'He will never die': World mourns Ali

SAN FRANCISCO: Tributes to Muhammad Ali poured in from across the sporting, cultural and political world after his death at age 74 with many saying there would never be another one like "The Greatest." Ali was fondly remembered not just as a heavyweight boxing icon but also for his fight for social justice, while others recalled his warmth and generosity, how he was equally at home with presidents and people on the streets. George Foreman, Ali's most famous knockout victim from the Rumble in the Jungle, noted Ali's other main rival, Joe Frazier, in tweeting: "Ali, Frazier and Foreman... we were one guy. A part of me slipped away, the greatest piece."

The front page headline on Ali's hometown newspaper, the Courier-Journal of Louisville, Kentucky, simply said, "The Greatest," with a legendary 1965 photo of Ali standing over a flattened Sonny Liston. "We lost a legend, a hero and a great man," said Floyd Mayweather, who retired last year as an unbeaten welterweight champion. "He's one of the guys who paved the way for me to be where I'm at. Words can't explain what Muhammad Ali did for the sport." Another former world heavyweight champion, Mike Tyson, tweeted: "God came for his champion. So long great one. The Greatest. RIP."

Don King, who promoted the Rumble in the Jungle, said Ali will live on forever alongside other US civil rights heroes. "He was tremendous, not just a boxer, a great human being, an icon," King said. "Muhammad Ali's spirit, like Martin Luther King Jr., will live on. That's why Muhammad Ali will never die." Ali spoke out for African-American civil rights in the 1960s, carrying on his fight against injustice and sacrificing the prime years of his own career in the process. "When people saw what he had done for what he believed in, threw away three-and-a-half years of his career and he remained steadfast, he came through all of that bigger and more important than ever before," boxing promoter Bob Arum said.

Transcending sport

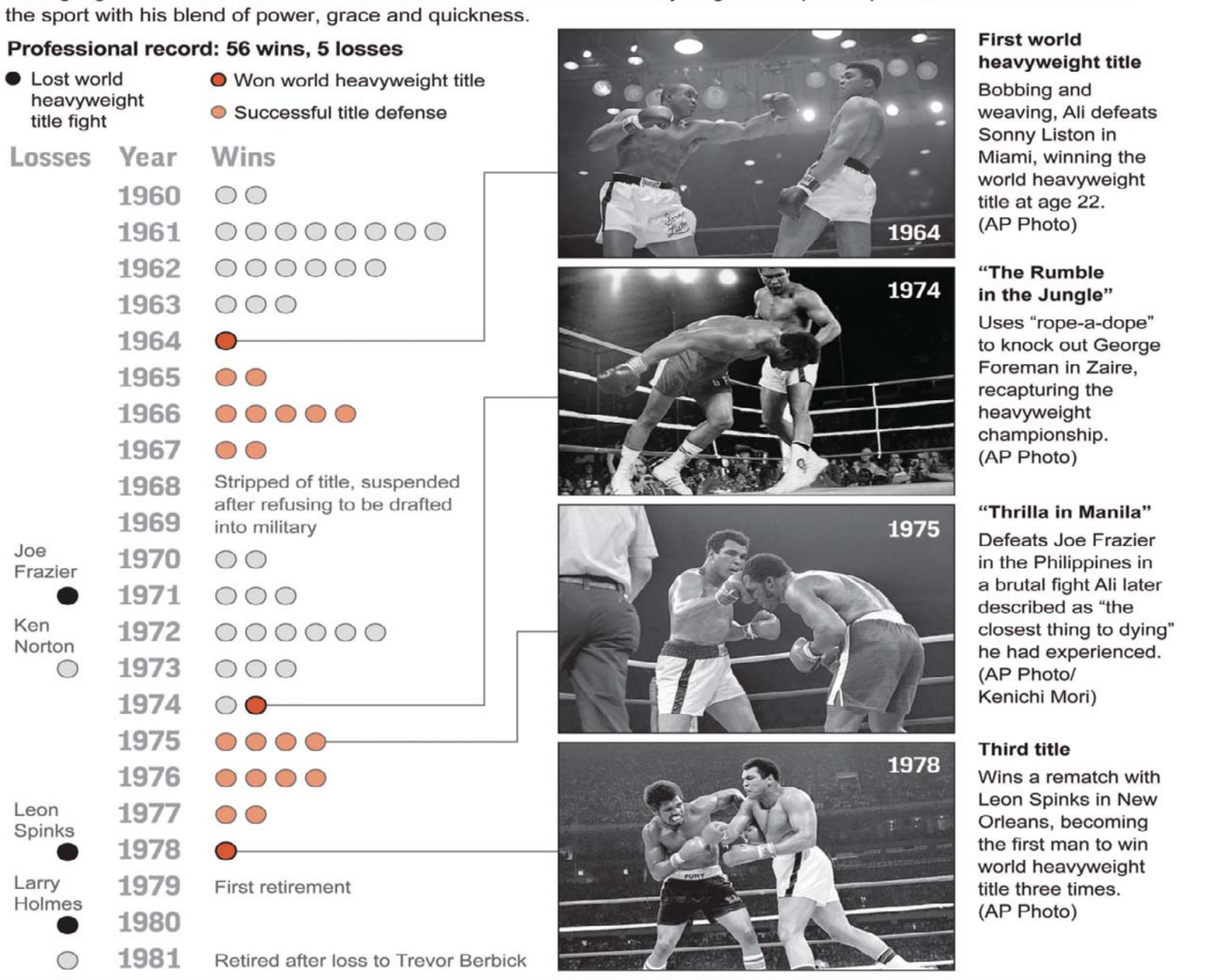
Reflecting Ali's reach far beyond boxing, many of the biggest names in world politics also remembered a man who stuck up for his beliefs-and for those less influential than himself. The Nelson Mandela Foundation said Ali had been Mandela's hero. "Nelson Mandela, a boxing enthusiast most of his life, acknowledged Ali as his boxing hero. Madiba had great respect for his legacy and spoke with admiration of Ali's achievements," said Sello Hatang, chief executive of the foundation. Mandela's favorite book at his office-where there was a photo of the two men together-was an autographed copy of an Ali biography, the organization said.

