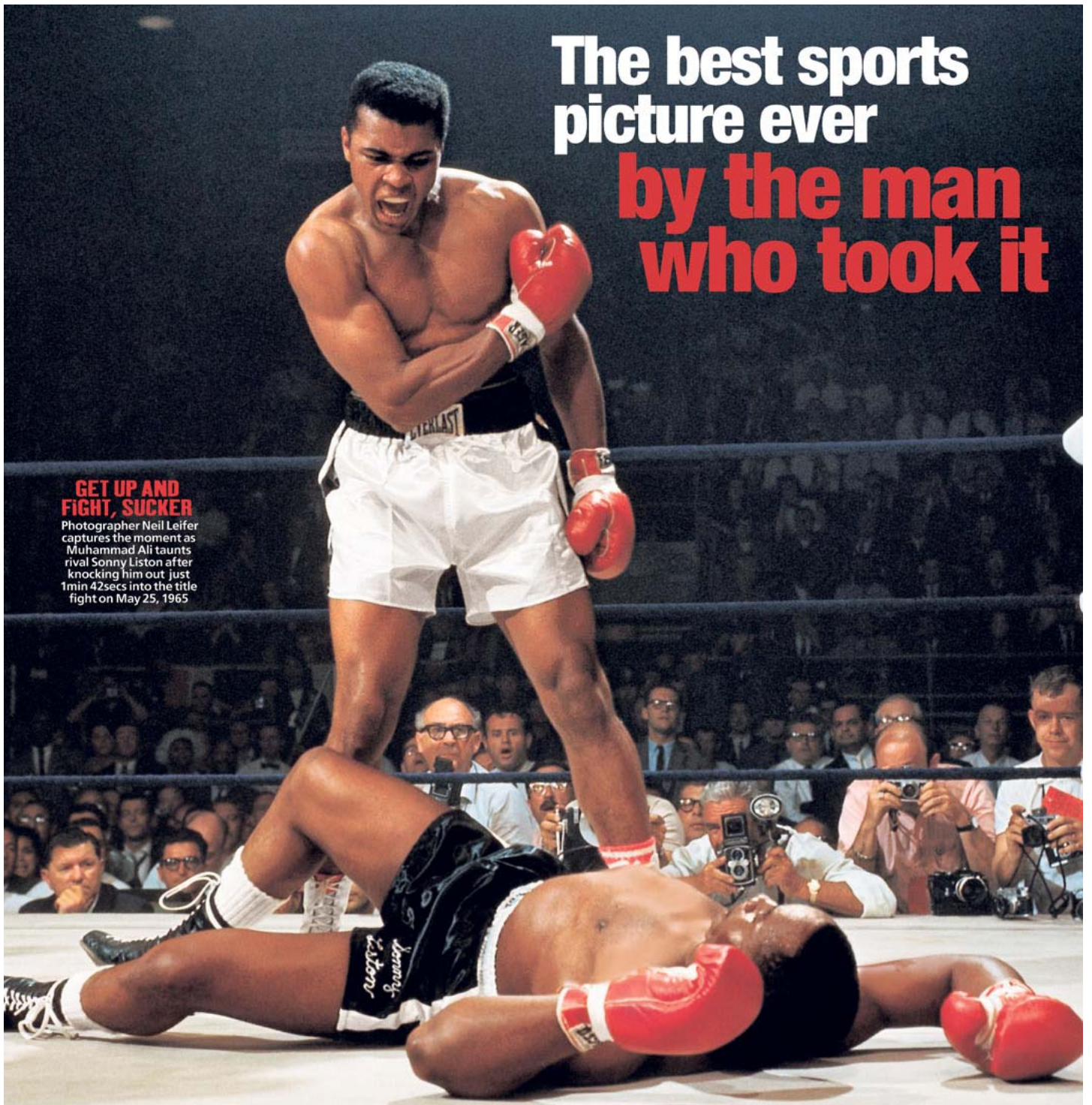


The best sports
picture ever
by the man
who took it

**GET UP AND
FIGHT, SUCKER**

Photographer Neil Leifer captures the moment as Muhammad Ali taunts rival Sonny Liston after knocking him out just 1min 42secs into the title fight on May 25, 1965



