

DAVE MONDY

How Things Break

Sonny Liston landed on canvas below Muhammad Ali's feet on May 25, 1965, and Neil Leifer snapped a photo:



Neil Leifer / Neil Leifer Collection / Getty Images

Afterward, several events unspooled:

The photo languished unlauded—before it was (much later) voted The Best Sports Photo of the Century; Ali became the most hated figure in American sports—before he was (much later) named The Sportsman of the Century; and Liston was subjected to intense scrutiny—before (not much later) he fizzled into a mostly forgotten footnote.

Like many sports fans, I'd glimpsed this picture for years—in random Ali articles, atop “best of” lists, even on T-shirts—but it wasn't until doing my own (overly) obsessive research, excavating layers, that I discovered its most astounding attribute:

Everything you'd initially imagine about the image is wrong. But first:

What a photo! If it doesn't instantly hit your eyes haloed in a corona of potency—structured so soundly as to seem staged, this forceful frieze of physical dominance—I don't know what to say. Look at it: The Victor yells, The Loser displays himself vanquished, and The Watchers (The Press closest, The Crowd behind) are all caught *in that moment*. The kinetic poetry of moving bodies, momentarily frozen, such is the stuff of the best sports photos—this has *that*.

But then: the incongruities! The Victor, appearing to proclaim dominance, is in fact pleading for the bested man to rise; and, for that matter, there are secretly *two* bested rivals below Ali, not one; and though this looks like the moment after a vicious put-down punch, the photo was actually preceded by the puniest of blows, a scandal, a “phantom punch,” as it would later be known—a wispy, theoretical mini-hook that none in attendance even observed. That Crowd so multitudinous that it stretches beyond the horizon line? They were actually the smallest assembled crowd in heavyweight championship history—there to witness a bumbling conclusion, filled with calls that the fix was in. This bout: still boxing's biggest unsolved mystery. This image: still iconic, even (especially) with the controversy, for a sport as mythologized as it is crooked.

Yes, what appears to be an exclamation point is instead an ellipsis . . . an ellipsis that, the further I followed it, ferried me through Fitzgeraldish fugue states—but I'm getting ahead of myself. As mentioned: on May 25, 1965, Neil Leifer snapped a photo.

1. *The Photo*

Neil Leifer must've been crestfallen—how could he help it?

He snapped The Shot of the bout—knew it—but could only watch while other photos filled the prominent pages of *Sports Illustrated*, his own work buried in the back. Leifer must've been crestfallen because he'd taken an artistic risk that night in May. Specifically, he went out and loaded Kodak's latest Ektachrome film into his Rolleiflex medium format—which is an overly technical way of saying that, of all the photographers crammed around the ring, Leifer held quite a distinction: he was one of only two shooting *in color*.

Leifer was known for excessive preparations—this night was no different—but however early he'd arrived to the fight, he was bumped off his preferred side of the ring by Herb Scharfman, a senior photographer at *Sports Illustrated*. Scharfman wanted the spot by the judges' table—it made for easier midfight maneuvering—so Leifer, the twenty-two-year-old striver at *Sports Illustrated*, had to defer.

A difficult task was made more difficult.

There was a reason few folks shot in color: if the light didn't splash just right, exposure exactly accurate, it was all too easy to grab an image *marginally* colorized, washed out, the picture plopped in the muddy midground between color and monochrome, reaping the benefits of neither. To capture the color, Leifer had rigged special flash units over the ring, but this led to a bigger challenge:

Leifer had one shot. The other photographers brandished the equivalent of semi-automatics whilst he held a sniper rifle. Leifer's strobes needed time to recharge, which meant he couldn't click and click. Whenever a fighter fell, the other photographers could quick-twitch their shutters, but Leifer had to pick one moment, artistically aping the sniper's motto: one shot, one kill.

Nonetheless, Leifer managed the risks and got the great shot—*got* it, *knew* it—but couldn't get it to stick. Not in the minds of his editors, at least. Eventually, many months after that issue of *Sports Illustrated* had been consigned to the stacks, an editor espied the image again and thought it worth consideration. He submitted it to the prestigious "Pictures of the Year" contest—the Oscars for photographers. But there, too, the photo failed. What would later be voted as the best sports photo of the century couldn't conjure an honorable mention.

• • •

"Luck in sports photography is everything," Leifer would say later, "but what separates the really top sports photographer from the ordinary is that when they get lucky, they don't miss."