Former US president Bill Clinton said he had been "honored" to award Ali the Presidential Citizens Medal at the White House in January 2001, just before leaving office. "Through triumph and trials," Clinton said, Ali "became even greater than his legend." "We watched him grow from the brash self-confidence of youth and success into a manhood full of religious and political convictions that led him to make tough choices and live with the consequences." Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called Ali "an extraordinary athlete and a remarkable man of good deeds who conquered the hearts of millions." "Boxing legend Muhammad Ali's life-long struggle against racism and discrimination will never be forgotten," he wrote on Twitter.

'Touched hearts'

The sporting world also united to remember one of its biggest names. Retired NBA all-time scoring leader Kareem Abdul-Jabbar praised Ali's courage in fighting discrimination. "At a time when blacks who spoke up about injustice were labeled uppity and often arrested, Muhammad willingly sacrificed the best years of his career to stand tall and fight for what he believed was right," said Abdul-Jabbar. "In doing so, he made all Americans, black and white, stand taller. I may be 7-feet-2 but I never felt taller than when standing in his shadow."

Ali won an Olympic gold medal in 1960 and lit the torch at the 1996 Olympic opening ceremony. Thomas Bach, president of the International Olympic Committee, said Ali-who had been battling Parkinson's disease for decades-"was an athlete who touched the hearts of people across the globe, an athlete who was engaged beyond sport, an athlete who had the courage to give hope to so many suffering illness by lighting the Olympic cauldron and not hiding his own affliction." Former England football captain David Beckham called Ali "the greatest there will ever be." "The biggest and the best," Beckham said on Instagram. — AFP



A data visualization and timeline of the boxing career of Muhammad Ali.

