

Dave Hannigan

Fifteen
Rounds
in the
Wilderness

MUHAMMAD ALI

MUHAMMAD
ALI

WELCOME
TO
HANDSWORTH



WE LOVE YOU



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Rounds
in the
Wilderness

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Dave Hannigan



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ROUND ONE

1982

Take it slow, Muhammad Ali. Read a book now and then. Go to the supermarket once in a while. That's right, you just put the food in the basket as you wheel the thing around the aisles. Cut the lawn. Take out the trash. Ride a bus. There isn't a lot of stuff out here that you've been doing in the last 20 years but that's all right. You'll survive. We all do. Just don't watch a lot of television. That'll rot your mind faster than any combination Trevor Berbick ever imagined

Leigh Montville, *The Boston Globe*, 1 January 1982

ON NEW Year's Day, *Body and Soul* opened in select movie theatres across America. A blaxploitation flick crossed with a Rocky film, it starred Leon Isaac Kennedy as Leon Johnson, a wannabe doctor forced into the boxing ring to pay the medical bills of his ailing sister. Playing himself, Muhammad Ali is on screen for less than five minutes and one snarky review said of his performance, 'Laurence Olivier need not worry.'

Still, Ali's presence in the cast was enough to warrant a 'With Muhammad Ali' sticker on the posters advertising *Body and Soul*.

His most notable scene is in a gym where he briefly pummels the speed bag before Johnson begs him to become his trainer.

‘Look, my friend, people come to me all the time for help, business deals,’ says Ali. ‘Buy this, invest in this, invest in that, train this man, train that man. Everybody knows I’m the greatest, right? But I’m not obligated and I don’t have time to make you the greatest.’

* * *

An invited guest at the inauguration of Harvey Sloane for his second term as Mayor of Louisville on 4 January, Muhammad Ali wrote a poem for the occasion, poking fun at his long-time friend, a politician he affectionately used to call ‘a hippie’.

*‘You’re the finest of men, we all agree
But why don’t you ever call Muhammad Ali?
Two times mayor makes you rate
Three times champion make me great!’*

During the official ceremony at the Macauley Theatre, Ali sat just behind the city’s first family on stage, causing a bit of a stir when he got up in the middle of proceedings and walked out. Later, he explained he had left to go perform Salat, one of the five times per day when every Muslim must kneel and pray towards Mecca.

* * *

On 13 January, a federal grand jury found Harold Smith, founder and CEO of Muhammad Ali Sports Promotions, guilty on 29 out of 31 charges related to embezzling more than \$21m from the Beverley Hills branch of the Wells Fargo Bank. In 1977, Ali had granted Smith permission to use his name in return for a fee, but was not involved in the day-to-day operations of the company. ‘I’m

shocked,' said Ali. 'I'm just now hearing it. I'm surprised he was found guilty. I still don't believe it. I just don't think one man can embezzle a bank [out] of so much money and not be caught while committing the crime.'

* * *

A former Hudson County investigator and Verona police officer named Ron Lipton was on trial in the Superior Court of Newton, New Jersey. Following an incident in which he hit Alex Klein, 20, with a baseball bat, he faced a litany of charges. His defence was that he used the bat to disarm Klein, who was wielding a knife in a dispute outside Lipton's home. The victim had been one of several men who had, for some time, been terrorising the family and menacing the neighbourhood.

A one-time amateur middleweight prospect in the 1960s, Lipton spent more than a decade as a sparring partner of Muhammad Ali's. It was Lipton who first told Ali the story of the injustice done to the incarcerated boxer Rubin 'Hurricane' Carter and the pair travelled to Rahway State Prison together to visit him. Their relationship remained so strong that Ali flew 3,000 miles to testify to Lipton's good character in his hour of need. That he would do so seemed such a long shot when first mooted that one prosecutor had a bet with a journalist covering the trial that the celebrity witness would surely never show up.

