

# The Arts

The New York Times

## Knockout Of a Book For the Greatest

A Tribute to Ali  
Weighs 75 Pounds



In 1961 he was still Cassius Clay and 19 in a Miami Beach gym.

By RICHARD SANDOMIR

Since the early 1960's Muhammad Ali has proved irresistible to writers and photographers entranced by his boxing ring artistry, his prettiness, his poetry, his dancing, his racial consciousness and his loquaciousness, now betrayed by Parkinson's disease.

A boxer but more than a fighter, he delighted, amazed, infuriated and inspired a global audience.

"He's like Walt Whitman or Annie Oakley or Gorgeous George or Bob Dylan, people who invented themselves out of the cultural air they were breathing," said David Remnick, the editor of *The New Yorker* and the author of "King of the World" (Random House), a 1998 biography.

More than 100 books have been written about Mr. Ali, and he is believed to be among the most photographed people on the



Left, Fred Schuiker; above, Neil Leifer/both from "GOAT: A Tribute to Muhammad Ali"

Muhammad Ali (standing) and Cleveland Williams (not) on Nov. 14, 1966, from 80 feet above the ring in the Houston Astrodome.

planet.

"He was the most approachable major subject I've ever dealt with, in sports, politics or Hollywood," said Neil Leifer, who has photographed Mr. Ali for *Sports Illustrated*, *Life* and *Esquire*. "As you turned your camera on, there was that glint in his eye. You couldn't take a bad picture of him. And he knew it."

Now arrives a project both inevitable and

outlandish, the hyperbolic expression of an abundantly chronicled life: "GOAT: A Tribute to Muhammad Ali" (Taschen Books), a 75-pound, 792-page, 20-by-20-inch book packed with 600,000 words and 3,000 images.

It is covered in silk and Louis Vuitton leather and is being bound at the rate of a few hundred copies a week.

"I have a double hernia," the publisher, Benedikt Taschen, said. "I can't discount

that it must be from the book."

When it is published next month, "GOAT" (for Greatest of All Time) will be sold in a limited edition of 10,000. Nine thousand will be priced at \$3,000, and 1,000, with a sculpture by the artist Jeff Koons, will sell for \$7,500. The plastic sculpture, which requires assembly, is a porpoise leaping over the book and an inflatable tire that are resting

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Howard Bingham/From "GOAT: A Tribute to Muhammad Ali"

Muhammad Ali, shown here in 1962, was the heavyweight champion and was loved by children.

## Knockout of a Book for Muhammad Ali

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on a wooden stool.

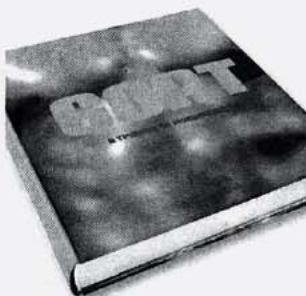
"GOAT" was begat by Mr. Taschen's success with "Helmet Newton's SUMO," a 480-page, 20" x 28" book of erotic photographs that came with a coffee table designed by Philippe Starck. The \$1,500 book weighed 66 pounds. When just a few were left, Mr. Taschen doubled the price and they sold out.

Mr. Taschen watched Mr. Ali's fights as a child in Germany and saw in him an eloquent, articulate athlete whose stature was elevated by his refusal to be inducted into the United States Army in the Vietnam War, which cost him his heavyweight title.

Since Mr. Ali's retirement in 1981, Mr. Taschen has built an art book empire based in Cologne, Germany. The subjects of his books are an eclectic mix of art scholarship, movies, advertising, Chinese propaganda, architecture, travel and erotica like "Naked as a Jaybird," a celebration of hippie nudists.

And now Mr. Ali. "Ali is different from other icons, who are not as accessible," Mr. Taschen said. "No one was looking as good as he is, and no one was photographed for as long as he was. They either die young or turn ugly. He was a photographer's and a writer's dream."

Mr. Ali; his wife, Lonnie; and his



The cover has Muhammad Ali's torso overprinted with "GOAT." It stands for Greatest of All Time.

baum, a spokeswoman for the Alis, said: "The directive from Lonnie Ali was not to sanitize it. If it's true, so be it. But it's possible if it's not truthful, there were cuts."

Mr. Yuman, who has some of Mr. Ali's talent for promotion, said: "We were on a mission to do something that was significant and meaningful and could pass on knowledge and philosophy, as well as something that's a piece of art. We all shared the vision that this is more than a coffee-table book, but the most comprehensive piece of work ever done on anybody in the history of mankind, period."

The pictures resonate on the heavy stock and large format in ways that were not possible in newspapers and magazines. Familiar images like Philippe Halsman's portrait of a wide-eyed Mr. Ali, beads of sweat on his brow, evoke his joy and confidence; Mr. Leifer's overhead shot of Mr. Ali's knockdown of Cleveland Williams in 1966 shows ever more the starkness of the canvas with the vanquished boxer's supine body.

"We used the more obscure photographs, the less obvious ones, and wanted to give more life to the familiar ones," Mr. Taschen said. "We didn't want a book in a big size that was just blown up. It only made sense if it makes them alive and completely different. And we knew that if it didn't look perfect at 20 by 20, it would look terrible."

Whether it is a megabook, a piece of art or an object of desire, the goal is to sell it. Mr. Taschen said there were orders from booksellers and private sources.

"It helps if you have some money, yes," Mr. Taschen said. "If they're rich, I don't know, but they will be rich afterward. The demographics of 'SUMO' showed that you needed money and space, and that was the reason we didn't have great sales in Japan, because they have small apartments, even rich people."