

Birth of a Champion

On the one hand it's hard to figure that there's much to contribute as a writer to the legacy of Muhammad Ali because he's been the source of so much writing at so many levels already. On the other hand, it's almost like an initiation ritual to write about him. His figure looms so large that he's like a mountain that can always bear new description in new light, new weather...

I was just sitting in my apartment and happened on the opening bell of the Cassius Clay vs. Sonny Liston fight on ESPN Classics. I decided to watch. Clay was 22 yrs. old, 19-0 with 15 KOs. He was fighting Sonny Liston, heavyweight champion of the world, 31 yrs-old. Liston was a quiet rugged man with tree trunk legs and massive punching strength. Clay was a willowy, loud-mouth kid from Louisville who had not yet fought top competition. He was an 8-1 underdog coming into the fight.

Round 1: Clay comes out very live on his feet, circling the champ clockwise with his left hand very low, just above his hip and his right hand close to his body just above the high waistband of his shorts. He looks very tall, skinny and vulnerable. Liston stalks in straight ahead with his left hand in front of his face and his right hand under his chin. He throws a couple heavy left lead hooks and misses by a foot as Clay gyrates his upper body around like the mast of a sailing ship in heavy seas. The first round is not particularly eventful. Clay is establishing a range though. He is out of Liston's reach entirely and he pops a few sharp left jabs in between the champs gloves and hits his face. They look relatively harmless but you can tell when the bell rings that Liston is annoyed. One whole round and he never even saw Clay. The crowd roars at the bell.

I recognize, knowing who Clay will become, that he's giving Liston and the crowd a narrative. He's teaching them. Lesson 1: There is a place I can stand and hit you from where you can't hit me.

Round 2: They meet in the center of the ring and Clay starts turning Liston again, always moving in a circle to his left in that bouncing side shuffle, stopping just for a second to duck his head and stick out a straight left. Clay is not moving as fast and he is not as energetic with his punches. Liston appears to be following a new directive from his corner. Get close. Don't waste energy punching from far away. So he's trying to cut Clay off and force him to stop. About 30 seconds into the round this happens for the first time. Liston stops Clay against the ropes. His eyes get big and he unloads a right. Clay brings both forearms together in front of his face and leans back against the ropes as the blow lands. Liston steps closer to throw a left and Clay propelled forward by the ropes, ducks left, steps forward and disappears magically into the center of the ring. The speed and grace of the escape are amazing and more amazing is that he does the same thing three more times in the round, always absorbing a blow with a cover up and a rock against the ropes, dodging his way out on the rebound and turning back towards his opponent as he goes. The crowd applauds at the bell. Lesson 2: You can't catch me.

Round 3: Clay comes out high energy and starts turning Liston fast and pumping his left lead jab in through Liston's guard. They go around three times and Liston seems to be getting angry. Suddenly, Clay stops, fakes the left lands a straight right that catches Liston under the left eye and follows it up with a five punch combination. Liston is clearly hurt. The crowd is shocked. Clay follows Liston to the neutral corner, fakes a couple shots, then delivers another laser-sharp combination in which he lands three power punches. Liston is reeling, doubled over in the corner covered up. Clay lets him out, follows him around. Liston barrels into him throwing awkward blows with both hands. One punch glances off of Clay's chin and the crowd roars, but Clay escapes again. He lets Liston come at him for the last minute of the round. At the bell the crowd roars loud. Liston has a cut under his left eye, which is swelling fast. Lesson 3: I can hurt you.

Round 4: Both men look a little tired. Clay turns Liston left. Liston steps in and Clay covers up on ropes. Repeat. It's a slow boring round. Liston looks wary. He's trying to punch but he's missing. Whenever he closes in and throws one of his tree-cutter lefts, Clay slips under it, or leans back just out of its range and Liston throws himself off balance. It looks tiring. Clay keeps turning him and throwing that left lead jab from a couple different release points. They still look simple and innocuous, but it's starting to become clear that they're not. The cut under Liston's eye is opening, his nose and right eye

are swelling up too. It's kind of a defining moment in the career of Muhammad Ali if you think about it. A routine, defensive round, but you realize that fast, smooth jab that seems to land so easily it can't be a big deal, is actually lethal. Lesson 4: I'm blinding you.