Arriving at the Sussex County Courthouse in a chauffeur-driven yellow Cadillac on 21 January, Ali wore a brown pin-striped suit and caused an inevitable stir in the building even before he was brought to testify in front of Judge Frederic G. Weber. Asked by first assistant-prosecutor Vincent J. Connor Jr if he knew what Lipton was charged with, Ali said 'not exactly', then offered a resounding character reference. 'I love Ron and we have been through everything together,' said Ali. 'I am here

today because there is no one I would do this for, not for \$100,000, except for Ron. I will always be there for him. I wouldn't be here all the way from California for nobody if I didn't believe he was honest. I'm here because he's a good man and I wouldn't come up here and risk my reputation for somebody that I didn't know that well. He's a good man, a God-fearing man. He did all he could for Rubin even though he was white and Rubin was black. He put himself on the line, his family, his job. It's people like this man that's going to change the world and make it better for all races.'

When Connor questioned him about dates and times of events involving Lipton, Ali responded, 'If I knew I were going to be in court, I would have kept a diary.'

Not the last laugh he got from the gallery. 'People said I was hit on the head too many times,' said Ali. 'Who had the nerve to tell you that?' asked Connor.

After pausing a moment, Ali answered, 'My mother.'

And the whole court guffawed.

At the conclusion of his evidence, Ali left the witness box and shook hands with every member of the jury. An unorthodox move, the prosecutor told reporters afterwards he didn't think Ali's magnanimous gesture/breach of legal etiquette would affect the outcome of the case. If anything, he said, it was proof the defence had very little else to offer.

The jury acquitted Lipton of all charges except possession of a weapon. At a second trial, he was acquitted of that too.

* * *

Two weeks later, Muhammad Ali was at the New Frontier Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada for a magic convention and an audience with the celebrated Siegfried and Roy duo. While a photograph of the double act with Ali and a plethora of white rabbits made newspapers all over the country, he immersed himself in the event.

At one point, he came across a blind man wearing a fedora and sunglasses, tapping his way down the corridor with a white cane. 'Are you a magician?' asked Ali. 'I am the amazing Haundini!' replied Gary Haun. He improvised the name on the spot but, after being rendered blind by an accident while serving in the US Marines, he had taught himself to do magic. With Ali rapt, he did a card trick and followed that up by making a coin disappear. 'Wow!' said Ali, 'You really are amazing!'

Everybody at the convention knew Ali had a voracious appetite for seeing magic up close. Bill Gardner, a young up-and-comer from Wichita, Kansas, was one of many invited to visit the only hotel room with a security guard standing sentry outside. For half an hour, even as Ali wolfed down some matzo ball soup, Gardner ran through a panoply of his go-to tricks, including the classic multiplying rabbits routine. When he pressed one of the yellow foam rabbits into Ali's hand as part of the act, he couldn't get over the size of the palm and the position in which he found himself. 'OK, I'm actually handling the hand that's just pummeled the crap out of a lot of people,' said Gardner. 'But he was incredibly gentle.'

* * *

In the first week of April, Muhammad Ali walked into a television studio in New York City wearing a business suit and carrying a briefcase, like a man getting ready to negotiate a deal. He had come to tape an episode of HBO's *Grudge Match* alongside Joe Frazier, their legends forever intertwined because of their three epic encounters in the ring.

'I'm going to introduce Joe and Muhammad,' said the host Barry Tompkins as the cameras prepared to roll.

'Two retired, washed-up bums,' muttered Ali.

Eight days before Ali lost to Berbick the previous December, Frazier, a tell-tale paunch where his washboard stomach used

to be, fought a journeyman named Floyd 'Jumbo' Cummings to a mediocre draw in a half-empty amphitheatre hard by the stockyards on the southside of Chicago. At HBO, the icons had come not to discuss the ignominious way their careers had ended – Frazier actually insisted he might still fight again – but to revisit the glory days. Contests that defined an era in the sport. Bouts no fan would ever tire of talking about.

'I always respected him as a champion and a man,' said Frazier. 'His way of living is his way and my way of living is mine. But you always have to watch him. When you walk away from him, walk backwards!'

