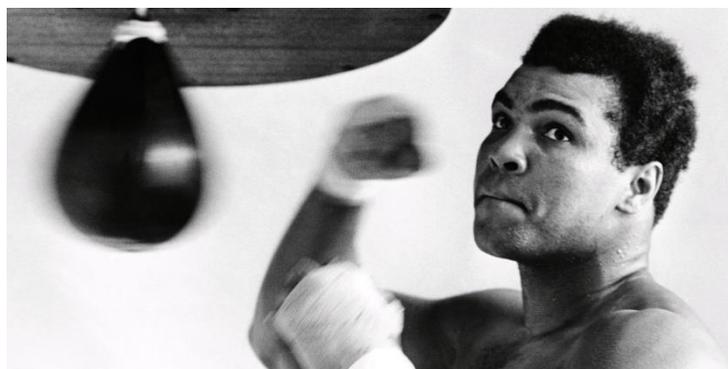


## Chapter Four

### The Boxer, 1971



**If** you remember him at all, you may remember Mark Belanger as the winner of eight Gold Glove Awards at shortstop for the world champion Baltimore Orioles between 1969 and 1978. I remember him as a basketball player at Pittsfield High School where he led the PHS Generals deep into the New England High School Basketball Championship in 1962.

My dad was a teacher at PHS. Clapp Park was a short walk from our home on West Housatonic Street, and we went to many home baseball games. I didn't particularly enjoy baseball, but I would sit with my dad in the bleachers right next to first base. One afternoon, Mark Belanger threw a rare miscue. Typically, I wasn't paying attention, and the wayward ball struck me hard on the right cheek bone. I escaped with a shiner, but was proud to tell the kids at school the next day that it was Mark Belanger who nailed me.

Growing up in Massachusetts during the dynasty years of Red Auerbach's Boston Celtics, I liked basketball much more than I liked baseball. I never saw a game in

Boston Garden, but I went to all the Pittsfield High School basketball games to watch Mark Belanger who I was certain would one day wear the Celtic shamrock on his jersey. We always showed up at the games early because my dad was a ticket taker at the old National Armory where PHS used to play its games before moving to the new gym at the Boys' Club on Melville Street. The Armory was a smoky venue, but it didn't seem to bother the players or the fans.

This isn't about basketball or baseball. It's about boxing, and I am finally getting to it ....

My first direct exposure to pugilism was in Bobo Dapson's backyard under the apple tree – more ancient than Bobo, even. My dad came up with the great idea that the best way for my older brother and me to resolve our insignificant differences was with boxing gloves. He acquired two pairs using my mother's S&H Green Stamps.

One summer evening, thick, white smoke rose from the bench beneath Bobo's apple tree as he huffed on his pipe and my dad puffed on a Lucky Strike to ward off mosquitoes. As Bobo and my dad talked about the hot, sticky weather, my brother and I engaged in a trivial argument, the topic of which is far beyond memory. When we didn't stop after two "knock-it-offs" from my dad, he directed us to sit on the bench with Bobo. He walked to our house next door and retrieved the unused, fire engine red boxing gloves and strapped a pair on each of our hands. "You wanna argue?" he queried. "Do it with your fists." Bobo chuckled.

My brother drew first – and last – blood. Neither of us had a clue what to do, so he decided to wail and flail on my skinny frame in windmill fashion. I must have gone down a half-dozen times. My dad and Bobo laughed so hard they nearly fell off that bench to join me on the ground.

"Okay, that's enough," my dad finally came to my rescue. "Just remember, I've got these gloves in the closet. You want to argue? Do it with the gloves." My Unscathed brother was undeterred, but I was inclined not to argue any more, at least not within earshot of my dad.