Ali made Jungle Rumble by flattening Foreman

LOS ANGELES: Boxing icon Muhammad Ali, known simply as "The Greatest," captured the greatest victory of his career in 1974 by knocking out George Foreman to win the "Rumble in the Jungle." Ali flattened the previously undefeated champion at 2:58 of the eighth round at Kinshasa in what was then Zaire but is now the Democratic Republic of Congo.

In addition to an epic effort that displayed his boxing gifts, the triumph touched upon the role of Ali-who died on Friday at age 74 - as a cultural hero. He reclaimed the world heavyweight crown he had not held since being banned from boxing in 1967 for refusing to fight in the Vietnam War, a conviction overturned by the US Supreme Court in 1971. Using his now-legendary "Rope-A-Dope" strategy, Ali played upon fears that at 32 he might be seriously overmatched by the larger, more intimidating and younger Foreman, the 25-year-old who entered the ring at 40-0 with 37 knockouts.

Ali leaned on the ropes and covered up while Foreman pounded away at him, his deflected blows doing minimal damage while spending precious energy. Ali taunted the champion into swinging away as the rounds wore on that October night while the crowd chanted "Ali boma ye" (Kill him, Ali). Foreman began to tire while Ali started landing fast jabs and hard punches. In the eighth round, Ali connected with a lightning-bolt right hand and Foreman stumbled to the canvas, beaten for the first time. "Muhammad amazed me," Foreman said. "I'll admit it. He out-thought me. He out-fought me. That night, he was just the better man in the ring."

Poetry in motion

In the run-up to the fight, Ali uttered some of the most magical of his rhyming quips. Among them: "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee - his hands can't hit what his eyes can't see." "I'm so fast that last night I turned off the light switch in my hotel room and got into bed before the room was dark." "I done something new for this fight. I done rassled with an alligator. I done tussled with a whale. I handcuffed lightning, I thrown thunder in jail. "Only last week I murdered a rock, injured a stone, hospitalized a brick. I'm so mean I make medicine sick."

'Bigger than boxing'

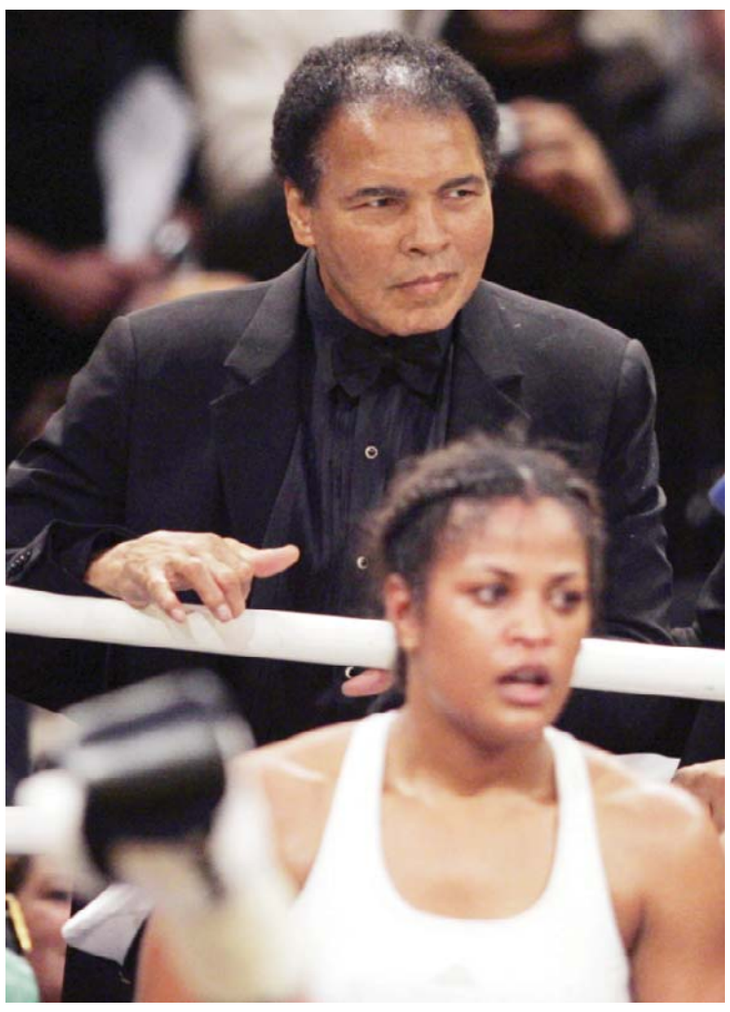
Ali was diagnosed in 1984 with Parkinson's disease, which ended the snappy banter that had been his trademark. Foreman, who needed 20 years to regain the crown, could not deny Ali's greatness. "Muhammad Ali has always been bigger than boxing," Foreman said in a 2014 essay on his website. "I say Ali was the greatest man because there has never been a man so young and so good at what he did, give up so much," he added. "I say boxing is too small for Muhammad Ali. He changes the very world. No other boxer could do that."— AFP