After the interview ended, Tompkins asked Ali where he was headed next. At that point, he produced a notepad on which were written an alphabetic list of countries he wanted to visit to promote a worldwide organisation he intended to start to protect the human rights of children. As he scrolled through the nations, he stopped and asked, 'How do you pronounce that?'

Unsure whether Ali was mocking or serious, Tompkins read out, 'Vietnam.'

* * *

Ahead of his attempt to wrest the heavyweight title from Larry Holmes in Las Vegas, Gerry Cooney set up training camp at the Canyon Hotel in Palm Springs. Muhammad Ali paid a visit to the challenger on 10 May, accompanied by his fabled cornerman Bundini Brown and Harold Smith, still awaiting sentencing for ripping off Wells Fargo.

'Gerry Cooney is not the white boy,' said Ali. 'He's the right boy.'

Many who had come to camp to watch the Long Islander work out quickly turned their back on the elevated ring to line up for an autograph from the esteemed visitor. One man nearly fainted

when offered the chance to shake Ali's hand. When Richard Hoffer, a reporter from the *Los Angeles Times*, mentioned his enduring popularity, Ali quipped, 'It's bad now, think if I'd have beaten Holmes!'

Then he launched into a recitation of his plans for the future.

'Spiritual life is the thing,' he said. 'King of Arabia called me. President of Bangladesh. Starting a big evangelism programme, explaining Islamic faith. One billion Muslims in the world. Four billion people. One billion Muslims. Boxing made me popular, but this is my real job, working for God.'

If that sounded like a man set to live the rest of his life as a missionary, Ali quickly contradicted himself.

'I got to stop travelling actually,' said Ali. 'Been home 30 days, most I've ever been home. Too much travelling. I like to cut my own grass, do the dishes, go shopping, simple stuff. Take my children to school, talk to my mother on the telephone. Simple things.'

Hoffer asked if he cut his own grass.

'Sometimes I want to,' said Ali.

* * *

On 4 June, a photograph of two of the most famous people on the planet flashed up the wire services in newspaper offices across the world. It showed Pope John Paul II and Muhammad Ali, each with pen in hand, signing autographs at a table. Both men looked serious and focused as they exchanged copies of each other's signatures. It was quite a shot. The pontiff, a promising soccer goalkeeper in his youth, alongside the retired boxer visiting Rome, the city where he had won Olympic gold in 1960 and launched himself upon the world all those years earlier.

Here was a picture that appeared to symbolise the next step in Ali's career. The best-known Muslim on earth visiting the

leader of the Catholic Church in the Vatican, his new status as some sort of unofficial roving global ambassador of peace obvious from the fact he'd been granted a private audience in the pope's personal quarters.

Although the Louisville home of his childhood was Baptist, Ali knew well the significance of that papal honour. When a student at Central High School, the then Cassius Clay worked part-time for the Catholic Sisters of Charity at the Nazareth College library. His host knew the merits of having this high-profile visitor too. A year earlier, the pope had been the victim of an assassination attempt by the Turkish terrorist Mehmet Ali Agca. For him, a photo opportunity with Ali represented an ecumenical message to Islamic countries.

Not that Ali quite got that memo.

'I told the pope that he ought to take all the white statues out of the churches,' he said. 'All this is heavy. I hope the pope will come out and do this. You know how it says in the Bible, in Exodus 20, chapter 4, they shall not make any graven images. All the white statues are wrong, they're graven images. The pope wants me to come back to discuss that.'

* * *

Forty-eight hours later, Ali stepped off a plane in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. The Advisory Committee for Economic Growth, a local non-profit, had invited him to the midwestern city to assist their efforts to raise money for a cultural achievement centre for disadvantaged youth. At the Five Seasons Centre, a crowd of just over 500 turned up to see him – smaller than organisers had hoped for but still a decent turnout given how hastily arranged and poorly promoted the so-called 'Ali Extravaganza!' had been.

For instance, when 27-year-old Steve Eden, the national Golden Gloves champion at 178 pounds just two years earlier,

climbed through the ropes for a proposed two-round exhibition, Ali was still wearing the trousers of a suit and a dress shirt with the tie recently removed. Hardly ideal, but they worked with what they had.