After every Friday night basketball game at the Armory, we rushed home in the old Studebaker to watch the fight on the Gillette Cavalcade of Sports that later evolved into the Fight of the Week. My dad rarely turned the lights on. He'd race through the house to the TV and switch it on. No remote control back then, and, as I recall, we only received two, maybe three channels on the giant antenna that waved atop the roof trying to lure in the stations 40 miles away from Albany, and, with any luck, some fuzzy pictures from New York City. My dad was happy to have the fight of the week, and my brother and I were content to watch the Popeye cartoon show with the Old Skipper followed by the Early Show that featured all the Johnny Weissmuller "Tarzan" movies. Back to boxing ...

The Armory meteorological atmosphere was nothing compared to the fog of pollution that sat motionless above the ring at Madison Square Garden or whatever other venue the fight might originate from. I suppose to create the same aura at the Garden, my dad would light up an unfiltered Lucky Strike as he sat in his lumpy chair. It's a wonder he lived to be 93, of course he traded in cigarettes for cigars, then pipes, and finally kicked the habit. I wonder what he would think about paying \$8 for a pack of cigarettes today?

As we conserved electricity, the dark room was illuminated only by the glow of the 16-inch black and white Admiral television set. My brother and I sat on the linoleum floor with a bowl of popcorn and leaned forward, moving our heads to the rhythm of the Gillette razor song. Though neither me or my brother knew anything about razors yet, we knew the words, “To look sharp, and feel sharp, too, choose a razor that is built for you ....”

Personal experience at the hands of my older brother taught me that boxing was a painful sport, certainly more painful than most. I admit, though, that I enjoyed watching those old fights. Then along comes Cassius Clay ...

We followed the Olympic games as much as was possible and out of the 1960 games in Rome emerged one of the greatest Peace Heroes to walk the earth, then, Cassius Clay, now, Muhammad Ali, R.I.P. The brash fighter’s unorthodox style was exciting to watch as his feet and fists moved faster than any man’s before or since. Yes, indeed, he could “float like a butterfly, sting like a bee!”

In the early 1960’s, I collected motion picture soundtracks when they were composed – not written – by the greats like Miklos Rozsa, Alfred Newman, Dimitri Tiomkin and Elmer Bernstein. I secured my stash at Sammy Vincent’s on North Street. My mother supported my choice of music because it kept me away from the sinful likes of the Beatles, the Animals, and The Beach Boys. That would change.

One afternoon as I sauntered into Sammy’s looking for Elmer Bernstein’s soundtrack to “The Great Escape,” my attention was drawn to an album cover with a picture of Cassius Clay dressed in a tuxedo. “I AM THE GREATEST” was sprawled across the top. I could have cared less what was on that album. I had to have it.

Six months after the album was released, six months after all the talking Cassius Clay recorded for the world to hear and for kids like me to memorize and take to heart, Cassius Clay the underdog soundly defeated Sonny Liston, converted to Islam and changed his name to Muhammad Ali. He did what he said he would do. Cassius Clay, now Muhammad Ali was the Heavyweight Boxing Champion of the World.

I loved the man. I loved the athlete, the best at his sport, and I loved the confidence with which he spoke and acted. Muhammad Ali was a man of conviction.

Three years later as the Vietnam War escalated and U.S. involvement went out of control, Ali refused to be inducted into the armed forces. He was arrested, convicted of draft evasion and stripped of his title. I followed his actions with great interest as I considered my own future.

Though I wanted to play basketball at Syracuse University, my parents steered me toward the United States Air Force Academy, and that is where I went. I share that path with the late, great Harry Chapin, the difference being that I went to the Blue Zoo and graduated; Harry bailed out after the first summer. I think he made the right choice for him and the millions like me who still remember the words to “Taxi.”

As a warrior-in-training, I was not supposed to like a draft dodger like Muhammad Ali, but I did. I couldn’t help myself despite my mother’s use of the N-word whenever Ali entered conversation. I am certain it was my affinity to Muhammad Ali that helped me grow out of the use of that word, a practice that demeaned me far more than it did anyone I directed the word at. As I watched Ali stand firm on his belief, I took stock of my own.

