

Ali remains a role model

By Robert Lipsyte

This has been a tough time for the images of iconic sports figures.

► Pete Rose, who once thrilled us with exuberant passion and 4,256 hits, the all-time record, finally has admitted betting on his own baseball games. He did so less in the spirit of contrition than in an attempt to get into the Hall of Fame and hustle his memoirs.

► Former N.Y. Giant Lawrence Taylor, perhaps the greatest defensive player in pro football history, is peddling an autobiography overripe with sex and drugs.

► The fiercely private and independent baseball star, Ted Williams, became a late-night joke in the ugly battle over his quick-frozen remains.

► Once considered the role model of the future, Lakers basketball star Kobe Bryant is facing rape charges.

So when I was invited last month to the American launch party of what is billed as one of the most expensive books in history — *GOAT: A Tribute to Muhammad Ali*, which you can now order for as much as \$7,500 — I accepted with a certain wariness, even though I had contributed an essay to the 75-pound volume. I didn't want to rediscover Ali as another worn-out warrior cashing in.

If the mark of a true hero is the light still shining after the high glory days are over, sports has a meager record. The legacy of the great Pittsburgh baseball player Roberto Clemente shines on because he died in a 1972 plane crash while bringing relief supplies to victims of the Managua, Nicaragua, earthquake. A few other athletes have used their celebrity to promote worthy causes.

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Ali is unique. His light has been flashing — and flickering — for 40 years. Yet, unlike other former sports stars who have fallen on hard times or have had their reputations tarnished, Ali has beaten the odds. He has managed to transcend some of his past comments and controversies to become an international role model.

Ali has been that way since 1964, when he stunned the world as Cassius Clay by beating Sonny Liston and becoming the heavyweight boxing champion at age 22. Shortly after his victory, he confirmed his membership in the Nation of Islam, a black separatist group, and told reporters, including myself: "I don't have to be what you want me to be. I'm free to be whom I want."

In many ways, that statement was far more revolutionary than "I ain't got nothing against them Viet Cong," which brought down the establishment ire. When Ali refused to be drafted, he was illegally stripped of his title. He had gone quickly from scandalizing traditional fight fans to infuriating civil-rights activists, Christians and pro-Vietnam war patriots.

He was always hard to categorize. How could we correlate his rigorous physical training with his casual sexual dalliances, his hunger for celebrity and his dogmatic religiosity, his bubbling good humor and his bursts of cruelty in the ring against

opponents who insisted on calling him Cassius Clay after he changed his name to Muhammad Ali? Was this hypocrisy or the complexity of his quest to be true to himself, and, thus, to all? He never did answer those questions satisfactorily. As Jack Olsen of *Sports Illustrated* once wrote of Ali: "His life is a symphony of paradoxes."

As befitting a book called *GOAT* (it stands for Greatest of All Time, which also is Ali's corporate name), the party was held in the Miami Beach Convention Center, the site of that first Liston-Clay title fight. I found a seat at ringside, very close to where I think I sat for the fight, and next to Ali and Will Smith, the actor who played him in the 2001 biographical movie, *Ali*. Smith was doing all of the talking. Ali, stiffened by Parkinson's disease, his face a frozen mask, barely mumbled. I stared into that face to try to find the magical youth who had babbled poetry and predictions.

Ali's eyes were on the speakers in the ring, but half-closed. I wondered what he was thinking. I was lost in my fantasy of Ali's mind, straining to find some sign in his face that he was still there. During my turn to speak, I reminded the audience that no other world-renowned athlete had given up so much money and sports acclaim for principle, or taught the world so powerful a lesson on how to be a human being.

And he did it without always trying to please the crowd. I certainly didn't always agree with him, and I still don't. For example, I can applaud his trip to Kabul, Afghanistan, in 2002 as a United Nations "messenger for peace." He thanked Afghan youth "for showing me how strong you are in spite of the hardships your country still faces. You must keep that strength. You must continue to hope for a brighter tomorrow."

Yet, I'm still perplexed by the paradox of his refusal to answer David Frost when he asked on television whether Ali would include al-Qaeda, the Taliban and Iraq among "the evil ones."

Ali replied that terrorism was wrong, but that he had to "dodge questions like that" because "I have people who love me." He did not want to offend anyone, especially fellow Muslims.

I can live with that because that light is still shining. In 1996, when he lit the Olympic flame in Atlanta with trembling hands, he offered the world lessons that went beyond borders and wars. One might have thought a man who once called himself "the prettiest" would hide this shell of himself. But his self-consciousness about his condition, his willingness to get on with his life as best he could, was an inspiration to any of us who ever has been sick or damaged. He's a more important role model now than ever before.

Just sitting close to him that night in Miami Beach, thinking about him, had erased my reservations. I was suddenly glad I had come. And then he gave the sign.

When his old doctor, Ferdie Pacheco, leaned down from the ring to say, "We had good times, didn't we?" in a way that evoked memories probably best untold, Ali smiled and raised one finger to his lips in the universal signal: Let's not talk about that.

I took that as a gift. He might not always be who we want him to be, but at least one old sports hero is still who we need him to be.

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