THE GREATEST

THE RINGSIDE SECRETS OF THE SHOT SEEN AROUND THE WORLD PAGES 2, 3 & 4

Lensman on famous picture

THIS IS MY BEST PHOTO

THERE WAS ONE SHOT AT GLORY AND I TOOK IT

Neil's favourite picture is not the Ali-Liston shot but this one, taken by a remote control camera in the rafters, when Ali knocked out Cleveland Williams in Houston in 1965. Neil said: "It's the

best picture of my career, my all-time favourite shot. It is the only one in my 50-year career that I wouldn't change a single thing. "Even in the Ali-Liston shot, I can now see two or three little

things I'd change if I had the chance to redo it. But this is the only picture of mine which hangs in the living room of my home. "I hang it in a diamond shape with Williams at the top."

SPECIAL REPORT

By BILLY SLOAN

IT is one minute and 42 seconds into the first round and Sonny Liston, one of the most fearsome fighters in boxing history, is spread-eagled on his back, arms splayed and senseless.

Looming above him, Muhammad Ali, the boxer recently known as Cassius Clay, yells at his stricken opponent to get up and fight.

Ringside, photographer Neil Leifer takes his shot, four specially installed flashlights above the ring blaze for a split-second, and the most famous photograph of the world's most famous man is frozen on film for ever.

The date was May 25, 1965. The venue, Lewiston, Maine. And, 46 years on, the award-winning US photographer can recall the moment like it was yesterday.

Neil, 68, said: "There was a lot of controversy before the fight. Ali had beaten Liston to become world champion the previous year.

"Then he said he no longer wanted to be known by his 'slave name' Cassius Clay and was a member of the Black Muslim movement.

"A lot of people believed the first fight was fixed. I don't know how anybody could say that - all you had to do was look at the state of Liston's face.

"They screamed 'fix' too when Ali knocked out Liston in the first round of the rematch but that's only because his KO punch was so fast that few people saw it.

"I was covering the fight for Sports Illustrated magazine with my colleague Herb Scharfman. We were the only two photographers shooting in colour.

"We sat on opposite sides of the ring and the knockout happened in the perfect spot for me. The referee wasn't blocking my view. I had a clear shot.

"I was using strobe lighting which meant I could only take a shot every four seconds. So that picture is one shot. You'll never see another of its kind in colour. I had no idea what I had.

"Herb is the bald-headed man between Ali's legs. He's a great photographer but I don't care how good he is - from where he's sitting, all he can see is Ali's ass."

After the fight, Neil caught a plane



Some called it the Phantom, Ali called it the Anchor - but the right-hander that felled Liston in 1965 is still causing controversy. One columnist insisted the punch would not "dent a grape" and Liston's collapse fuelled theories that he had taken a dive to pay off Mafia debts. Replays show the punch was perfect but even Ali admitted: "The punch jarred him. It was a good punch but I didn't think I hit him so hard that he couldn't get up."

back to New York unaware of what, if anything, he had managed to capture on his rolls of undeveloped film.

When he processed the shots, he realised immediately he'd struck gold.

But his boss at Sports Illustrated didn't agree and the knockout photo did not make the magazine cover and was relegated to an inside page.

It was another 23 years before it made the Sports Illustrated cover when it was judged one of the best sports pictures ever.

Neil said: "On the flight, I read newspaper coverage of the fight. They'd used a similar black and white picture taken by the Associated Press - whose guy had been one seat away from me. So I hoped I also had the shot.

"When I processed the film, I couldn't believe it. I just thought I had a very good boxing picture. I had no idea it would become such an iconic photo.

"It wasn't named one of the Best 50 Sports Pictures Of All Time until 1999. I think as Ali's legend grew and he got older and wasn't in the best of health, people regarded it as the shot which most brought back the memory of what he was. It's now probably the best-known boxing picture ever."

Neil added: "I've worked on the sets of the Rocky movies where fight scenes were choreographed. The camera knows where the knockdown is coming. If I could have choreographed Ali v Liston, that's exactly the spot I'd have told the actor to fall down."

Neil photographed Ali on 70 occasions, among them 35 of his greatest fights, including matches

against George Foreman, Joe Frazier, Ken Norton and Leon Spinks.

His shots have graced the covers of top US magazines Sports Illustrated, Time, Life and Esquire.

Neil also shot all three battles between Ali and arch-rival Frazier, including the legendary Thriller In Manila in the Philippines in 1975.