In 1969 during my junior year at USAFA, I befriended a self-taught guitar player. His name was Leonard Slazinski. We called him Slaz. Slaz was a good shit, as we say, a friend to all. One evening as I approached his dorm room, I was greeted by a gruesome picture he had taped to his closed door. It was one of the first published photos of the My Lai massacre. The image struck with the force of a 2x4. Most of us paid no attention to the reports of the troubling incident detailing atrocities committed by Company C, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 20<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 11<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 23<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division that resulted in over 500 Vietnamese civilian casualties, men, women and children. Slaz was different. He did pay attention, and he felt shame at his potential role in a military machine that could commit such a vile act. Few of us shared his moral integrity and courage. I regret that today. Within 30 days of taping that picture to his door, Slaz was dismissed from the Air Force Academy as a conscientious objector. I was humbled by his courage to stand up for his beliefs and convictions, the same conviction and courage that stripped Muhammad Ali of his title.

I recall Ali's simple, direct and blunt statement to the press, "I ain't got no quarrel with those Vietcong." I didn't either, but I was being trained to 'Kill Commie's for Christ,' and I was prepared to do it if I had to.

Half a century later, Slaz is a successful physician and we continue to correspond ....

In 1967, every Air Force Academy freshman – commonly referred to as a 'smack' – was required to take a PE course in boxing. That course was more dreaded than 'Aerospace Tower Leaping.' No one likes to get beat up. For 10 weeks, we learned and practiced traditional boxing techniques. Having survived the course, an unlucky few were tagged to represent their squadrons in intramural boxing, held on winter afternoons after class.

In the winter of my discontent as a sophomore, Louie Luallin, a senior and captain of our squadron boxing team asked me to fight as the light heavyweight for 32<sup>nd</sup> Squadron. We were trained not to say "no," so there I was during the first fight of the season facing 7<sup>th</sup> Squadron's Wing Open defending champion, experienced senior Jesus "Lizard Man" Salas. Woe is me! We're talking a savage beast who snarled – rather hissed (reptiles hiss, they don't snarl) – at me from the opposite corner. He didn't appear to be afraid of me. I don't think he liked me, either.

I had several inches on Jesus, but he had two years of competitive boxing experience on me and a mean streak that would drive a rattlesnake back to its hole. I fought the fight, all three, 60-second rounds, but Jesus had his way and crucified me. To my credit, I stayed on my feet, but I walked from the ring covered in the blood that flowed freely from my broken nose. The traditional skills I learned as a freshman failed me.

"Don't worry," Louie told me. "You'll do better next time." Next time? You mean I have to do this again?

Up until the shellacking I took at the fists of Jesus Salas, I hadn't thought much about Ali who remained in exile, but as I shadowed boxed in front of a mirror the next afternoon staring at my swollen nose that ballooned between by black eyes, it occurred to me that when I fought Jesus, I trudged around the ring like that big, slow bear, Sonny Liston, not more than a stationary target, a punching bag of flesh and bone.

I smiled when I lowered my arms to my waist. That's where Ali carries his gloves. I rose to my toes and began to dance like the Champ. I felt fluid. I felt good. I imagined myself floating like that butterfly. I whipped out my left arm and jabbed. I can do it. I can sting like a bee, too!

Thirty-second squadron rolled through the remainder of the season in fine fashion. I did not suffer another loss, and I didn't lose any more blood, which was as important to me as the results in the win/loss column. When the winter campaign ended, we were fighting for the Wing Championship and our worthy opponents once again, Lizard Man's feared 7<sup>th</sup> Squadron. As well as I had been boxing since my previous ass-whooping at the fists of Jesus Salas, I had no desire whatsoever to enter the ring with Jesus in the opposite corner.