In this Nov 9, 2005 file photo, President Bush presents the Presidential Medal of Freedom to boxer Muhammad Ali in the East Room of the White House. — AP

India's Kom tearfully recalls 'inspiration' Ali

NEW DELHI: Indian boxing star Mary Kom mourned her "inspiration" Muhammad Ali in a tearful interview yesterday, after news of the legendary boxer's death was confirmed by his family. The 74-year-old sports hero, who had battled Parkinson's disease for decades, died Friday in a hospital in Phoenix, Arizona. "Most of the boxers are inspired by him," Kom told television network NDTV by telephone. "Me also, I was inspired by him to take up boxing, his struggles and the hard work he took in his boxing career," she said, her voice breaking audibly. Kom, 33, is a former five-time world champion and one of India's most successful sports stars.

She is reportedly seeking wildcard entry to the Rio Olympics after devastating fans by losing a crucial qualifying bout in Kazakhstan last month. "We feel very, very sad that he is no more. We will always remember his contribution to boxing... I will always remember him and keep him in my heart," she said. A boxing official told AFP this week that India has asked the sport's world association for a wildcard spot at the Olympics after Kom lost in the second round at the Women's World Boxing Championships. A mother of three, she hails from a poor family in the long-neglected and remote northeastern state of Manipur. Her life inspired a Bollywood biopic in 2014 called "Mary Kom". — AFP



Muhammad Ali looks at his daughter Laila after she won a non-title fight against Asa Maria Sandell from Sweden, in Berlin, Germany in this file photo. — AP

Muhammad Ali knocked out by Parkinson's disease

PARIS: One of Muhammad Ali's greatest battles was not in the ring but against Parkinson's disease, which severely hampered his speech and motor skills in the last three decades of his life. For many specialists, the crippling neurological disorder was no accident, but the tragic result of Ali's years as a boxer.