When they get lucky, they don't miss.

Leifer didn't miss that day—but he certainly got lucky. If Scharfman hadn't booted the youngster to the opposite side, Leifer would've been stuck behind Ali at the big moment. Opposite sides of the ring, like opposite sides of a coin, just random chance—but when Liston fell, he fell in front of Leifer, not Scharfman. "It didn't matter how good Herbie was that day," Leifer said. "He was in the wrong seat." Instead of snap-

ping a historic photo, Scharfman became part of one. The balding man between Ali's legs? That's Herb Scharfman, Leifer's rival:



But Leifer wasn't just lucky. Sitting next to him on fight night, also on that "lucky" side, was an AP photographer, John Rooney. Rooney had almost the same position as Leifer and snapped this photo (which may initially seem identical, but note that Scharfman is to the left of Ali):



AP Images

Not a bad photo at all—good enough, in fact, to go out on the wire and be featured on front pages throughout the country. But look at both pictures. What makes only one iconic? Partly (as noted by photography edi-

tor David Schonauer), it's the color and clarity of Leifer's Ektrachrome over Rooney's black-and-white Tri-X film. Similarly, there's Leifer's Rolleiflex camera, as opposed to Rooney's 35mm SLR—which is a jargon way of saying that Leifer ended up with a big square, not Rooney's rectangle. Look at both frames—isn't the square essential? Its solid structure supports, reflects Ali's strength; more importantly, it captures the blackness above the man.

What is it about that space above Ali—there with Leifer, lacking with Rooney—that seems to be the very difference between Good and Great? Rooney's photo is cramped, quick; it delivers all its information immediately, forcefully. Leifer's photo conveys the same power but lets us linger, our eyes allowed to stroll around the stage. Maybe it's as simple as adherence to the old composition dictum, the Rule of Thirds (briefly: if one were to divide any photo horizontally into three rows and vertically into three columns, most of the major mental lines, the rule suggests, should fall on those divides). The bottom row slices just over Scharfman's head, the second above Ali's hair, leaving that top row of blank black. It lets us consider Ali within his world. He seems all the more strong, archetypal, for such space. And, dividing the image into columns, the center is bracketed by Sonny Liston's knee on one side and his eyes on the other, both aimed skyward. Our focus is drawn to the downed man, then shot back up to the victor.

But maybe a beautiful image shouldn't be bisected by sophistry—like the E.B. White quote comparing comedy to a frog: *To dissect it is to kill it.*

The genius might be as simple as Leifer's timing. Once more, look at the two images—look at Ali's expression. Such a slight change, telling us the photos were snapped milliseconds apart. Surely the superiority of Leifer's moment is mere luck—no one could calibrate such a quick click, right? But those same semiseconds are the twitchy difference between hitting a home run or routine foul, between slipping a jab or taking it on the chin. We credit athletes for their split seconds—instinct helming the controls of consciousness—so why not the same for the folks photographing them? “Whether that's instinctual or whether that's just luck,” Leifer said when forced to conjecture, “I don't know.” Sounds like the humble, postgame evasion of any athlete.

When they get lucky, they don't miss.

No, but they may have to wait to see what they've hit.

Rooney, on a daily deadline, sent off his photos immediately; Leifer, working for a weekly, slipped his undeveloped film into his pocket in the morning and took a flight to New York. Upon landing, he saw Rooney's picture already inked on newsprint—“in one of the Maine newspapers,”

Leifer recalled, “or maybe it was the *Boston Globe*. I hadn’t even seen my photos of the fight yet, so when I saw Rooney’s I was pretty happy; I knew that at least I was sitting on the right side of the ring.” And once Leifer developed his film, he was even happier. “If I were directing a movie and I could tell Ali where to knock him down and Sonny where to fall, they’re exactly where I would put them.” And yet, however cinematically staged, recognition would wait. Rooney’s photo won the 1965 World Press Photo Prize for the best sports picture—though, now, Rooney and his photo are mostly forgotten. Indeed, when Rooney’s photo shows up online, it’s usually attributed to Leifer, assumed by people performing a quick scan to be a black-and-white cropped copy of the great, big original.

