

# Muhammad Ali, in their own words, is the greatest

**Reggie Amigo** in Hong Kong

*In my heart, he will always be the greatest.*

**George Foreman on Muhammad Ali**

That line struck me like a punch. And as I flipped the cover of the latest book on the former world champion, I found myself thumbing through some of the greatest tributes to any man, page after page.

"Lawdy, lawdy [Lord, O Lord], he's a great champion," came off a battered – and humbled – Joe Frazier after Thrilla in Manila, an epic third fight in their head-to-head contests against which future boxers would measure themselves.

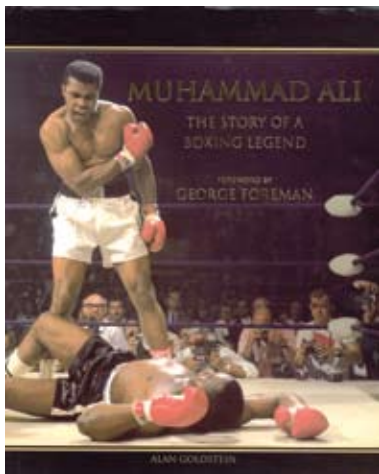
And Larry Holmes, who would be remembered more for who he fought than what he did on the night he predictably defended his world title against an aging, tired Ali, saved his best for a parting shot, telling his fallen hero: "You're the greatest. I love you."

In the outpouring of generosity over Ali's failing health, it's hard to find an unkind word. In fairness, however, the man had earned the accolades long before Parkinson's Disease began to ravage his body into a shell of his former self.

Even so, that's only part of the great story that is Muhammad Ali, and the world may never know the half of it.

But thanks to people like Alan Goldstein, a long-serving sportswriter on the *Baltimore Sun*, we get to relive the Ali legend. His book is an honest portrait of the man not from the reams of copy he inspired but from the fighters who were at the receiving end of his greatness.

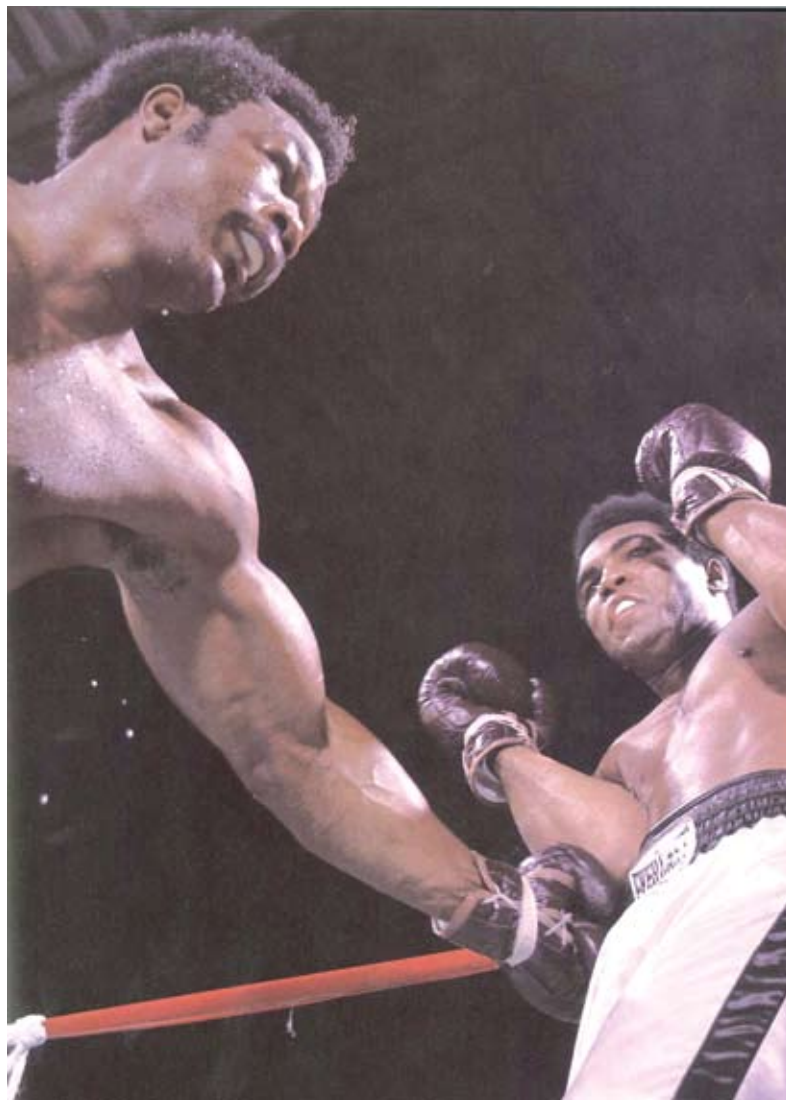
In their own words, each one of them – from Sonny Liston to Floyd Patterson, Leon Spinks and little known Jean-Pierre Coopman (whom Ali called "a gentleman") – helped put together *Muhammad Ali, the Story of a Boxing Legend* (Carlton Books, 178 pages, \$272).



Goldstein keeps it simple by not getting in the way, except to introduce a chapter in the chronology, drawing on the many years he spent covering Ali's fights.

One such fight, which took Ali and Foreman to darkest, deepest Africa, almost leaps out of the pages.

And here I was, transfixed on the images, knocked back to a summer afternoon 34 years ago, lost in a crowd of grown men shouting themselves silly around a black and white TV at the sight of Foreman



being cut from his legs, crashing down and out.

I had to skip my UP zoology class for that. I remember telling my laboratory teammates the story the next day only to find out they had done what I did.

By the time Thrilla in Manila rolled around, I had started a small collection of things Ali, from stickers to newspaper clippings and some of the earlier books on him.