As he readied himself in his corner, Ali put on his game face, yelling 'I want Steve!' and gesticulating with his fists. These were the tone and actions of a man trying to convince a small but delighted audience he was taking this as seriously as a championship bout. Eden, in proper boxing attire, made the early running, taking the fight to his opponent in business casual and Ali shipped a couple of blows before returning fire.

'Ali's boxing skills were still intact,' said Eden. 'He picked me in the second round with a three or four-punch combination.'

Eden and Ali talked boxing afterwards and the recently retired amateur went home with an autographed photograph inscribed with the words, 'I'll get you next time, Steve!'

From there Ali went to his hotel, where he was scheduled to perform a 60-minute magic show for an audience of children. Ali sat cross-legged on the carpet, surrounded by boys and girls relishing his every move, for two and a half hours.

'As he was getting ready to go up to his room for a well-deserved rest, one little girl gripped his hand,' wrote Mike Chapman in the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*. 'He looked down at her, a white child perhaps three or four, and she said, "Hi Muhammad," in a very sweet voice. He gaped at her, smiled widely, then bent over and picked her up. She hugged him and he giggled, looking at me. "Hey, Mr Newspaperman," he said, "Where is your photographer now? You need to get a picture of this." He held her cheek to cheek.'

En route to the airport at the end of his visit, Ali asked how much money his trip had raised. One host confessed to having just about broke even on the whole thing. At that point, Ali promptly

tore in half the expenses cheque they had just given him to cover the cost of his travel.

‘Muhammad,’ said one of the organisers, ‘you can’t do that!’

‘Yes, I can,’ he said. ‘It’s my way of giving back.’

* * *

On 8 June, Ali filed a suit against his former promoter Don King in the Northern District Court of Illinois, seeking \$1,170,000 he was owed from the Larry Holmes fight in October 1980. The litigation also requested statutory interest on the money and payment of reasonable attorney’s fees.

‘I think Muhammad Ali is one of the greatest fighters of all time,’ said King. ‘Far be it from me to say anything derogatory about him. But you must understand, he had to get a headline.’

* * *

Tickets for the first-ever Monday Night at the Fights at Duke’s Country in Tulsa, Oklahoma on 19 July retailed for \$15 each, didn’t list any of the boxers due to get in the ring but did advertise a guest appearance by Muhammad Ali. When the box office wasn’t ticking over as briskly as initially hoped, somebody involved decided to bend the truth and garner some free publicity. ‘I just know he’ll be doing an exhibition,’ said Ken Murray about the prospect of Ali putting on gloves. ‘It’s to kick off the first of a series of Monday night fight cards.’

Ali touched down at Tulsa International Airport 24 hours before the show and appeared bemused by the prospect of donning gloves. ‘This may come as a shock or a surprise, but there is no way I’ve come here to box,’ said Ali. ‘I was told I was coming here to help as a promotion. No one told me I was expected to get inside a boxing ring. I’m a world-class fighter and three-time heavyweight champion, I just don’t jump into a ring with anybody. I’m 40. I

know I look young and pretty – you heard about me being pretty. Now, you see it is true.’

When Ali turned up at the nightclub on Monday evening, J.V. Haney, director of athletics at Webster High School, and Bill Roller, a basketball coach, were waiting. Haney moonlighted for a local radio station and had been sent to get an interview. While he set up his equipment, Ali flopped down on a couch next to Roller and fell asleep. His travelling companions eventually roused him to do a five-minute on-air chat, and afterwards he sat back down and dozed off again.

Later in the evening, he apologised to Haney for giving such a brief interview, then invited him and Roller to the penthouse suite at the Excelsior Hotel once the fights had ended. When they reached Ali’s room that night, they found a man in his element. ‘There was a large circle of people, probably around 20,’ said Haney. ‘I pushed my way up to where I could see, and there was Muhammad Ali sitting cross-legged, barefoot in the middle of the room, and he had about 30 to 40 magic tricks spread out on the floor all around him. He was really good at it. I remember his hands being so fast. They were pretty good magic tricks. And he was having a good time doing it. He really was enjoying himself.’