Leifer’s photo grew in fame slowly, only as Ali’s fame grew. Leifer attributes it to people’s admiration for Ali, after he was forced to forfeit the prime of his career because of his political activism. “This photo shows Ali at the height of his powers,” Leifer said. “People wanted to remember him at his best.” Leifer and Ali were alike in this way, both remembered for their professional heights (Leifer would go on to become one of the greats of his profession, making the cover of *SI* over 150 times and the cover of *Life* over 40), unlike poor Scharfman, a man known for much of his life as being at the very top of his profession, but now mostly noted—when noted at all—as the answer to a trivia question, a joke. The man between Ali’s legs. How aptly, then, he matches the man directly below him in the photo, Scharfman’s chin almost upon Liston’s thigh.

2. *The Fighters*

It’s hard to imagine a man more memorialized for being the opposite of what he was, at least for ninety-five percent of his life, than Sonny Liston. He was the most frightening, the most punishing boxer in over a generation. The sport had been in a slow swoon since the retirement of Rocky Marciano over twenty years previous, and though Sonny Liston didn’t have the properly pale pigment to capture the popular imagination like ol’ Rock from Brockton, a.k.a. The Brockton Bomber (a.k.a. *it saddens me we’ll never have nicknames quite like this again*), Liston revived pugilistic passion in a new way: everyone loved to hate Liston. Even in a sport defined by violence piled upon violence, Liston’s brutality stood out—both within and without the ring.

Liston was arrested nineteen times, and, save for a few mob-connected money-laundering charges, the arrests were all of the fists-on-flesh variety. In a famous incident, five cops jumped Liston, beating him about the head and neck until “they broke their hickory nightsticks”—and they still couldn’t get cuffs on him. In a more cartoonish infraction,

Liston deposited a cop headfirst into a trash can. And there was the time Liston took away the gun of an arresting officer—Liston broke the guy's knee, then strode from the scene wearing the copper's hat.

Liston's fists each measured fifteen inches around. For reference, a softball is eleven inches around; so take that softball and inflate it an extra third in size, stick that on the end of your wrist, and propel it forward with some of the biggest biceps on record—and then you can understand what Sonny Liston was slapping people around with. He had no trouble getting at those folks, either, with a reach of eighty-four inches, the second longest in heavyweight history. Our understanding of adjectives dictates that a thing can be either long *or* squat, but Liston's arms were somehow both—agile tree trunks, lithe railroad ties. Such was his reputation that many heavyweights refused to fight him; he was the perfect frightening fighter to excite loathing in white crowds. But not just white crowds. When Floyd Patterson, the champ before Liston, finally agreed to fight Sonny, the NAACP met with Liston, trying to persuade him not to go through with it. They were afraid of the clichéd criminal image that Liston would present to Caucasian America.

But Liston went ahead and faced longtime champ Patterson and pasted him in the first round. Liston became the champ, though he'd always say the NAACP rejection really hurt him. A lot of things hurt the very private Liston that he didn't let on about. For example, when he returned to his hometown, the proudly provincial Philadelphia, there was no celebration; the town hated him. A prominent local scribe suggested, "Emily Post would recommend ticker tape parade. For confetti we can use his arrest warrants." Liston became more and more withdrawn. He was the twenty-fourth of twenty-five children, all of whom had been beaten mercilessly by their father. Though he didn't like talking about it, when a trainer once asked him about all the scars on his back, Liston said, "I had bad dealings with my daddy." In his early teens, Liston escaped to Chicago with his mother and boxed for their survival. He never learned to read or write. After his lack of acceptance after his title, buoyed by insecurities from a lack of education, he sunk further and further into his Mafia connections. At the time of the Ali bout, Sonny was living full-time in a Vegas casino connected, like his manager, to Mob men. None of this endeared him to the populace, but it also didn't make them lose respect for his power within the ring.

At the time he fought Muhammed Ali (initially known as Cassius Clay, but we'll get to that later), Liston went off as a seven-to-one favorite. For the nongamblers out there, that means that in order to win \$100 off a Liston victory, you'd have to put down \$700. Alternately, you

could win \$700 by betting only \$100, assuming you were betting on Ali. But no one was. Muhammed Ali was a cocky kid who'd recently won Olympic gold in Athens, but at the time of the fight, he wasn't even the second-rated fighter in the world. He could dance, he could dodge, but everyone knew he couldn't take a punch.