I was a visitor in my mother's Grade 3 class sleeping away boring

afternoons under her desk when Ali won his first professional fight. I had not heard him proclaim himself "The Greatest", but now we know how it became a currency. Now we also know why he liked to call his opponents names, and why TV executives lapped up the one-liners he used to sell his fights.

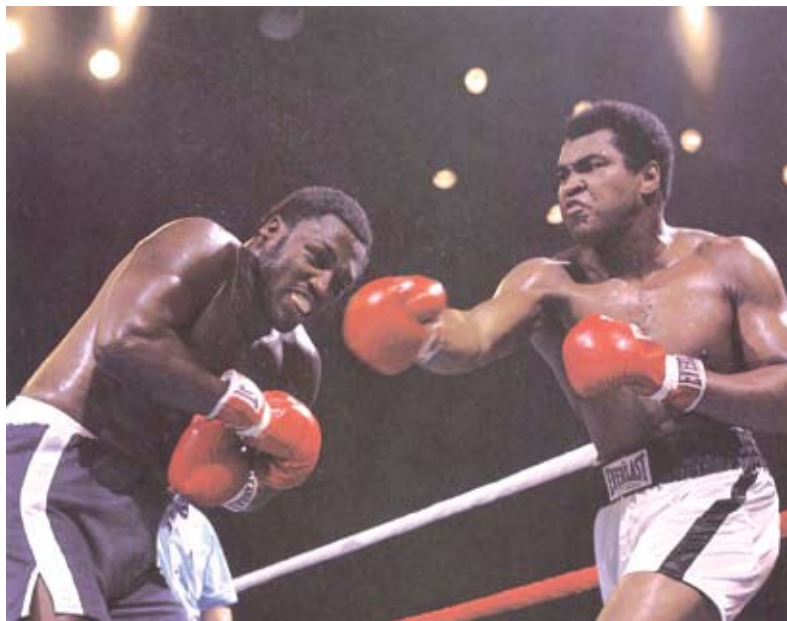
In a time when internet marketing was not even a sound bite, Ali was a brand. He pitched himself like so much stuff off a store shelf and earned handsomely. When asked why he came out to take on Holmes, the reigning world champion, his former sparring partner and 12 years his junior, Ali said: "I got it made for life financially and every other way. I don't need to beat Larry Holmes."

The following year, Ali fought Trevor Berbick and lost a painful 10-round decision, but even as he was being put to shame, Ali was thinking of a grand comeback. Six months later, he put the question to manager Angelo Dundee. "You can't do it anymore," came the reply. "There isn't any water left in the well."

So Ali closed his career in defeat, but he hadn't hit bottom. And so, the story continues ...

Like the man that inspired it, the book takes some doing to put down.

I'm reading it a third time, reliving the moment in each word. If you have not read about Ali or heard of him, you'll never know what I mean.



Foreman slugs Ali in Africa (top). Ali rocks Frazier in Manila (above).

## Beckham shifts from soccer to ... er, football

Before David Beckham can convert America into a soccer nation, he'll need to learn the lingo.

After saying his family came first, he said the second most important thing "is the foot... is the soccer."

"I'll get used to that at some point. I'm sorry," Beckham said.

The sports superstar and pop culture "it" guy was officially introduced at his home stadium amid a cannon of confetti and a roar of cheers.

Beckham quickly recognized his move to the Los Angeles Galaxy will take some adjusting. Even simple things, as in what to call his sport – it's football in the rest of the world.

His brief slip drew some scattered boos, which turned into laughs.

An estimated 5,000 soccer enthusiasts – and new Beckham fans – sat in the stands as "Becks" was introduced and held up his new No 23 jersey.

"My family have now moved to Los Angeles, something we're looking forward to, something we're very proud of, and in our life everything's perfect," Beckham said from a stage set up on the playing field.

"So, on to my new challenge. This is one of the biggest challenges I have ever taken on in my career, to move to a different country, the other side of the world, something that I'm looking forward to."

Wearing a crisp gray suit and sporting a buzz cut and a stubbly chin, Beckham smiled as he walked onto the field as the loudspeakers blared the refrain, "Hello, America."

His wife Victoria, aka Posh Spice, wore a stylish fuchsia dress with matching color alligator bag and posed for photos, turning and preening, before the presentation began.

The crowd consisted mostly of youngsters, with teenage girls the most prominent group. Their scattered screams gave the welcome party a rock star vibe.

"He's a celebrity and a great soccer player," 15-year-old Taylor Markham said.

Her friend Alyssa Bricker, also a 15-year-old soccer player, said, "I can't wait to see him start playing."

Asked if she thought Beckham was handsome, Bricker said, "Oh, yeah. He's hot."

And his wife? "She's pretty," Bricker said. "And very lucky."

The Galaxy has switched team colors to coincide with Beckham's arrival, going from the familiar green to navy, white and gold.



David Beckham ... American 'boy'.

## Center carries on legacy and life's work

The Muhammad Ali Center (right), a tribute to the man and his values, is located in Louisville, Kentucky's "Museum Row" in the West Main District of downtown.

The six-story, 96,750 sq ft museum opened on November 19, 2005 at a cost of US\$80 million.

It also includes a 40,000 sq



ft two-level amphitheater and plaza that is currently under construction and will connect

to Museum Plaza. The plaza is expected to be completed this year.

The cultural center features exhibitions regarding Muhammad Ali's core values on respect, confidence, conviction, dedication, giving and spirituality.

An orientation theater helps present Ali's life from birth to the

present, and a mock-boxing ring recreated after what was in his Deer Lake Training Camp.

A two-level pavilion, housed within a large elliptical room, features his boxing memorabilia and history.

A large projector displays "The Greatest", Muhammad Ali's signature fight, onto a full-sized boxing ring.