. They needed a sharp kick-start to help recruiting. They got it when Cassius Clay fell into the bag.

The Black Muslims moved quickly to block Ali's liaison with Sonji and quickly learnt their first lesson about Ali's independence, strong-mindedness and stubbornness. He refused to give up Sonji. Sex won over religion. It always does.

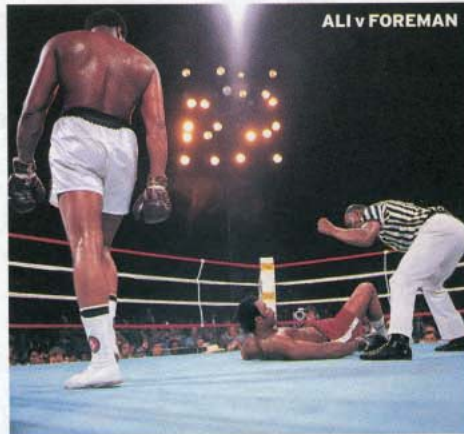
It didn't take long for Sonji, child of the ghetto nightlife, to smartass her way out of Ali's life. As Ali went to the temple, and as his enchantment with the new toy that was sex waned, Sonji saw the handwriting on the wall. She was in no place to make deals and demands with the Muslim muscle offering a harsher and more 'permanent' deal. Sonji split, with some cash, her jewels – and her life.

Ali was now a hatched chick. He shook off the pieces of shell that had been his virginity and embraced sex. Girls stood in line; no one in the black world was a more desirable target than Muhammad Ali.

And how does the champ take it? With a laugh. That's the third component of sexual attraction: a sense of humour. Ali had a little boy's infectious sense of humour. He delighted in entertaining people. This was fuelled by his intense need to be loved. Ali loved himself. He was never self-critical. Ali loved to make a girl laugh and he was very good at it.

Component four was availability. Pick any of today's 'sex' stars, who have made it in the movies, TV, music, sports. Can you just go up and talk to them? Or even, perhaps, get a date? You probably won't get past the bodyguards. Ali had no bodyguards. He was there, in the open, available for all to see him, know him, love him.

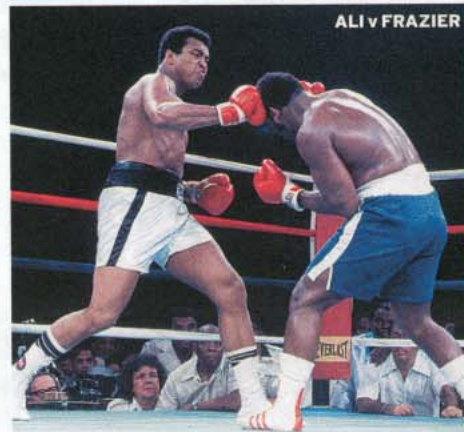
Once in Cleveland, on a sleety, rainy, freezing afternoon, with the city workers going home, I was with Ali when, on a whim, he decided to stop his limo at each street corner. He'd get out alone and approach a group of working ladies. They were all tired after a hard eight-hour day in a factory. Ali would grab one and hug her tight, and kiss her on the mouth.



ALI v FOREMAN



ALI v LISTON



ALI v FRAZIER



ALI v SPINKS

ALI: CLASSIC FIGHTS

CASSIUS CLAY v SONNY LISTON
25 February 1964

Miami Beach Convention Hall
Liston was the 7 to 1 on favourite going into the fight; many still doubted the 22-year-old Clay's abilities. The champion had been preparing for a short fight in which he would punish the brazen young Clay but, despite at one stage complaining of blurred vision, the challenger dazzled Liston with a combination of speed and high-powered punching. Sitting on the stool, his face swollen, Liston made no move to come out and fight for the seventh round. Clay was heavyweight champion of the world.

MUHAMMAD ALI v JOE FRAZIER
8 March 1971

Madison Square Garden
Before a celebrity-filled audience, two contrasting styles collided: Ali the entertainer and Frazier the gritty, intense brawler. Despite Ali's prediction that his opponent would go down in the sixth, Frazier battled throughout, winning a 15-round decision. Many believed

that Ali had fought Frazier too early following his four-year exile from the ring. What was certain was that in that time Ali had lost some of his former agility.

v GEORGE FOREMAN
29 October 1974

Kinshasa, Zaire
The famous 'Rumble in the Jungle' - Ali versus heavyweight champion George Foreman. Using his now famous 'Rope-a-dope' strategy, Ali hung back, covering himself, throwing only the occasional jab. Foreman attacked, throwing countless punches but rarely connecting fully. In the eighth round Ali was able to knock down his exhausted opponent, who failed to get up to make the count. Foreman, the only one not to recognise Ali's strategy, later complained: 'This guy never really fought.'

v JOE FRAZIER
1 October 1975

Araneta Coliseum, Quezon City, Near Manila, Philippines
The 'Thrilla in Manila' marked the culmination of the Ali-Frazier saga. Certainly the most brutal of their three encounters, the fight had to be stopped in the fourteenth round when Frazier's eye

became swollen. The decision went to Ali. After the fight, in place of their usual verbal jousting, each fighter paid due respect to the other. It was named 'Fight of the Year' by *The Ring* magazine, which chose Ali as its 'Fighter of the Year'.