He said: "I missed out on the cover of Life magazine in the first Ali v Frazier contest at Madison Square Garden in New York in 1971.

"Their official photographer was Frank Sinatra. Ol' Blue Eyes couldn't get a ringside ticket so volunteered to shoot some pictures.

"My instructions were to get pictures of the fight and get good shots of Sinatra doing his stuff.

"Ali never met a camera he didn't like, whether it was a TV camera or stills photographer."

Neil and Howard Bingham, Ali's closest friend, are the two main photographers whose work is featured in Greatest of All Time by German publishers Taschen, first brought out in 2003. There were

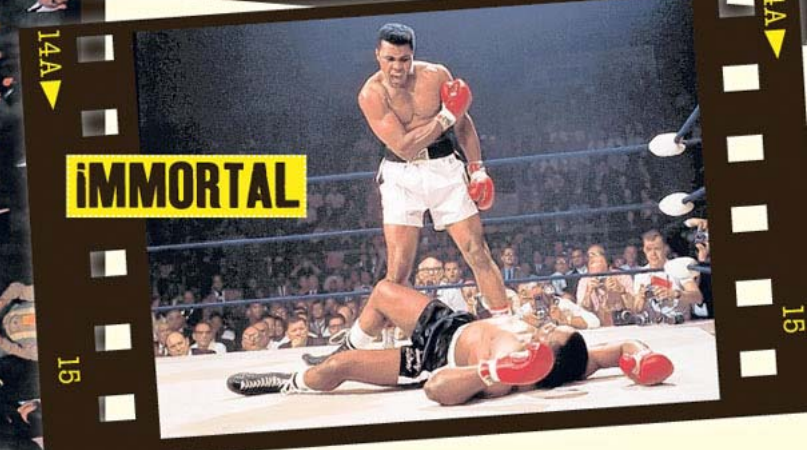
TURN TO PAGE 4

Legends on camera: Neil poses with Ali





iMEDIATE



iMMORTAL

One frame, two stories: Rooney's picture, top, was on the front pages within hours but it is Neil's version, above, that is remembered

A SINGLE PUNCH TWO FRAMES ONE WINNER

Neil took the most famous but not the only version of the shot that captured Ali towering over Liston. On May 25, 1965, photographer John Rooney, from Associated Press, was sitting just a seat away from Leifer and caught the shot. He was shooting in black and white and wiring his pictures to the newspapers. Many led with his image the next day, including the New York Daily News. Their front page featured in an episode in the last series of TV's Mad Men that played out over the course of the big fight night. Neil remembers seeing the picture in papers the next day as he was catching a flight to take his film to New York to be developed. He had not yet seen his pictures but was relieved he had been sitting on the right side of the ring. Rooney's version won the World Press Photo prize for best sports

picture of 1965 but it is Neil's colour shot that has become immortal. Sunday Mail picture editor Andy Hosie said that, because of the lighting and film used by Neil, modern-day photographers could only dream of getting such a shot. He said: "In those days the photographers from magazines like Sports Illustrated and Life were allowed to light the ring themselves, so every time he took a picture, his own flashlights on the gantry above the ring went off illuminating the shot perfectly. "The colours are perfect and the detail and depth is astonishing. "The lighting coupled with his Rolleiflex camera and Ektachrome film allowed him to capture sharp, high-quality images. Neil's shot is the one we remember."

NEIL LEIFER

Framed: Lensmen are seen in this shot from other side



two limited editions of the 700-page work of art, which weighs 75lbs. The first 1000 copies of the Champion's Edition were personally signed by Ali, accompanied by a sculpture by pop-artist Jeff Koons, and sold for £10,000.

Now a new edition called Greatest Of All Time - A Tribute To Muhammad Ali is on sale for £99.99.

Neil reckons he has more than 100,000 photographs of Ali in his archive and always strived to get the very best picture.

He said: "I'd get the most beautiful shot on the cover of Sports Illustrated or Life and a month later I'd look at the picture again and see something I'd have done a little bit differently."

"As a photographer, that's what motivates you for the next assignment."

"A good photographer doesn't turn up at seven o'clock on Saturday night for the fight. I was there days before to rig up my overhead camera and lights."

Neil was also ringside for the epic Rumble In The Jungle in Kinshasa, Zaire, on October 30, 1974, the fight most fans regard as Ali's greatest triumph, against George Foreman.