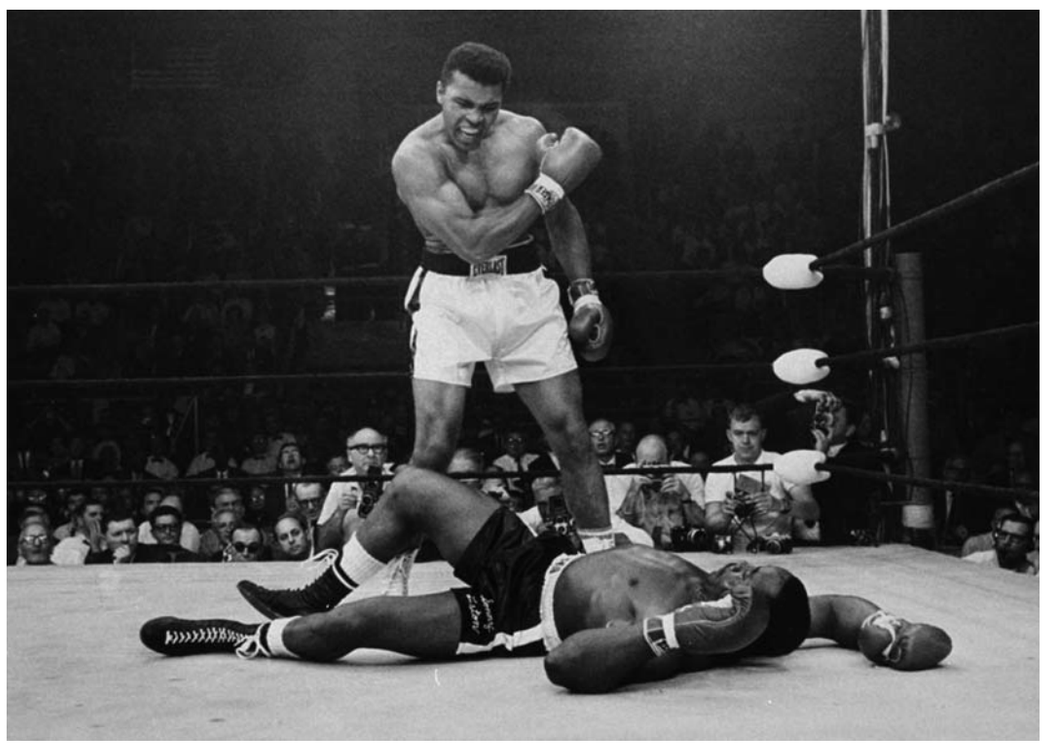
Ali was diagnosed with Parkinson's in 1984 at the age of 42, three years after he retired with 61 professional bouts under his belt. At the time, experts spoke of "dementia pugilistica" or "punch-drunk syndrome" to describe brain damage seen in sportspeople who sustain multiple concussions over the course of their careers. "We cannot say anything decisively but there are strong suspicions," Andre Monroche, head of the medical commission of the French contact sports federation said. "We know now that repeated blows alter the nerve cells, especially in a brain that has not been rested," he said.

Jean-FranÁois Chermann, a neurologist at Leopold Bellan Hospital in Paris, is categorical. In a 2010 book on the impact of knockouts, Chermann wrote that Ali "at the end of his training sessions let down his guard and asked his sparring partner to give him blows to the head to show he was the strongest." "There is a link between his current illness and that kind of practice," Chermann wrote. Medical studies have long warned about the consequences from boxing and other sports where the head receives frequent impacts.

A 2008 study by the University of Heidelberg in Germany scanned the brains of 42 boxers and 37 non-boxers. In three of the boxers, they found "microhaemorrhages" in the brain-the likely result of the sharp impact of blows in the ring that damage soft, swirling cerebral tissue. "These changes are most likely precursors for later severe brain damage such as Parkinson's disease or dementia," the authors said. In 2013, a probe published in the journal Scientific Reports found "profound abnormalities" in the brain activity of retired American football players. Unusual activity in the frontal lobe, observed in former National Football League (NFL) players as they carried out a cognitive test, matched records for heavy blows they had received to the head while on the field. Around 30 percent of boxers develop neurological difficulties after their career, according to Chermann. "The more knockouts you suffer, the greater the risks." Amateur boxers are even more at threat, he said. "They have more fights, are monitored less and spend less time working on their defense compared to the pros," Chermann said.

Second impact syndrome

Knockouts are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to head injuries sustained in a range of sports, from rugby and ice hockey, to skiing, judo and horse-riding, to name but a few. While in boxing, you see the blows being landed, in other sports the injury may go unnoticed, Monroche said. "It could also be a footballer who heads the ball a lot. In boxing there's a referee. In other sports, no-one intervenes." Since Ali hung up his gloves, research has shown the importance of at least five days' rest for athletes who suffer a concussion, to avoid "second impact syndrome"-a condition blamed for dozens of fatalities among sportsmen and women every year. French rugby has taken the matter in hand, introducing neurological monitoring for professional players in 2013. In the US, American football and ice hockey players are also closely watched for head injuries.— AFP



In this May 25, 1965 file photo, Heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali stands over fallen challenger Sonny Liston, shouting and gesturing shortly after dropping Liston with a short hard right to the jaw in Lewiston, Maine. — AP