v LEON SPINKS
15 February 1978

Hilton Sports Pavilion, Las Vegas
Facing 1976 Olympic light-heavyweight champion Leon Spinks, Ali suffered a shock defeat in a 15-round decision. Spinks went ahead on points in the early rounds and held on in a gruelling fight.

v LARRY HOLMES
2 October 1980

Caesars Palace, Las Vegas
Coming out of retirement to challenge the new heavyweight champion, Ali suffered the worst defeat of his career. From the outset it was clear that Ali's speed and punching power had disappeared. Holmes knocked him out in the eleventh round. It was the fourth loss of Ali's career and the only time he had been defeated before the final bell. Holmes later admitted that he felt little elation in beating this shell of Ali's former self.
Words: William Lee



'Ooooh,' he would say smacking his lips, 'you so fine, woman. Where your old man? How come he let a fine woman like you stand on a street corner and wait on a bus? Don't he know I'm going to come back and steal you one day?'

Then he'd move on to another, even if it took 15 minutes. A riot was about to break out. Before Ali left, he'd hugged and kissed them all and made up an original piece of doggerel for each. This was not an isolated incident. He did it in Chicago, New York, Detroit, Pittsburgh. Was he available? Yessir, he surely was.

My favourite story of Ali's kindness and availability was told to me by an old gentleman on a long flight back from the Rumble in the Jungle. 'My grandson graduated with honours,' said the old man. 'I promised him he could spend three months in Europe; I would provide a pass, hotel accommodation and a bit of money. He would return to take a job at a big plant in Atlanta. It was up to him to be back on a specific day. Well, he landed in New York