• • •

It's tempting to view past events as having been inevitable; it's hard, at least subconsciously, not to laugh into one's collar about all those so-called "experts" who dismissed Muhammed Ali. *Muhammed Ali*, of all people! Ha! But of course, he wasn't Muhammed Ali then. He was a kid named Cassius Clay, highly untested, and they were right to doubt him. If you have a favorite sports commentator (admittedly, to many that will seem like having a favorite canker sore), that person would've picked Liston, too.

And that commentator would have had good reason. I recently YouTubed Ali's fight with British champ Henry Cooper, which directly preceded the bout with Liston. At the end of the fourth round, Cooper catches Ali with a cool, clean left ("Enry's 'Ammer" it was called in Britspeak), and down goes Ali. He's tangled in bottom ropes, eyes rolled back—bell rings! Ali stumbles to his corner, slack on his stool, slapped by handlers. "Doesn't know where he is!" the announcer exclaims. Ali keeps trying to open his eyes wide like a child mocking surprise, then sluffs off. The manager grabs smelling salts (technically illegal under British rules), and Ali snaps to. Bell clangs. Ali floats, then, midring, and simply sort of destroys Cooper—it's strange to watch. Ali's movements are loose and casual as he repeatedly, specifically punishes a spot to the upper left of Cooper's eye socket until it swells grotesquely. Between sepia-toned camera shots, something in Cooper's face breaks and there's blood everywhere. A local ref is slow to stop the fight. Cooper throws his arms around Ali—blood streaks and smears everywhere—the announcer says, "Appalling. That's the worst cut eye I've seen." Then the ref calls it.

Ali victorious. And yet, if Enry's 'Ammer had landed thirty seconds sooner, it seems obvious that Ali wouldn't have been saved by the bell. Which means he would've been knocked out. Which means he wouldn't have been undefeated. Which means Ali wouldn't have had the chance to face Liston, which means—pretty much—he never would've become Muhammed Ali.

Does this mean Ali wasn't really one of the greatest heavyweights of all time? Nope. It just means that even in sports—where a person (me)

treasures the reduction of all the questions and complications of normal life to simple, finite numbers, easy to analyze—it turns out that Luck is still uncomfortably King. As true for Ali as Leifer, Liston as Scharfman.

• • •

Nonetheless, Ali *did* get lucky, did get his chance, and he was ready—like in Leifer’s mantra, he didn’t miss his shot. On February 24, 1964, Ali defeated Liston in seven and stormed around the ring proclaiming (accurately) that he’d “shocked the world!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” I apologize for the quantity of exclamation points there, in that it’s an inadequate number to represent his exuberance, but general printing costs prevent me from showing Ali as he was, so open-throttled with his trademark combo of the articulate and outlandish. YouTube him yourself, watch him right after the fight; even his closest handlers, who love him, want to put their hands over his mouth to stop the spouting. Taunting the press: “I’m so pretty!” “I’m a bad man!” “I talk to god... the *real* god!” “I don’t have a mark on my face, and I just upset Sonny Liston, and I just turned twenty-two years old—I *must be the greatest!*” These quotes express his bravado, yes, but not his wit.

• • •

Excerpt from “Sonny Liston Poem” by Muhammed Ali, delivered to the media the night before the big fight:

Clay swings with his left, Clay swings with his right,
Look at young Cassius carry the fight.
Liston keeps backing, but there’s not enough room,
It’s a matter of time till Clay lowers the boom.
Now Clay lands with a right, what a beautiful swing,
And the punch raises the Bear clean out of the ring.
Liston is still rising and the ref wears a frown,
For he can’t start counting till Sonny goes down.
Now Liston is disappearing from view, the crowd is going frantic,
But radar stations have picked him up, somewhere over the Atlantic.
Who would have thought when they came to the fight?
That they’d witness the launching of a human satellite.
Yes, the crowd did not dream, when they put up the money,
That they would see a total eclipse of the Sonny.

Though Liston didn't actually enter orbit, the poet was otherwise correct in his predictions.

• • •

But that still doesn't show Ali's actual intellect, his force of character—and America didn't see it that night, either. For one evening, the boxing public got to revel in the story of a confident upstart, the fresh-faced Olympian who beat the badder (blacker) man. Ali was managed by a group of wealthy Kentucky businessmen, an old-boy network, and he was handsome and light-skinned. Without a Great White Hope, Muhammed Ali was the next best thing.

Or rather, Cassius Clay. Time to set this straight.