Many guests were still there as dawn broke. However, aspects of the event at Duke’s Country left a sour taste. ‘This is the last time I’ll be involved with boxing or promotion,’ said Ali, before leaving Tulsa. ‘I’ve had 28 years in boxing. Most boxers, after they retire, they hang around boxing rings and gymnasiums. There’s nothing else they can do. I don’t want that image.’

* * *

On a whistle-stop tour of Vancouver on 4 August, Muhammad Ali appeared on Gary Bannerman’s radio programme, taped a segment for *The Alan Thicke Show* and sat for an interview

with local columnist Archie McDonald. He was accompanied by Richard Hirschfeld, a lawyer from Virginia with a colourful past that included falling foul of the Securities and Exchange Commission for banking irregularities. It was whispered that Hirschfeld inveigled his way into Ali's entourage by falsely claiming to have once been John Wayne's personal lawyer.

Ali spent the visit to Canada talking up his burgeoning business portfolio, performing his default magic trick of making a handkerchief disappear, and preaching an old tune about religious imagery. 'People see that God is white, the last supper is all white, angels all white,' he said. 'It's wrong but nobody has yet brought this up.'

* * *

On Friday, 20 August, Mal Vincent, a journalist with the *Virginian-Pilot*, found himself driving through the backwoods of Virginia Beach in a convoy containing Richard Hirschfeld, Sheikh Mohammed Al-Fassi, some local grandee politicians and Muhammad Ali. This curious ensemble headed to the summer home of local developer Eddie Garcia to discuss plans for a proposed \$44m 600-room hotel.

As the mayor, the politicians and the businessmen talked telephone numbers and toured Garcia's mansion, Vincent noticed that Ali was on the fringe of the conversations. Present but not central to proceedings and much, much quieter than the public persona Vincent knew from television over the previous decades.

'Would you like an autograph?' asked Ali, before handing Vincent a pre-written piece of paper with his John Hancock [signature] on it.

Several more times that afternoon, they went through the same routine and the journalist went home with four identical pieces of signed memorabilia. If a potentially enormous hotel

development was massive news for Virginia Beach and should have been Vincent's main concern as a newspaper reporter, he was too taken with Ali to get caught up in the story.

'The Muhammad I met that day was shy, reserved and, to tell the truth, a little overlooked in the business atmosphere of that day,' wrote Vincent. 'He carried a small attaché case under his arm, which he seemed to value. When I asked him what was in it, he was eager to show me. He opened it and pulled out a coloured scarf. He looked at me as if he wondered why I didn't react. Pretty quickly, I picked up on the routine. He was doing a magic trick.'

Then he did more magic tricks. And more. And each time, Vincent feigned amazement while wondering what Ali was doing with these characters. Garcia had recently denied mob ties, Hirschfeld had cost a few wealthy Virginians a lot of money with his dodgy bank. And, even as America's newspapers salivated over the extravagance of the mysterious Sheik Al-Fassi's decadent lifestyle – the Boeing 707 he chartered supposedly cost \$8,500 per hour to run – they had lately been reporting him also leaving a trail of unpaid bills in his wake.

According to Hirschfeld, the hotel would bring jobs and revenue to the city, and massive profits to the principal investors, including Ali. As a goodwill gesture, the sheikh donated \$30,000 to various Virginia Beach youth groups.

'Sadly,' concluded Vincent, 'you got the idea that the Arabian group and the other "suits" trotted Ali around for his celebrity rather than his investments. And it was sad that, somehow, I got the idea he realised it. He was very sad at that time but he was not "out of it". You get the idea that he knew fully what was happening but couldn't always control or handle it.'

* * *

Twenty-four hours later, James C. Lytle, Mayor of Evanston, Illinois, welcomed Muhammad Ali, Sheikh Mohammed Al-Fassi and an entourage of five limousines to a luncheon in the back of his home on sleepy Central Park Avenue. Just over a week before, he'd received word that the Middle Eastern billionaire wanted to make Lytle's municipality, 12 miles from downtown Chicago, the latest recipient of his philanthropic largesse. For everybody else present, the money mattered much less than the presence of Ali.

