

Blanchette: Muhammad Ali shook up world with his special gifts

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The first person to expose my limited insight into sports was my older sister, Michelle. Well, her and Muhammad Ali.

I was 8. I knew everything there was to know about boxing from Gillette's Friday Night Fights and Ring Magazine, which I would scan each month at a downtown newsstand – before inevitably settling on a comic book. So I was convinced, along with 90 percent of America, that in their heavyweight championship fight of 1964, Sonny Liston was going to take out a vainglorious clown named Cassius Clay in one round, providing the challenger didn't puddle beneath Sonny's glare at the weigh-in first.

My sister, who I'm not sure ever watched a fight before or since, bet me otherwise. I never inquired about the tenets of her faith.

The news that I would be a dollar poorer that February night – no comics for a couple of months – was delivered by transistor radio as I fudged my school-night bedtime. Later I would be riveted by the photos and films – Liston quitting on his stool, Ali (the name change came a week later) hectoring the ringside press from the ropes, the new champ raving to a TV interviewer, "I'm pretty!"

"Hold it, you're not that pretty," the interviewer protested.

"I'm a bad man! I shook up the world!"

But the real world-shaking would occur over the next 50-some years. The last of it happened on Friday night – Ali dead at age 74 after being hospitalized with respiratory complications, and a world which knows full well that everyone loses the last fight still unprepared to let go.

There was never room on this terra for more than one Ali, and now the position can never be filled.

Ali, gone.

We are left with the memories and the legend – the silly, extemporaneous verse, the indelible ring grace, the warrior for social justice and individual freedoms and, sadly, how too much of America wanted him behind bars for what he stood for.

We have butterflies and bees, rope-a-dope, the savagery of Manila, the dark carnival of Zaire and, especially, the charisma that was so overwhelming that it could not be conquered by the Parkinson's that ravaged his body for 25 years.

We have the laughter and the pain, our wonder and our shame. We have the echo.

But we don't have Ali.

And how badly we need one. Instead, we are left to make do with Money Mayweathers and assorted human logos and shoe lines who find it perfectly reasonable to think of themselves as brands. Many are admirable enough souls, but not one is a cross-cultural beacon.

And none of them can rhyme.

He needed to be the greatest in the ring to grab our attention, but once that was done he was simply The Greatest and the boxing was the least of what he was -- particularly after the Thrilla, the last showdown with Joe Frazier, which left them both physical shells.

That was more than 40 years ago, and while we'll be left to explain Ali to generations unborn, it's remarkable how his essence is understood by millennials, and even the iGeneration. Finding a poster-sized reproduction of Neil Leifer's iconic photo of Ali menacing the beaten and befuddled Liston on my son's bedroom wall was certainly a revelation.

If we despaired that the Parkinson's had muted his rhymes, it didn't so much matter. We were still privy to occasional wisdom, and always to his dignity. And his shortcomings made him even more of us, rather than apart. His public cruelty to Frazier, for example, was not only beneath him, it was downright Trumpian -- and he was not afraid to make his regrets public.

Even beacons must recharge their light.

And over time, it burned brighter -- never more so than at the 1996 Olympics, when he emerged at the top of the stairs to light the cauldron. He trembled as the flame struggled to take hold, and we trembled with him -- and then we all, everywhere, carried a little flame with us.

And I mean everywhere. In Butte, Montana, a friend would meet his pals for coffee daily at the Met Tavern. He drove up one morning to find, pacing the parking lot and chatting on one of those old brick-sized cellphones, none other than Evel Knievel -- and yes, this anecdote is already on its way to a world championship for name-dropping.

"Champ, I want you to say hello to a friend of mine," Knievel said into the phone, and passed it along.

At the other end of the connection, of course, was Muhammad Ali.

Ali asked my friend if he'd grown up with Knievel in Butte, which he had, and then asked his name.

"Fraser MacDonald," Ali was informed.

There was a pause on Ali's end, but not long enough to telegraph what was coming.

"And down goes Fraser!" Ali hollered into the phone, his impression of Howard Cosell as on the money as a stiff jab.

It shook up my friend's world. It was Muhammad Ali's very special gift.