1

Beating the System

Some Georgia politicians—Andrew Young, Julian Bond, Maynard Jackson—who launched their careers in the 1960s and 1970s became famous. One, an ex-peanut farmer from the town of Plains, rose to the highest office in the land. Another became Speaker of the House. Yet there was one man in the state who, it could be said, was the most gifted of all in the art of power. He was not particularly well known outside of Georgia back then, and never would be, but inside, many folks heard of the Honorable Leroy Reginald Johnson, the Democratic state senator from the 38th District, the first African American to serve in the State Legislature in almost ninety-two years.

"He had this marvelous facility for getting along with other people," Bond said. "My brother had some kind of traffic ticket problem, and I remember going with my parents to see Johnson. He said, 'I'll take care of it.' My father said, 'Well, what do I owe you?' He was a lawyer, you expect to pay him. 'That's okay,' Johnson responded. 'You can do something for me sometime.' Without the criminal element, he was the Godfather. He was the guy that you came to see to get things done, things that you could not do for yourself."

Leroy Johnson was the first person Harry Pett thought of when, during the summer of 1970, his son-in-law, Robert Kassel, who was recently involved in the promotion of his first boxing card, called him in Atlanta to find out if he knew of anyone in the city with real clout. Kassel, an ambitious thirty-year-old New York corporate attorney, did not expect too much. He knew that his father-in-law, who operated a small spice business, did not exactly mingle with society's movers and shakers, but Kassel did not know where else to turn. Over the previous three years, not a single city in the entire nation demonstrated the courage to permit Muhammad Ali to resume his boxing career. The only reason Kassel thought of Atlanta was that Atlanta was where he had attended college, at Emory University, for undergrad and law school, and where he met his first wife. Atlanta would serve his purpose as well as any other city. Pett, who had once met Johnson at a function, placed the call.

"Senator, do you think that you might be able to get a license for Muhammad Ali to fight in Atlanta?" Pett asked Johnson. "If you can somehow find a way to put this together, we can make sure that Ali gets a contract."

Johnson was no expert on the fight game, but he was definitely an expert on picking fights in the arena which he mastered, fights he won more often than he lost, and here was one with enticing possibilities.

If he was successful, he would make history, helping to put Ali back where he belonged, between the ropes, and he would make money—lots of it. For a black man in 1970, in the Deep South no less, Johnson, in his early forties, did quite well for himself. He owned a house in northwest Atlanta and a cottage about fifteen miles outside of town. But Johnson, who also worked in a downtown law practice, didn't get to where he was by running from opportunities to rise even higher. He told Pett he would check with his contacts and call him back in a few days. "My mission was to beat the system," Johnson recalled, "to say to the world that you cannot do this to a man just because of his color."

On April 28, 1967, at eight o'clock in the morning, Muhammad Ali walked into the United States Armed Forces Examination and Entrance Station at 701 San Jacinto Street in Houston. For much of the morning, Ali and the other recruits went through routine physical examinations and filled out paperwork. At about 1 p.m., they were taken to a room for their formal induction. After the ceremony, they would go by bus to Fort Polk, Louisiana, to begin their basic training.

One name after another was called, each man stepping forward to symbolize his entrance into the armed forces. Then came Ali's turn.

"Cassius Marcellus Clay!" an officer said.

Ali did not step forward.

The officer called him by his preferred name, Ali, but it made no difference. Navy Lieutenant Clarence Hartman then brought Ali to a room down the hall to explain that his act of defiance was a felony that could be punished by five years in prison and a $10,000 fine. But, upon returning to the first room, Ali again failed to move when his name was announced. Hartman asked Ali to write down the reason he would not accept service.

"I refuse to be inducted into the armed forces of the United States because I claim to be exempt as a minister of the religion of Islam," he wrote.

His refusal came as no surprise, and it epitomized the dramatic transformation in Ali, and how he was perceived, since he first became a public figure when he captured the gold medal at the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome. Back then, he was known as Cassius Clay from Louisville, Kentucky, a hero adored for his charm, wit, and innocence. In 1964, he slayed the heavyweight champion, the mighty Sonny Liston, and "shook up the world," as he put it. Within weeks, however, he changed his name to Muhammad Ali, a member of the Nation of Islam. Nothing, however, alienated Ali from his detractors as much as the famous comment he made in February 1966 after his draft status was reclassified to 1-A: "Man, I ain't got no quarrel with them Vietcong." To Ali, it made no sense

to fight in a war to liberate the people of South Vietnam when members of his race were being mistreated back home.

Within hours of refusing service, Ali was stripped of his crown by the New York State Athletic Commission and the World Boxing Association. Ali's decision was "regarded by the commission to be detrimental to the best interests of boxing," stated Edwin B. Dooley, the chairman. On June 20, 1967, Ali was convicted by a federal jury in Houston of violating the Selective Service Act. He was sentenced to five years in prison and fined $10,000, the maximum penalty. The jury took only about twenty minutes before reaching a guilty verdict. Ali's lawyers filed an appeal.