'Ali could not have been nicer to everybody,' said Lytle. 'He spent most of the luncheon with the kids from the neighbourhood who came quickly to see what was going on. He took pictures with them. Played with them. At one point, he saw my mom, who was 82 years old at the time and about 5ft 2in. He just walked right over to her, picked her up off the ground and said, "Hello, little momma!"'

If elderly Althea Lytle was, like everybody else, immediately smitten with Ali, Al-Fassi was not making quite the same impression. He brought a retinue of 40, his wife was made to walk four steps behind him, and at one point he lay in a hammock between two trees as his bodyguards gently pushed it back and forth. He did hand over a cheque for \$15,000 – \$10,000 to go to youth employment initiatives, the rest to fund beautifying Evanston.

'Most cities I go to I find financial problems,' said Al-Fassi. 'So, I help them.'

That was not quite true. It took Mayor Lytle several follow-up phone calls and, ultimately, a threat to contact others in the Al-Fassi family before the sheikh finally made good on his promise to underwrite the \$6,000 it cost to host himself and his travelling circus.

'The sheikh was the biggest jerk I've ever seen or met,' said Lytle. 'I wondered afterwards why Ali was hanging around with

this guy. As far as I knew, Ali had money. He wasn't washed up and desperate like fighters sometimes are. He was just such a decent guy to everybody he met that day that it troubled me that he was hanging out with this sheikh. Maybe Al-Fassi had some other positive characteristics to him that people only saw in private. I certainly couldn't see them.'

* * *

On 20 September, the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art hosted its first-ever fashion show when 800 invited guests got to see Rudolph Valentino unveil his new collection. Brooke Shields, Norman Mailer, Placido Domingo, Raquel Welch, Calvin Klein, Bianca Jagger and Mikhail Baryshnikov were among the great and good gathered for the occasion.

As they arrived in the building, some dawdled in the lobby to watch Muhammad Ali perform magic tricks, repeatedly making a swatch of orange chiffon appear and disappear. On the way out at the end of the evening, Ali, who'd watched the catwalk show from a front-row seat next to Klein and Jagger, returned to his earlier pitch to continue conjuring but assured reporters asking about a potential change of career that this was just 'a hobby'.

* * *

Nine thousand shoehorned into the Baltimore Civic Centre in Maryland for 'An Evening with Sugar Ray Leonard' on 9 November. A city was afforded the chance to pay homage to its greatest fighter in a show that included highlight reels, interviews with friends, family and rivals, and testimonies from Ken Norton, Marvin Hagler, Angelo Dundee and Matthew Saad Muhammad. When it came time for Howard Cosell, the master of ceremonies, to introduce Muhammad Ali, he described his old friend as 'the most important figure in boxing history'.

‘Did you say most important *figure* in boxing history or did you say most important *n******?’ asked Ali. The place erupted and that set the tone for his contribution, one journalist describing his performance full of one-liners as ‘fattish and frisky’.

‘After the Olympics, Ray asked me how he should go as a pro,’ said Ali. ‘I told him to get Angelo Dundee. He ain’t a great trainer. He ain’t a great manager. But he has the complexion and the connection to get the protection.’

More laughter. ‘I too have an announcement to make. I shall return ...’ He waited a couple of moments as the audience audibly gasped at the prospect of him unretiring yet again then delivered the punchline, ‘... to California!’

* * *

A couple of days later, a sedan pulled into the car park of the Allen Park Youth Centre in north Miami, where Angelo Dundee was working his latest stable of fighters. A passenger in the front seat saw sports journalists gathered at the entrance and smiled. ‘My writers!’ said Muhammad Ali.

None of the scribes took offence. They had too much history with the man. Ed Schuyler from the Associated Press had given a farewell address on behalf of the media at his final press conference following the defeat by Berbick. The *New York Times*’ Dave Anderson first covered him as the then Cassius Clay in March 1963.