Cassius Clay was his birth name—a great boxing name, and the name he initially made famous. But unbeknownst to the general public, before the Liston bout, Clay became a member of the Nation of Islam. Young Cassius selected a new name—Cassius X, after Malcolm X—but that appellation was vetoed (though it's fun, just for a moment, to imagine all the places you've seen the name "Muhammed Ali"—from *SportsCenter* to T-shirts—and replace it with "Cassius X"); instead, he was given the name we now know him by. And the very morning after his big Liston victory, Cassius Clay announced that he was changing his name to Muhammed Ali—a radical name from radical Islam. He might as well have announced fealty to Malcolm X and outright opposition to the Vietnam War! Which he soon did.

And just like that, public opinion flipped. The day before, Liston had been the baddie, but now everyone wished he'd won. A simple equation, it turned out: the one thing the public hated more than a criminal black man was a cocky black man with radical politics.

A rematch was set—and then delayed because of backroom negotiations. Then the venue fell through. Then Ali had to have emergency hernia surgery. Meanwhile, much of the public couldn't wait to see Ali get pounded. Finally, a last-minute negotiation was reached: they would fight in St. Dominic's Arena, in the tiny town of Lewiston, Maine, on May 25, 1965.

• • •

How anti-climactic that fight was—the fight featured in Leifer's photo—after so much buildup. "A two-minute fight might be a major disappointment for the fans, but for a photographer, it doesn't matter

whether it goes fifteen rounds or fifteen seconds,” Leifer said. “All any editor expected from me was a great knockout picture.” Leifer got the picture, but the fans got a supremely disappointing bout.

Midway through the first round, Liston fell to the canvas, even though he seemed to have dodged Ali’s punch, and no witnesses on-site could say they saw Ali connect. Nonetheless, with Liston suddenly and inexplicably down, referee Joe Walcott ordered Ali to retreat to a neutral corner. Ali refused; instead, he stood over his fallen opponent, gesturing and yelling, “Get up and fight, sucker!” Ali wanted a clean victory—and this smelled fishy—but no matter; before anyone knew what was going on, Walcott declared Ali the victor, and the fight was over.

“Get up and fight, sucker!” This was the “triumphant” moment that Leifer’s photo captured. So why did this image, instead of the others snapped of Ali, become the most iconic? “You have to understand, a lot of pictures aren’t appreciated when they’re first taken and then later they get a life of their own,” Leifer would say. “This photo became the way people wanted to see Ali, charismatic, tough, confident. The circumstances didn’t end up mattering.”

Of course, they did matter *that day*, May 25. The end of that fight remains one of the most controversial in boxing history. The blow that ended the match became known as “the phantom punch.” Even Ali was unsure as to whether or not he’d connected; footage from the event shows Ali, as he exits the arena, asking his entourage, “Did I hit him?”

Slow-motion replays seem to show that Ali did indeed connect with a quick, chopping right to Liston’s head (known later as the “Anchor Punch”) as Liston was moving toward him—but most agree that it wasn’t powerful enough to take down a big boxer like Sonny.

So did Liston take a dive? He was certainly mob-connected. Rumors persist to this day, though for every quote to support one theory, there’s a counterquote to support the opposite. Whole books have been devoted to various sides of the debate, written by authors who are either Tirelessly Researching Crusaders or Conspiracy Nuts, depending on which theory you support.

Financial investigations have shown that neither Liston nor his wife ever profited—outside of the original purse money—from the fight. Some claim that Liston already owed a bunch of money to the Mafia, and by taking a convenient dive, he simply paid off his debt. But if Liston was under the control of the Mob, it’s hard to imagine they’d want Ali to be the champ, a man they *didn’t* control—but again, who knows?

An equally popular theory is that Liston was frightened into taking a fall by the Nation of Islam. Representatives of the Nation met with

Liston several weeks before the fight. No one knows what was said in that meeting, but some speculate that they threatened Liston. The group certainly was militant and broke into sometimes violent factions—Malcolm X had been assassinated just a few months before the fight. Liston supposedly told one biographer that this is why he went down, fear of assassination, but he gave other interviewers contradictory quotes. Again, who knows?

• • •

Leifer, for his part, seems to fall on the side of an Ali knockout, but he also confesses, “I can’t tell you that I saw the punch that put Liston down.” At the least, most seem to agree that Ali wasn’t facing the Liston of past years. One *New York Times* writer noted that Liston “looked awful” in prefight workouts and reported that Liston’s handlers had been secretly paying his sparring partner one hundred dollars to take it easy on the big man. Liston’s handlers knew “he didn’t have it anymore.”

