

Bill Rea ? My loss and the world?s

?I've made my share of mistakes along the way, but if I have changed even one life for the better, I haven't lived in vain.?

Muhammad Ali

I was half expecting the news when I got up Saturday morning.

Nevertheless, I still had the feeling that I had been sucker-punched in the gut when I read that Muhammad Ali had died.

We all have to deal with the deaths of people, some of them close to us and some who we have never met. For example, this incident came almost exactly one week after my aunt died.

Not exactly the same thing, as far as most of you are concerned. Although from my point of view, there are similarities.

My aunt's death was a personal thing, and as is the case with most deaths in the family, it will take a bit of time to come to terms with. In that case, those dealing with the matter included her daughter (my cousin), who is an only child, my brother and myself, along with my wife. My brother, who lives in Toronto, assisted with the arrangements, and I was asked to deliver the eulogy.

The family came together, as did friends. My aunt died about six weeks shy of her 93rd birthday, so she had outlived most (not all) of her contemporaries, but there were many friends who came out, including a lot of neighbours. Last Wednesday's visitation almost took on the atmosphere of a street party. My main regret was she was missing it. She would have loved it.

So as friends, neighbours and family come together when some one close to us goes, the world community comes together when we lose a giant, and that was the case with Ali.

His was a strange life, which saw him, about 50 years ago, being despised by most decent people. The six-year-old boy who was myself was led to believe that a bad man, named Cassius Clay, had somehow wronged a nice man named Sonny Liston.

From reading I have done in the years since, Liston was not a nice man. In fact, he got his start as a petty criminal, not too surprising, considering the upbringing he endured.

?The only thing my old man ever gave me was a beating,? he was quoted as saying.

On the other hand, the word ?character? pops into my head when I think of Ali, on two levels.

Certainly he was a character. Anyone lucky enough to watch the byplay that used to go on between him and the late Howard Cosell would have agreed in a second.

And there's no question he was a man of character. True, he could be obnoxious sometimes, and even cruel, as Floyd Patterson (among others) learned the hard way.

But he was also known as a man who stood on principle when the cost of such a stand was enormous.

Ali resisted being drafted in 1967. He was stripped of his heavyweight championship titles and denied the ability to earn a living in the only trade he knew. Part of the issue was he was not prepared to fight in Vietnam.

?I got no quarrel with them Vietcong.?' he was quoted as saying (there are different versions of that quote, but the message is always clear)

How many of us would have taken a stand like that, especially if we had so much to lose? We all like to think we would have, and we probably would initially. Then just about all of us would start rationalizing and reconsidering. And we would eventually cave.

But Ali didn't cave.

He could have come to Canada, as many young men in his position did (I've met a couple of them over the years).

Ali stood his ground and said ?no.?' And I think it inspired a lot of other people to say ?no,?' helping them find the courage to do just that.

That made many people very angry. But it also drew him considerable respect. He represented a degree of social consciousness that was different from anything that had ever been seen. There was a feeling that many things that had been taken for granted for years were no longer acceptable, be it positions on race or positions on going to fight a war in Vietnam.

By the time I was in my teens, I was starting to appreciate what Ali represented. I was still too young for really deep thinking, but I could appreciate a very good boxer when I saw one, and there's no doubt that's what Ali was.

My father, who had followed the sport since he was a kid, and I used to discuss issues like who was the greatest heavyweight of all time. He, of course, had a certain advantage, having seen more than 30 years that I had missed. He sometimes lamented the fact that Ali had been the only real champion I had seen, so I had no reference points, while he could draw comparisons between the likes of Joe Louis or Rocky Marciano. For reasons I never completely understood, he seemed to have little use for Joe Frazier (since I was still a kid, it never occurred to me to ask why).

I believe the ultimate Ali fight was his third one with Frazier, commonly known as the Thrilla in Manila.

Going into that fight, each man knew his opponent very well. Each man knew he was capable of beating his opponent, and that his

opponent was capable of beating him. And I think each man knew the loser would likely never get another shot at the title. And I don't think either man was quite the same again.

Cosell wrote about meeting Frazier not long after the fight.

'I hit him with blows that would have crushed walls, Howard, and he wouldn't go down.'

Ali won on a TKO. Frazier's face was swollen to the point he was virtually blind. But Ali's condition was not much better. He told his cornermen to cut his gloves off.

'Frazier quit just before I did,' Ali was quoted as saying. 'I didn't think I could fight any more.'

There was more to Ali than his boxing or activism.

Cosell, in his last book, *What's Wrong With Sports* (highly recommended reading), related a couple of anecdotes.

My favourite dealt with Ali touring a women's prison. He worked his way down the line, occasionally kissing an inmate. Someone noticed he was kissing only the ugly ones.

'For the rest of their lives, they can say 'Muhammad Ali kissed me,'' he later explained.

I will think of my aunt often in the time to come, and miss her, remembering the many happy times. The world will think of Ali often, and remember what he accomplished and represented.

In a couple of paragraphs, I have written about a woman I loved very much and a man I admired and respected very much. They are both now gone. But as I reflect on them, there is a big smile on my face, and much gladness in my heart.