The photographer feared the worst and he wasn't alone. World champ Foreman had "warmed up" for the contest by obliterating Ali's arch-rival Frazier, knocking him down six times over two explosive rounds.

One punch was so devastating it lifted Frazier, who'd beaten Ali in 1971, off his feet. Big George then went on to demolish another rival, Ken Norton, who had also scored a win over Ali in 1973 in another two equally one-sided rounds. But The Greatest had a plan - the Rope-a-Dope.

Neil said: "Staging a fight in the Congo was a fascinating experience. I didn't think Ali could win because George was such a big puncher that his fights rarely went past Round 2."

"Many Ali fights had gone the distance - a full 15 rounds."

"Like all the other spectators, I was baffled when Ali used his Rope-a-Dope technique and lay back on the ropes."

"I was not on the right side of the ring when Ali knocked Foreman out. I still got a great shot but it's of Ali walking to a neutral corner as Foreman is being counted out."

"I also took a beautiful aerial sequence of four shots with Foreman lying on the canvas. But it's just your luck."

"I have a fantastic picture of Ali standing on the banks of the Congo River at dusk, which is one of my favourites."

"I also took a Pied Piper-style shot where he was walking through a village with a group of local kids."

As a boy growing up in New York, Neil blagged his way into New York Giants football games by volunteering to push wheelchairs of handicapped fans into the stadium. Once inside, he'd sit with the cameramen covering the game and shoot the action.

On his 16th birthday, he sold shots of the 1958 title game between the Giants and the Baltimore Colts to Sports Illustrated and never looked back.

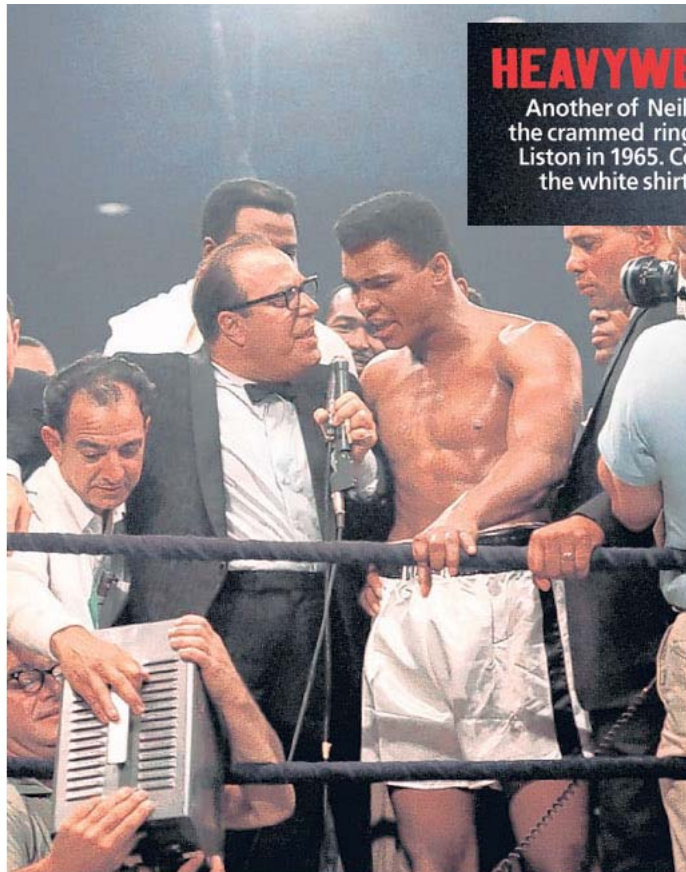
He's photographed US presidents Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan and George Bush and covered 15 Olympic Games.

He has also shot Pope John Paul II, the Space Shuttle, Mike Tyson and scores of movie stars including Clint Eastwood and Paul Newman.

But Ali remains his favourite subject. Neil said: "He is great human being and a very nice guy."

HEAVYWEIGHT INTERVIEW

Another of Neil Leifer's classic pictures shows the crammed ring after Ali's famous victory over Liston in 1965. Cornerman Angelo Dundee is in the white shirt reaching through the ropes



and headed for Times Square. We pulled up, Ali jumped out of the car and within seconds hundreds of people were mobbing him.