“The truth is,” Leifer continued, “I haven’t seen the knockout punch in half the great fights I’ve covered. You’re thinking of strobe lights, batteries, and so many other things.” But even if he didn’t care much about that famous punch, Leifer cared a great deal about Ali. Indeed, though Leifer would go on to become one of the most noted sports photographers of his generation (as I’ve said, he’d end up making the cover of *Sports Illustrated* over 150 times) and a great photographer in general (making the cover of *Time* over fifty times), Leifer always counted Ali as his favorite subject. The day of that phantom punch in Lewiston, Maine, was just the early phase of a relationship between photographer and subject that continues to this day. Leifer has photographed Ali in over thirty-five fights and at twenty separate photo shoots. “There has never been an athlete like Ali, and I was lucky enough that my career and his career paralleled,” Leifer said in a recent interview, talking of how the two still stay in touch. “We are a year apart in age. He turned seventy a year ago January, and I spent four days with him in Arizona where he’s living.”

Leifer doesn’t shoot photographs anymore; he’s turned entirely to filmmaking—though there remains one subject for whom he’d shoot a still image. “I’d photograph Ali anytime.”

• • •

And as for Ali and the phantom punch? Yes, he'd wanted a cleaner victory—but Ali was soon able to leave the scandal behind him. His total dominance of the sport over the next several years put to rest any questions about the purity of his ascendance. He became one of the greatest boxers—and, most likely, *the* greatest boxer—of the modern era.

Soon after his fight in Lewiston, Ali would become embroiled in controversies that made the Liston fall seem small. When the U.S. military drafted Ali, he objected (Leifer was there to photograph Ali refusing his draft order), and Ali was promptly arrested. He then became a major speaker in the protest movement, where his intellect and wit served him well. One of Ali's most famous quotes from that era, explaining why he wouldn't fight in the Vietnam War: "Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go ten thousand miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs and denied simple human rights?" And also there's this quote: "I ain't got no quarrel with them Viet Cong.... They never called me nigger."

Such was the atmosphere at the time, and such was the atmosphere in which the major boxing commissions stripped Ali of all his boxing titles, so that during the very prime of his athletic years, Ali was not allowed to practice his sport.

But that's a different saga. The point is, by then, the Sonny scandal had been long overshadowed—the province of obsessive theorists.

• • •

The primary source, the only man who could really confirm or deny any of the theories about the phantom punch, was found dead in his Las Vegas home on January 5, 1971. Sonny Liston was found by his wife, who'd been away, and it was estimated that he had already been dead for five days.

An autopsy revealed that the cause of Liston's death was a heroin overdose; though Liston had never been known to do heroin, he was abusing a lot of other chemicals at the time, and it wasn't a stretch to imagine that he had branched out. Also, the police determined that there were no signs of foul play. Still, some wonder.

No drug or heroin paraphernalia was found inside the house, and also there's this: Big Sonny had one lifelong fear—an almost cute phobia for a man so imposing, if it hadn't been such a truly crippling terror, a fear that, even when he badly needed the money, kept him from fighting in Europe simply because it would've required him to get vaccinations—a

phobia that would make Liston, brutal Liston, literally flee a doctor's examination room.

Sonny Liston had a lifelong fear of needles.

3. *The Finale*

So there's this poem by Richard Katrovas, and part of the second stanza goes,

A man—a fool and so a man—
will likely suffer for his manhood
as a boxer suffers for his bread.
What is more beautiful, more true
to who we are (for what we are)
than fighters, spent, embracing all
that each had tried to murder from
the first bell to the last, and what
may offer greater hope for us,
for some of us, than that embrace?

Though the masculine anguish may be ladled on a bit thick, I confess that I love that part about the boxers' embrace. It's always struck me as such a touching moment in the sport. It's called a "clinch" and generally happens when a boxer needs rest or relief from the opponent's blows, and the end of the round isn't close enough to save him. The boxer wraps his arms around his opponent, hugging him, so punches can only land on his back.