I starved myself for the week prior to the match so I could drop a weight class. I figured I had beat the system until the afternoon of the championship when I dragged my 6'4" frame, now clothed in 167 skinny pounds into the gym. I couldn't believe it. Slotted to fight at 167 pounds for 7<sup>th</sup> squadron ... Jesus Salas! I could not escape his fists of steel. At that time in my life, I believed God's love was conditional. Clearly, I had done something terribly wrong, and God would take his vengeance with the fists of his Son's namesake!

Jesus had not given me much thought after destroying me in our first bout. I sensed his confusion in the opening round as he stalked me around the 16' x 16' enclosure while I danced nervously, first right, then left, trying to be unpredictable. I continued to imagine myself as Ali, a generous task at my 167 dwindling pounds. The bell ended the first of three 90-second rounds (championship rounds were extended an additional 30 seconds).

"You're doing good," Louie told me as I sat on the squat, wooden stool in my corner.

"Good? Ain't neither one of us has thrown a punch yet," I replied, which indeed was accurate.

I batted down my own hatches knowing too well that our leathered fists would fly at a furious pace in the second round. I was not disappointed. We exchanged blows, jabbed and countered for two minutes, but neither Jesus or I connected with a solid punch until the final 15 seconds. Jesus reared back with a massive right aimed at my head, which I offered Ali-like to lure him in. As he released his nuclear-charged fist, I leaned back and avoided the leather, which passed dangerously close before my field of vision. I had created a clear shot at Jesus' glaring scowl. I threw my best punch, and my right landed with power as the bell rang.

I winced and immediately returned to my corner, holding my right hand under my left armpit. "I think I broke my thumb," I grimaced, but Louie paid no attention as he grinned from ear to ear while the large crowd gathered around the ring cheered. I turned and saw Jesus sitting on his keister holding his right shoulder.

With renewed confidence and urged on by my classmates and teammates, I called to Jesus with inflated bravado, "Get up!" I shook my fist menacingly and raised my arms, broken thumb be damned. Of course, the one thing I didn't anticipate .... He answered my challenge and struggled to his feet holding his arm in obvious pain.

I turned back to my corner and pleaded with Louie again, "I think we need to end this. My thumb is broken."

“Don’t worry about your thumb,” he replied as he stared into my eyes, holding my head in his hands. “You got him! Understand. You got him! The way he’s holding that shoulder, I’d say he’s pulled it or worse. Do the same thing you just did. Give him a free shot, but don’t get hit. When his glove flies by your face, nail him like you just did!”

I stared across the ring. Jesus glared back.

The bell announced the third round and each of us moved to the center of the ring. With my hands lowered, I leaned forward and offered the bait. I sensed Jesus had one good shot left. He reared back and threw a haymaker.

I don’t remember if I hit him or not. All I know is that the momentum of his swing sent him to the canvas. His shoulder was clearly dislocated. Jesus’ corner did the right thing and threw in the towel. It was over.

While I boxed two more years with success, those two fights with Jesus Salas are forever embedded in my mind, much like the fight on March 8, 1971, the Fight of the Century ....

Even as a senior upperclassman with less than 100 days until graduation, my classmates and I were not allowed off the Academy grounds on weeknights, at least that was the way it was in 1971. March 8 fell on a Monday night that year, and that was the night when two undefeated boxers would fight for the heavyweight championship of the world. It was the first time two undefeated boxers ever fought for the crown, and there were none better than the two who would step into the ring that night, Muhammad Ali, the Champ, and Smokin’ Joe Frazier. Ali’s conviction for draft evasion remained in appeals, but strong, anti-war sentiment grew steadily across the American landscape.

It was well known at the Academy that I was a Muhammad Ali fan and I was ecstatic when the Bijou theater in Colorado Springs announced that it would show the fight live on closed-circuit television. The problem was, the fight was scheduled on a Monday night.