"It stopped the traffic. The cops were going crazy. He just wanted to show his girls he could still attract a crowd."

Now 69, Ali suffers from Parkinson's Disease but Neil does not feel pity for his friend.

He said: "I wish he was not physically impaired but all you have to do is hang around him for 10 minutes to realise he doesn't feel sorry for himself. His mind is still sharp as a tack."

"When Parkinson's began to take its toll, Ali carried out a schedule a healthy guy couldn't have kept up with. He flew all over the world to receive awards or do charity work."

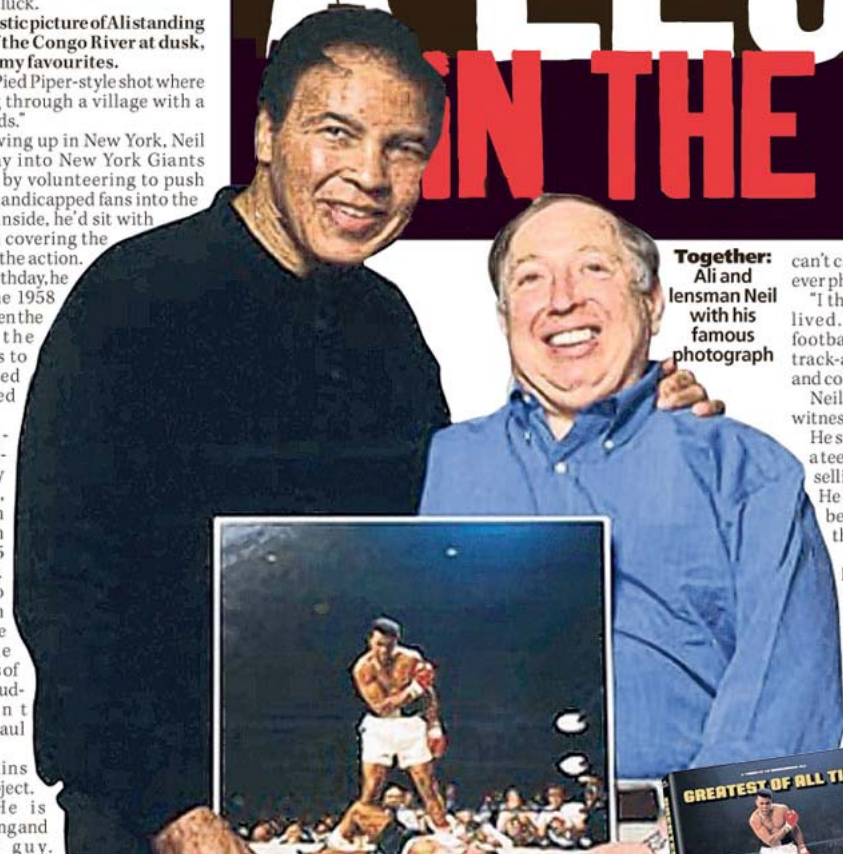
"I just wonder how he'd be now if he'd done a little more resting and took his medication."

Neil added: "In 50 years' time, Ali will be remembered not just as a great boxer but also a great man - a combination of the two."

"Certainly for a black man, Ali is always going to be one of the great African-Americans of all time. One of the best men of all time."

"It was my privilege to take his picture. It was my honour to add just a little part to the legend."

A LEGEND IN THE FRAME



Together: Ali and lensman Neil with his famous photograph

can't say that about all the superstars I've ever photographed.

"I think he is the greatest athlete who ever lived. He'd have been an unbelievable football player, basketball star or Olympic track-and-field champion - his physical gifts and co-ordination were God-given."

Neil still laughs at two occasions when he witnessed Ali's special kind of magic.

He said: "Before his Norton fight, Ali spotted a teenager in the foyer of Houston Astrodome selling a huge stack of T-shirts at \$25 a pop. He said to him, 'Hey kid, how long have you been here? You haven't sold out. Watch this.'"

"Ali began yelling, 'Get your T-shirts here'. Within minutes, there was a queue around the block. He sold them all and handed the kid a fistful of cash."

Another time, Neil was having dinner with Ali and two of his daughters in Manhattan. He recalled: "They were too young to realise just how famous their father had been."

"We jumped into his limousine

● Greatest Of All Time - A Tribute To Muhammad Ali, £99.99, is published by Taschen and is available at www.taschen.com