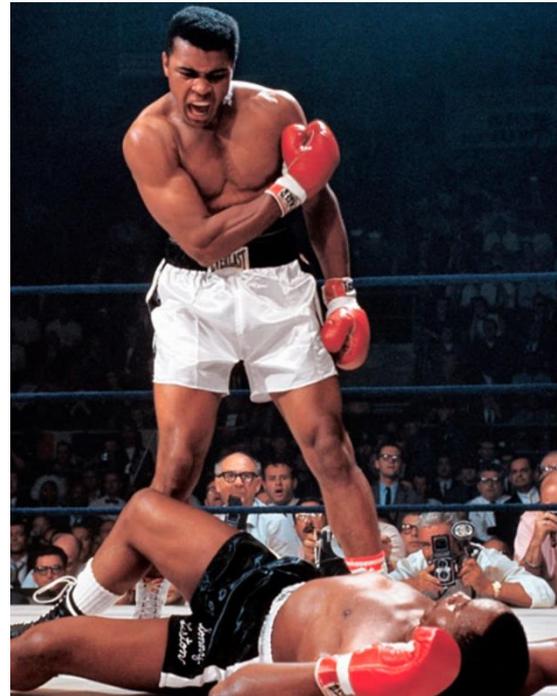


For today's 'On this day' we go back to April 28, 1967 (just under three years before I was born!), which was the day MUHAMMAD ALI lost the title as World Boxing Heavyweight Champion, which he had won by beating the then World Heavyweight Champion, SONNY LISTON, on February 25 1964. But unlike other boxing champions like Liston who lose their title by being beaten by another boxer in the ring, Muhammad Ali's title was taken away from him by the people in charge of boxing in America, and he was not allowed to box again until 1970. How did this happen?



Muhammad Ali's original name was CASSIUS CLAY. He started boxing when he was 12, after a thief stole his bicycle - he wanted to learn how to beat the thief up in revenge. He did very well as an amateur (pronounced 'am - a - tur') boxer (someone who doesn't earn money by boxing) and won the Light Heavyweight gold medal in the 1960 Olympics in Rome. But on his return to his home town in Kentucky, he went into a restaurant to have something to eat and was told that the restaurant didn't serve black people. At that time - almost a hundred years after the end of the American Civil War - black people were still treated very badly in some parts of American, particularly in the American South. Cassius Clay was so disgusted, he threw his gold medal in the river. Cassius then turned professional - boxing for money - and rose to become World Heavyweight Champion of the world in 1964. Cassius Clay then announced he had become a Muslim and was changing his name to 'Muhammad Ali'. It was under that name that Muhammad Ali became world famous - probably the most famous sports personality in world history. (Had you heard of him?)

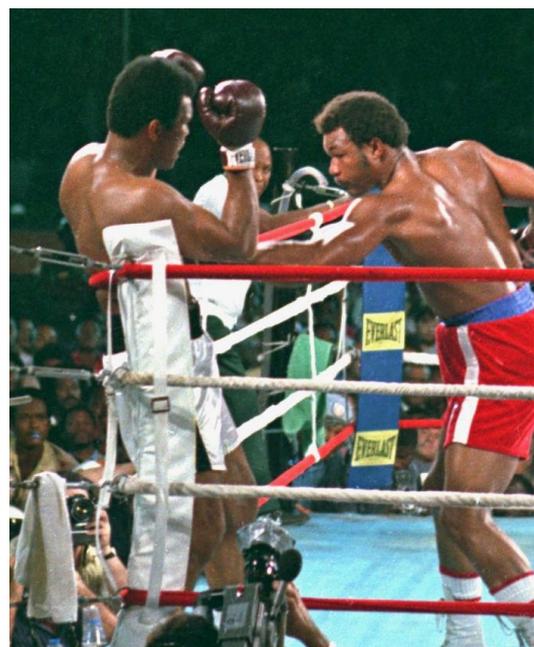
But just as Ali had reached the top of the boxing world, America was about to get itself into big, big trouble. From 1965, America started sending soldiers to a country called VIETNAM, in South-East Asia, in order to protect South Vietnam - which was an ally of the United States - from being invaded and taken over by North Vietnam - which was on the side of the United States' big enemy at the time, the SOVIET UNION. America sent so many soldiers to Vietnam that they ran out of soldiers who had signed up to serve in the American Army, and America had to start telling ordinary young men that they had been selected, in something called THE DRAFT, to enter the Army and fight in Vietnam. Muhammad Ali was of the right age to be



drafted into the American Army, but he made it very clear that he believed in peace and love and he would not agree to fight in the American Army if he was drafted. But on April 28, 1967, he was summoned to an Army office in Texas to be made a member of the American Army: three times Ali's name was called out to come forward and become a member of the Army; three times Ali refused to step forward. Ali was then arrested for what was called 'draft evasion' - refusing to become a member of the Army when you had been drafted into the Army - was later convicted of committing that offence. The same day Ali refused to become a member of the American Army, the boxing authorities in New York stripped him of his title as Heavyweight Champion of the World, and took away his licence (his permission) to box as a professional.