But sometimes, at the end of a particularly long and brutal bout, it almost doesn't matter who starts the clinch—once one boxer goes for it, they both seem to fall into it, sustain it, both need the respite; they lean on one another, and if either were to move away quickly, the other would fall; yet they don't move away; for a very short time, they lean into each other like lovers at the end of a particularly slow dance—maybe it's the last song at the wedding. Seeing such a clinch, one wonders just how profoundly *tired* an athlete has to be to rest chest-to-chest, even for a moment, against the man he's spent months preparing to brutalize.

So I wonder if, maybe, Sonny Liston was tired. So tired. Of being tired.

He might've taken a dive because of the Nation of Islam, he might've taken a dive because of the Mafia, or maybe there wasn't a dive at all, just an unfortunate stumble and bumbling officials. But if Liston *did* take a dive, maybe it was an internal dive, taken at some unknown time days or months before the fight.

He was promised a \$1.2 million purse for his first fight with Clay, and yet when his Mafia paymasters cut the check, it was for just \$13,000. They said the rest went to fees for his publicity, his “free” stay at the hotel, his restaurant and bar tab, et cetera; the Mob was leveraging their tax. For the rematch, Sonny Liston was once again promised around \$1.2 million, and before the fight, he once again received, instead, \$13,000. Somewhere, internally, I wonder if Liston just said *fuck it*.

I don’t mean he walked into that ring in Lewiston thinking, *I’m taking a dive*. I mean something deeper down wanted to take a dive, even as his conscious self tried to fight for victory. Something like what F. Scott Fitzgerald writes of in *The Crack-Up*, when—curiously enough—he employs a pugilistic metaphor:

Of course all life is a process of breaking down, but the blows that do the dramatic side of the work—the big sudden blows that come, or seem to come, from outside—the ones you remember and blame things on and, in moments of weakness, tell your friends about, don’t show their effect all at once. There is another sort of blow that comes from within—that you don’t feel until it’s too late to do anything about it, until you realize with finality that in some regard you will never be as good a man again. The first sort of breakage seems to happen quick—the second kind happens almost without your knowing it but is realized suddenly indeed.

The more I researched this famous photo, the more these two pieces of literature kept butting in on my thoughts: the Katrovas poem and the Fitzgerald passage. Who knows the provenance of persistent sub-thoughts—but with Liston as a subject, these phrases *do* make sense. Earlier in his poem, Katrovas describes brutality as “the pain of father’s belt,” and Sonny knew that pain more than most; knew, too, about a “large boy’s knuckles,” since Sonny’s own knuckles measured freakishly large; yet, he also knew that regardless of a boy’s knuckle size, “life kicks his ass.” Certainly Sonny understood how “a boxer suffers for his bread.”

Nonetheless, for maybe a last time, he whipped himself into shape to face Ali early in ’65—and then Ali had a hernia, the match was put off for another six months, and Sonny fell out of shape. Back at the casino, living that casino life, his body fell into disrepair—and then he was once again cheated out of over a million dollars. Some part of him might’ve given up, as Fitzgerald says, “without your knowing it” and was only

“realized suddenly indeed” when he went down from a punch that could never have felled him *physically* if something incorporeal hadn’t already been cracked.

Isn’t this how most things break? After a romantic breakup, for example, one often wonders about the specific moments of the split, the night it happened—what could one have done differently to keep the fracturing at bay, that night, that morning, that afternoon on the phone? But later, of course, one sees it wasn’t about those moments at all—that the breakup was just the logical outcome of fissures that had already happened and happened slowly, undetected, much earlier, stacking one upon the other. Or, say, a person is fired, and the focus is on the “terminable offense.” Or say a family schism happens, Son Disavows Father—but the headline is never the real story. The real story is a slow, nearly imperceptible nurturing of resentments. Breakdowns, small ones, over time.

Sonny was tired.

But *so* tired.

One feels so badly for him. I set out to write about Muhammed Ali and Neil Leifer, but it’s Liston’s tale that won’t let me alone. So many of us give up on things, parts of our lives, throwing in the towel on whole swaths of our past, recognizing too late, if we recognize at all, that the subconscious compromises we don’t even realize we’re making are the most decimating compromises of all. But at least we’re not forever immortalized in the midst of our most capitulating posture. Sonny Liston would be forever frozen in self-inflicted failure because of one stupid photo.

So maybe, just here, he should be seen as he wanted to be seen, like in this publicity photo, taken a few months before his first fight with Clay.



Sonny Liston is buried in Paradise Memorial Gardens in Las Vegas, and his headstone bears just a two-word epitaph: “A Man.”