Round 5: This is a weird round. First of all Clay won't sit down in the corner and Angelo Dundee is yelling at him about something. You can't hear what. Then the bell rings and they come together in the middle of the ring. Liston throws three punches in a bull rush, they go against the ropes. Something is in Clay's eye. He's blinking his right eye like he can't see and reaching for it. The crowd is yelling. Liston comes at him in the way Mike Tyson used to, with both gloves right under his chin ready to throw vicious hooks with both. Clay goes back to the ropes. Liston swings away, Clay weaves, covers, leans. Nothing seems to land clean. This goes on for about a minute and Clay escapes into the center of the ring and starts to look normal again. You can tell Liston is tired from throwing all that heavy artillery continuously. He has nothing to show for it. Meanwhile Clay, seeing he's tired, extends his left hand all the way and keeps his glove in Liston's face, like you would do with a little kid. Liston knocks it away and Clay puts it back. Liston tries to punch, Clay backs up, starts turning him again, stops, and puts the left hand back in his face. It looks infuriating so it must be. At the end of the round Clay slips in a couple stiff jabs, one right on the cut. Lesson 5: I can do this all night.

Round 6: Clay comes quick across the ring, snapping a jab into Liston's face and then turning him with his left lead popping rhythmically at an offbeat. One, Two, Wham. One Wham. One, Two, Wham. Clay is moving his feet fast and he keeps snapping the jab. Every single one gets between Liston's paws and lands under his eyes or square on his nose. You can tell they hurt now. 30 seconds into the round Clay stops Liston in the middle of the ring and throws the kind of five-punch combo he hurt him with. He hurts him again, not as bad as the first time, but he's all over Liston's face. Liston looks slow and he's not punching. Something is wrong. That one exchange in the center is the real action of the round, but for the rest of it Clay is stalking and nailing Liston with the left lead jab. He keeps his left hand low and a little open. It's his signature but it must have looked alien then. He baits with his head and his open glove seems to talk. I'm gonna hit you... I'm gonna hit you... I'm go Wham. I just hit you. And he keeps doing it and you never see it and he's moving so fast that you couldn't hit him at the start and how you can't see. There's no hope of winning. The bell rings. The crowd cheers. Lesson 6: You can't win.

Round 7: They are in Liston's corner trying to stop the bleeding under the left eye. His personal physician is there. Liston looks miserable. Joe Louis, perhaps the best fighter of his age, is the ringside color commentator. He says, "Liston can't see. I believe Clay has the confidence to win now." Right at that moment the referee goes to Liston's corner, talks to the doc, the fight is called, pandemonium.

We all know what happens next. The ring gets mobbed. Clay starts shouting. He shouts at Cosell, at the crowd, at Liston's corner, in Joe Louis's ear. He has been waiting for this moment all his life. "I shook up the world! I shook up the world!"

A couple things, though, I didn't remember. Clay accuses Liston's corner of putting something on the gloves to blind him in the 5th round. He says outright, "That man's corner is dirty." Joe Louis calls it the biggest upset in boxing history and says that many had rated Liston before the fight as the best heavyweight ever. He mentions James Braddock (Cinderella Man) upsetting Max Baer. The fight has been called, we find out, because Liston has literally dislocated his left shoulder on one of his missed hooks. We are witnessing the birth of the greatest sports champion of the century. He is already famous. As he's being interviewed in the ring he says "I am the greatest." You know he believes it. Sam Cooke, the singer, comes into the ring to give Clay a hug.

"This is Sam Cooke," Clay yells. "The greatest rock singer in the world."

Muhammad Ali is written about so much because he was writing his own story, spinning it for all of us right from the beginning, creating a narrative we couldn't refuse. He started with boxing, teaching his opponents why they couldn't beat him.