Nineteen years later, Anderson watched a very different fighter change into his workout gear to train ahead of a tour of the Middle East that was scheduled to include three exhibition bouts. Dundee told the reporters his most famous charge had already trimmed nine pounds off his frame, was tipping the scales at 241 and doing two hours’ walking per day to supplement his training inside the ropes. ‘I’m so glad he’s going on this tour,’

said Bundini Brown. 'He's so miserable in L.A. Now he has something to do.'

Ali was adamant this wasn't a comeback, merely a way to raise money to fund the construction of mosques in America to grow the Islamic faith. 'My life just started at 40,' said Ali. 'All the boxing I did was in training for this. I'm not here training for boxing. I'm going over to those countries for donations. When I get there, I'll stop the whole city. You don't hear nothin' about Frazier, or Foreman, or Norton, or Holmes, or Cooney. But when I get to those cities, there'll be three million people at the airport. They'll be on the sides of the road going into the city. Boxing's not popular in India, boxing's not popular in Saudi Arabia. I'm workin' for the mosques, but I'm workin' for boxing, too. I'm introducing boxing to all those people. I'm still workin' for boxing.'

Then somebody raised the issue of his own financial situation. 'I got bonds and investments,' he said. 'I don't want to comment [on] how I live. Too many people out there are unemployed. I don't want to brag how much I got but I'm all right. I'm building a hotel in Virginia Beach, I'm talkin' to the King of Sudan about an oil deal.'

When Anderson pressed him about the length of the trip, Ali's response, in content and delivery, was telling. 'I'll be gone ...' he mumbled, his words clinging together as cobwebs of dust do,' wrote Anderson. 'I'll be gone six weeks.' He was counting with the fingers of his right hand. 'I'll be back November 10,' he said. 'Yeah, November 10.' 'You mean December 10, don't you?' somebody suggested. 'Yeah,' he said, looking up. 'Yeah, December 10.' 'Then you'll be away about three weeks, not six weeks.' 'Yeah,' he said slowly. 'I'll be away three weeks.'

His confusion about the calendar was less troubling than the manner of his speech. Over the course of nearly two decades covering 32 of his fights, Anderson had never heard Ali slurring

like this before. It was a troubling realisation as he watched him get in the ring and start taking punches to the headgear from 25-year-old heavyweight contender James 'Quick' Tillis.

* * *

Upon arriving at Dubai International Airport, Muhammad Ali put paid to rumours he had come to fight in the Middle East to ease his financial troubles. The purpose of the visit, he assured local media, was to raise money to build mosques in America, starting with a project in Chicago. Humble, charming and, inevitably, performing magic tricks, he lived up the advance billing of posters along the Dubai Creek Road advertising an opportunity to see 'The Greatest' fight at the Al Nasr Sports Stadium.

His travelling companions and opponents for the exhibitions were Jimmy Ellis, an old friend from Louisville who had briefly been world champion during Ali's enforced absence battling the US government over the Vietnam draft, and Reiner Hartmann, a 24-year-old German protégé who was Angelo Dundee's latest heavyweight project. At 41 and long retired, Ellis was getting a handy payday. For his trouble, Hartmann, boasting an unimpressive 6-2-1 record as a pro, was getting the inevitable spotlight that came from being in Ali's orbit.

The first exhibition against Ellis took place on Friday night, 3 December. If the attendance was enthusiastic, even at the sight of this heavier, slower version of the champ, one with severely diminished powers, the venue was far from full. 'There was no denying the admiration that Ali got from the crowd that was present at the stadium,' wrote Rangi Akbar in the *Gulf News*. 'After the bouts, he walked slowly towards the railings and fans were just content on kissing his hands. Nevertheless, one expected a much bigger attendance judging [by] Ali's worldwide popularity.'

It was a similar story two nights later when he took on Hartmann. A planned third bout was then cancelled due to poor ticket sales, and Emirati Juma Ganem, a spokesman for the promoter, said, 'It would be a rank injustice to a great boxer to make him work hard without having anyone appreciate it.'