My AOC – Air Officer Commanding – at 29<sup>th</sup> Squadron for my final two years at the Blue Zoo was Major Bob – “Uncle Bob” – Hohlstein. He knew I was an Ali fan and claimed I mimicked some of the Champ’s verbal swagger on the fields of friendly strife. When I asked if my two friends Nick Hauck, Hal Sauer and I could get his blessing to attend the fight, Major “H” shook his head with his best “Uncle Bob” smile and said, “Go ahead, I know it’s a big deal to you!”

Nick, Hal and I headed downtown on that Monday night in Nick’s 1969, 396 cubic-inch, black striped, gold Malibu SS, the envy of the cadet wing. I remember that Nick honked a few times as we watched the cadet chapel shrink in his rearview mirror.

The price of a ticket to watch the fight on the big screen at the Bijou was twenty bucks, which is about \$125 today. When we walked in, the screen was blank, the theater packed and a thick layer of smoke hung in the rafters. When the picture came up, it was not high definition by any standards, but we didn’t care. We were there and a part of it.

The fight went the full 15 rounds and not a man – I don’t remember a woman or child – used his \$20 seat. Everyone was on his feet, clenched fists raised and shouting encouragement, some for Ali, some for the machine-like Joe Frazier. We got our money’s worth and then some.

Ali danced, taunted and shuffled for the first four rounds and peppered Smokin' Joe with his deadly left jab, but Joe never backed off and kept moving forward with swollen eyes and knots on his forehead. With head lowered like a fighting bull, he delivered powerful shots to the Champ's body, and his work effort began to take its toll. Ali's three-year suspension began to show as his movement slowed, no longer a jitterbug, more like a waltz.

Joe gained confidence as the fight moved through the middle rounds, and Ali had no choice but to tie up in clinches to keep the beast at bay.

I found myself cheering less. The thought of a three-year suspension in the prime of Ali's boxing life couldn't be overlooked, and it hurt. Still, my respect for Joe Frazier grew with each round. Then it happened.

As the bell signaled the start of the 15<sup>th</sup> and final round, referee Arthur Mecante brought the two fighters to the center of the ring and they touched gloves. I found that moment magical after watching these two champions do their best to punish each other through 42 minutes. Knowing that he probably trailed on the scorecards, Ali opened with series of jabs and quick combinations, but Joe continued to move forward, weathering the storm as he had all night.

Thirty seconds in, they clinch, exhausted. Mecante instructs, "Step back." They do. Ali throws a body punch. Joe counters with a mighty left hook that solidly finds Ali's jaw and sends him to the mat, flat on his back.

Bedlam rocks the Bijou. Popcorn flies. Ali does not belabor the knockdown. He rises quickly to his feet and leans in the corner to take his mandatory eight-count. He cannot hide the disappointment on his face.

The fighters move back to the center of the ring. Joe moving forward, ever forward, Ali fighting back gamely but there is no sting to his punches. They clinch for the final thirty seconds. Neither has energy left. They have given their all, two proud men, but each knows the inevitable outcome. Joe Frazier wins the Heavyweight Boxing Championship of the World by unanimous decision.

Nick, Hal and I shuffle through the crowd. Most of them will find their way to a local tavern where they will relive the fight of the century. We have another calling and drive back to school. I don't have much to say.

We arrive at our dorm well after "Taps" has sounded, and the halls are dark and quiet. I still remember that night when Ali went down. I still remember getting hit in the head by Mark Belanger's errant throw. I remember being schooled by my brother under Bobo's apple tree and the crushing blows I took from Jesus Salas ... and I still remember Muhammad Ali who passed away this year. He will always be The Champ.

"How was fight?" Major Hohlstein asks me at breakfast the next morning.

"Best fight I ever saw. It was the fight of the century," I reply.

"Your man lost. I read he went down in the 15<sup>th</sup> round."

"Nobody loses in a fight like that," I hope I said. "He's still the Greatest. He'll always be the Champ."

Major "H" smiles. "I'm glad you got to see the fight."

"Thanks," I tell him as he puts a firm hand on my shoulder. "I am, too."