Ali went to court, asking the courts to say that he did not commit a crime by refusing to become a member of the American army because he had deep personal beliefs that stopped him agreeing to fight in the American Army. Eventually, in 1971 the UNITED STATES SUPREME COURT - the highest court in the United States - said that they agreed with Ali, and said he should not have been convicted of any crime. By then, Ali had managed to get his licence to box back - but the road back to being able to become Heavyweight Champions of the World again was a long and difficult one. Initially, it looked like Ali might get his title back very quickly. The Heavyweight Champion of the World by the time Ali started boxing again was a man called JOE FRAZIER, and Ali fought him for the title of Heavyweight Champion in 1971. But Ali lost that fight - the first ever time he had beaten as a boxer. That defeat meant that Ali had to fight a lot of other boxers to get the right to fight for the Heavyweight Championship again. And in fighting those other boxers, Ali lost again to a boxer called KEN NORTON, who broke Ali's jaw. Ali managed to beat Ken Norton in a second fight, and that led to another fight against JOE FRAZIER, who had lost the title of Heavyweight Champion to a really powerful boxer called GEORGE FOREMAN. Whoever won the fight between Ali and Frazier would get to fight George Foreman to see they could beat him and become Heavyweight Champion of the World. This time around, the second time fighting Joe Frazier, Ali managed to beat him. And that meant Ali could fight George Foreman for the Heavyweight Championship of the World in 1974 - ten years after Ali had first become Heavyweight Champion, and seven years after Ali had lost his title.

Ali and Foreman's boxing match took place in Africa. Ali won the fight, by doing something that was both really clever and really stupid. What Ali did was round after round - each round in a boxing match (there are usually 12 or 15 rounds) last 3 minutes - he would lean against the ropes of the boxing ring, hold his hands up against his face to protect his head, and let George Foreman - the scariest, most powerful puncher in the world, and someone who had easily beaten Joe Frazier, who Ali had struggled to beat - punch him over and over again on his body. His plan was to let Foreman tire himself out, and then Ali would start to box and knock him down and knock him out. And his plan worked! In the 8th round, Ali took up his normal position against the ropes, and took his beating, but then Foreman started to tire and his punches got weaker and weaker - and at that point



Ali sprung off the ropes, skipped round Foreman and then he hit him and knocked him down and knocked him out. This is the moment it happened:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JUrzp-rWOgU>

It makes you tired just to see how tired Foreman is, and there was Ali watching and waiting for his moment to arrive. So Ali was Heavyweight Champion of the World again in 1974. He would fight Joe Frazier for a third time in 1975, in Manila, in the Philippines, winning an absolutely brutal fight when Frazier's team of trainers and doctors refused to let him come out for the 15th round. If Frazier had not stayed in his corner, Ali doubted whether he had the energy to get up and fight the 15th round himself - he said the third fight against Joe Frazier was 'the closest to dying I have ever come.' Ali kept his title until 1978, when he was beaten by LEON SPINKS. By then Ali was 36 years old - very old to be boxing against much younger, more energetic fighters. But Ali came back one more time and won the Heavyweight Championship of the World again by beating Leon Spinks in a rematch in 1979. As a result, Ali became the first man ever to win the Heavyweight Championship of the World three times. Ali immediately retired - he recognised that he was too old, and he had taken more physical punishment in the ring than was healthy for him, particularly in the fights against Joe Frazier. But Ali couldn't resist having one more fight against the new Heavyweight Champion of the World, LARRY HOLMES, in 1980. But Ali by then was really struggling - he found it difficult to speak and his hands were trembling. Ali managed eleven rounds (with Holmes trying NOT to hit him!) before Ali's team of trainers and doctors insisted the fight was over and Holmes had won.

Ali died in 2016, when you were just coming up to your 6th birthday. The 36 years after he finally quit boxing saw him become a respected figure all over the world - no longer famous for his fighting abilities, but his kindness and gentleness and wisdom - but his years boxing really affected him. The man who used to boast that he would 'float like a butterfly, and sting like a bee' could hardly walk, could not hold anything in his hands, and found it difficult to talk in much more than a whisper. But it's the three years after Ali lost after he was stripped of his title that we remember today. Ali was 25 when he lost his title, and 28 when he was allowed to fight again. The years from 25 to 28 are the years when a really good boxer is most powerful - they are physically mature, but also very experienced. And it could be argued that Ali was the greatest boxer who ever lived. So for him to have lost the years when he would have been greatest as a boxer is a real shame - but he lost those years because he stood up for his beliefs, and that's better than not standing up for your beliefs, whatever the cost. So if the time comes, stand up for your beliefs!

In the meantime, here's a lovely five minute clip of the best bits from Muhammad Ali's career:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1lvkeUjEMIA>