HE WAS LIKE GOD. GOD WITH A CUSTARD PIE UP HIS SLEEVE

JOSEPH O'BRIAN, WRITER

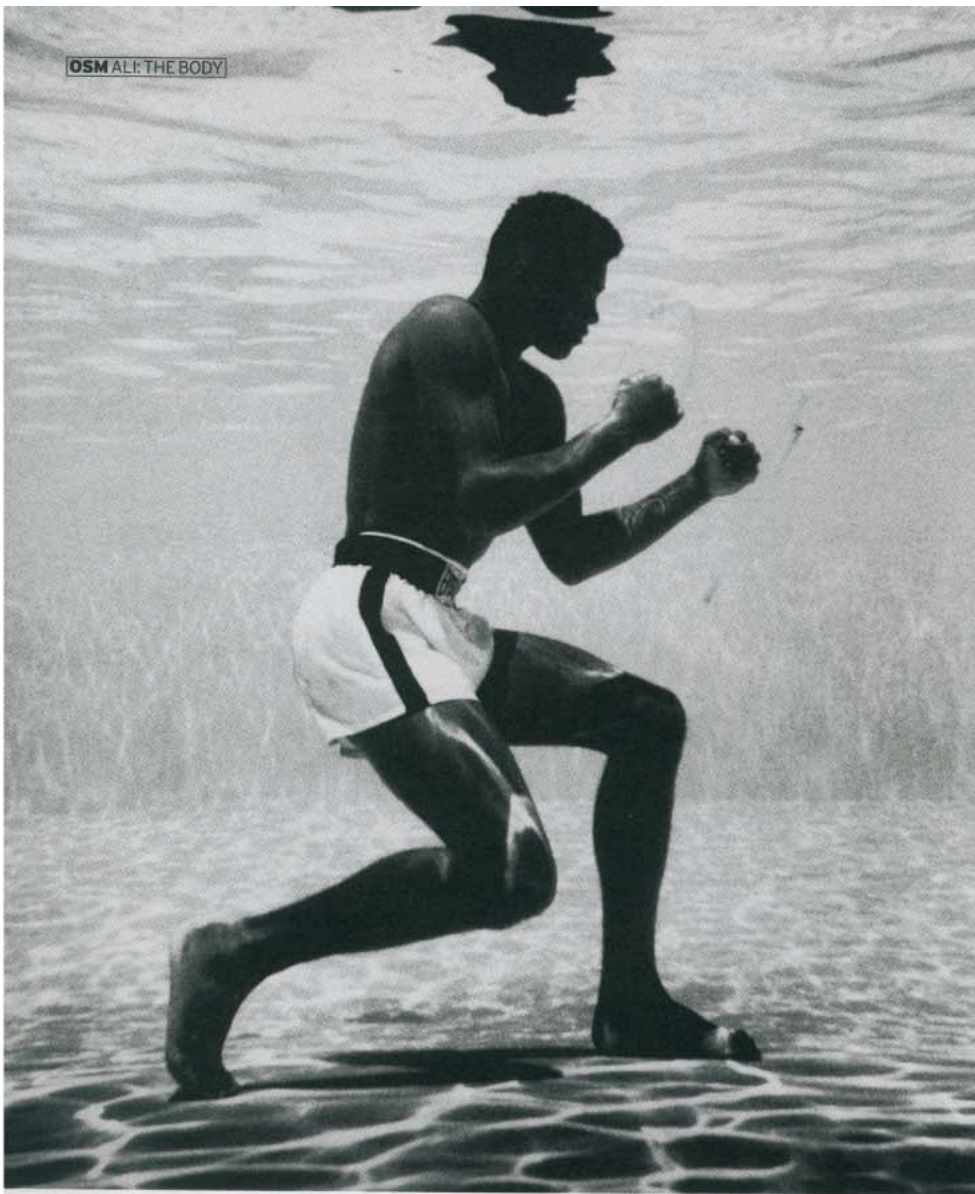
LADIES MAN

Top: A 21 year old Ali entertains his female companions in 1963. Howard Bingham
Above left: Visiting a record store in Las Vegas in 1965. Lee Balterman/Sports Illustrated
Above right: Sharing a joke with the sisters of Nazareth College in Louisville, 1963. James Drake/Getty

on a cold blustery day and had badly miscalculated his time. And he was broke, so he had to hitchhike. He was on the expressway for hours and no one would stop since he looked like a hippie with long hair and a beard. Suddenly, a limo pulled up, the door opened and he was invited inside to find himself looking at Muhammad Ali.

'Ali told him he'd take him as far as Cherry Hill, where he could spend the night with Ali. The next morning he awoke to the smell of frying eggs and sizzling steak. Ali was fixing breakfast. As soon as they finished, they got in Ali's Cadillac and drove out to where the boy could start hitchhiking again. Ali drove to the airport

OSM ALI: THE BODY



EYES WIDE OPEN

To complete Flip Schulke's 1961 shoot, Clay emptied his lungs, sank to the bottom of the pool and assumed a classic boxing stance.

People were ambivalent about Ali. They wanted to like him but there was the Muslim thing. Then, after Ali refused to go into the army, he launched himself on a crusade to explain himself to white students throughout the country. He stuck doggedly to the name Muhammad Ali and to his religion. He neither questioned nor denounced his leader. After three years, the college kids, the future-of-America kids, took the big, good-looking champ to their hearts. White America suddenly loved Ali. Supported him. Bailed him out financially.

When the first fight back turned out to be in Atlanta, the hotbed of segregation, I thought things would be ugly. Already, during the hard training days, cars filled with crazy kids would drive by our house and shoot at it. No one was hurt, but the message was clear: Nigger beware!

Looking back, what happened seems like a dream. The streets filled with the most awesome parade of wildly dressed, elegant and gaudy black population of pimps, prostitutes, drug dealers, users, con men and just plain old foxy girls. Lord, that was an outpouring of love and support for Ali, done with such ostentation and showboating or, as Madonna says, 'voguing', that I was moved to call it 'the Ali circus'.

The name stuck. Actually, the full name included them and us in the camp, now grown to around 50 hangers-on, and was 'the Ali circus of freaks'. What we found to our amazement was that there were as many white lovers of Ali as black. Ali had hit a home run. His power base was now all of white and black America. It really wasn't until the first Frazier fight in 1971 that the country seemed to acknowledge that Ali was OK as America's sweetheart and that, to me, was highly ironic because Ali would not look at any white woman.

Once, in New York, we were in a packed hotel lobby when a vision of incredible beauty approached Ali. I recognised the look in her eyes: unadulterated adulation. It was the queen of the silver screen, Kim Novak. Kim had had a long tempestuous affair with Sammy Davis Jr and had spent a great deal of time with Wilt Chamberlain, the 7ft 1in basketball player. In other words, she liked black men.

She extended her hand to Ali. He took it guardedly. She left her room key in Ali's hand. Ali dropped it as if he had been handed a coiled cobra. The key clattered to the floor. Ali moved quickly on, mumbling an apologetic: 'Sorry, but I don't see white women.'

Today that story – that concept – seems oddly archaic. Interracial marriages and dating are common and accepted. The 'threat' of the black man is as out of date as the fears of slave revolts in the plantation days.

I firmly believe Ali and his 'safe sexuality' opened the door on a new era. Ali proved that 'Black is Beautiful; Black is Best.' As I said, just look at him. **OSM**

and handed the kid an airline ticket to Atlanta, informing him that he could pay him as soon as he started getting paid.'

I tell this story to point up another component of sexual attraction. Women like a man who is kind, who is generous, who shows empathy. While Ali is the hardest man in the world inside the ring, he is easily the gentlest outside. Rough, tough boxers such as Liston or Mike Tyson are misogynists. They have no sex appeal. They hate women, as they hate themselves.

One last thing: Ali's universal sex appeal. I think Ali broke the barrier in the United States for white women. Before Ali, no black man had totally been desirable to all white women, particularly in the South. As late as the mid-Sixties no one dared try to appeal to whites.

FLOAT LIKE A BUTTERFLY, STING LIKE A BEE. YOUR HANDS CAN'T HIT WHAT YOUR EYES CAN'T SEE. CASSIUS CLAY, 1964