

Athletes and principles

By Tony Pearson

In June, one of the greatest athletes of all time died ? Muhammad Ali. He changed boxing forever. Ali didn't simply change the sport, he changed the world. He did so by standing on principle. In fact, he gave up the heavyweight boxing title and sacrificed the peak years of his career for it.

It started with a change of religion, when he joined the Nation of Islam (African American Islamic sect) at the urging of Malcolm X. He also changed his name from Cassius Clay to Muhammad Ali. Both moves were strongly condemned by the majority of the mainstream public opinion, which didn't care for Muslims nor African American activists.

He defied the mainstream even more by refusing induction into the U.S. army. At the time, the United States was waging a war in Vietnam ? a war seen by many then, and most now, as immoral, much like the invasion of Iraq. He famously declared that he had no quarrel with the Vietnamese. The American government charged him with draft evasion.

The result was that the patriotic rich white men who controlled boxing stripped him of his heavyweight title, and banned him from boxing. He was barred for three and a half years ? probably his best years in the sport. He would not give in.

As we know, he came back in his 30s to make boxing history. In *The Rumble in The Jungle* and *The Thrilla in Manila*, Ali demonstrated that he was among the greatest fighters of all time. He was epic.

Of course, not everything he did was praiseworthy. He had some major flaws, as do we all. He wasn't afraid to take a stand that was personally costly. After his conversion and his draft resistance, he defied his critics saying, ?I am America. I am the part you won't recognize. But get used to me ? black, confident, cocky. My name, not yours; my religion, not yours; my goals, my own.?

African American civil rights leader Al Sharpton put the impact of Ali's stance in perspective.

?For the heavyweight champion of the world, who had achieved the highest level of athletic celebrity, to put all of that on the line ? the money, the ability to get endorsements ? to sacrifice all of that for a cause, gave a whole sense of legitimacy to the movement and the causes with young people that nothing else could have done. That's another level of leadership and sacrifice.?

We all have moments in our lives when we have to decide between principle and popularity, between comfort and challenge. We don't always make the right choice. We become good at rationalizing our behaviour. We often go along to get along.

The passing of Ali brought to mind one other example from the sports world about choosing principle over personal interest. At the 1936 Olympics, held in Hitler's Berlin, the long-jump contest was between African American Jesse Owens and blond blue-eyed German Luz Long. As a German, Long was totally familiar with Hitler's aryan-racist views, which viewed African Americans as sub-human. Yet when Owens fouled his first two qualifying jumps, it was Long who advised him to jump from behind the bar in order to meet the qualifying distance.

Owens did so, qualified, and in the final, won the gold medal on his final jump, just beating Long, who took silver. After the competition, Long gave Owens a congratulatory hug and openly talked with him as they waited for the medal ceremony. For this he was reprimanded by Hitler's second-in-command. Owen later said, ?It took a lot of courage for him to befriend me in front of Hitler. You can melt down all the medals and cups I have and they wouldn't be a plating on the 24 karat friendship that I felt for Luz Long at that moment.?

A soldier during the Second World War, Long was killed in action. Before he died, he wrote a letter to Owens; ?My heart is telling me that this is perhaps the last letter of my life. If that is so, I beg one thing from you. When the war is over, please go to Germany, find my son and tell him about his father. Tell him about the times when war did not separate us and tell him that things can be different between men in this world.?

Ali and Long ? two athletes from different eras who showed us what it means to take a risk in order to stand for what you believe in. We can take a lesson from their courageous example.