By the summer of 1970, when Harry Pett called Senator Leroy Johnson, Ali remained free on bail, hoping the Supreme Court would review his case. If the court chose not to hear it, Ali would have to serve his sentence. He had not appeared in an official bout since March 22, 1967.

For blacks in Georgia, a proud member of the old Confederacy, the system was stacked against them from the start. Leroy Johnson, who grew up in an Atlanta ghetto, was no exception.

One afternoon, during the mid-1930s, instead of waiting patiently at the front door as he did every day to greet his cherished Aunt Minnie, a housekeeper being dropped off by her white female employer from the other side of town, the *rich* side, he ran to the car. He hugged his aunt and then, instinctively—he was seven or eight, too young, too loving, to comprehend bigotry—started to embrace the other woman, who was usually very friendly with him. The woman quickly pulled herself away, as if this harmless child would infect her with a horrible disease. Aunt Minnie seized Leroy's hand and ushered him immediately into the house.

"Why didn't she hug me?" the boy wondered.

"You will understand as you grow older," Aunt Minnie assured him, "that there is a difference between *us* and *them*."

Aunt Minnie told Leroy something else that day he would never forget. "I want you to know that when God made you," she

explained, "he was at his highest and best and that you are as good as anybody."

The message was constantly reinforced at Morehouse College, the distinguished private black liberal arts school in Atlanta that Johnson attended in the late 1940s with, in the class a year ahead, another student who dreamed of a color-blind America in his lifetime, Martin Luther King Jr. Morehouse made an impact on Johnson on his very first day when, during a rousing speech welcoming the student body, President Benjamin Elijah Mays, regarded later by Dr. King as his "spiritual mentor and intellectual father"—he would give the eulogy at King's funeral—warned, "You cannot and must not ever take segregation. When you go to a segregated theater, you are paying for segregation." Johnson became convinced that the president's stern words were meant specifically for him. A few days earlier, he had gone to see a picture at the Fox Theatre downtown, taking a seat, as usual, in the upstairs balcony, the section set aside for blacks. "I thought Mays had seen me go into the theater," Johnson recalled. "I never again went to a segregated theater."

After graduating from Morehouse in 1949, Johnson taught history and geography in the city's black schools for several years until he realized that his true calling was not in academia but in the legal profession, where he felt he could make the greatest difference on the major issues of the day. He earned his law degree from North Carolina College at Durham in 1957 and became the first African American investigator in the district attorney's office in Atlanta.

In 1962, he ran for a seat in the State Senate. The obstacles were enormous. A black man had not served in the Georgia legislature since Reconstruction. The system simply did not allow it. The system dictated that voters from all over Fulton County cast their ballots for each of the county's seven seats instead of only for a single district. Residents from predominantly white areas were not about to choose one of *them* to protect their interests. On the campaign trail, especially in more rural towns, Johnson was heckled or, perhaps worse, ignored. In the fall election, he prevailed among

the voters in his district but did not capture a majority countywide. But Leroy Johnson was a Morehouse man, and Morehouse men were taught never to give up. When a judge ruled that each seat was to be selected only by the voters within their respective district, Johnson was declared the victor.

Gaining recognition from his peers proved to be just as challenging. During Johnson's first thirty days in office, none of the other legislators uttered a word to him. "I would walk from the courthouse to the Senate chamber, meeting senators going in the opposite direction," he remembered. "I would say, 'Good morning, Senator.' They would just look away. They thought that my being there was like a plague, that the ceiling would fall in and the seats would crumble. I was all alone in a lion's den."

The silent treatment finally came to an abrupt end when Johnson arrived late one morning for an education committee meeting. Several senators rushed to his side. Johnson was, for the moment, no longer a black man trespassing on sacred white ground. He was a vote that counted as much as the others, a vote they needed to break a deadlock. Johnson put aside any resentment he might have still harbored—this was no time to let his hurt feelings get in the way of attaining the influence he coveted—and made the first of countless bargains, aligning himself with the senators who agreed to back several of his bills. "I learned you get not what you deserve in politics," he said, "you get what you can negotiate." At times, Johnson was criticized by members of his own race for not shaking things up enough in the white-dominated body, but he strongly believed the most prudent way to achieve long-term progress for blacks in the South was to not only beat the system but, as often as possible, to work within it.

On the other hand, he recognized that not every right could be obtained through skillful negotiation. Some rights needed to be seized. Johnson was adamant from the day he was sworn in that he deserved to receive the same privileges as every other member of this exclusive club. One afternoon, with assistance from one of his few friends in the chamber, Senator Joe Salome, Johnson decided he would attempt to desegregate the cafeteria in the Georgia State Capitol.

"Senator Johnson and I are going to have lunch," Salome told senators headed toward the cafeteria. "Please come and have lunch with us."

Nobody accepted the invitation, which, of course, did not come as a tremendous shock. After all, this was early 1963, before the March on Washington and Dr. King's "I have a dream" speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, before the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Bill, before the South finally surrendered for the second, and last, time. The rejections did not deter the Morehouse man for one second. He picked up a tray, filled it with a few items, and calmly joined his friend in the checkout line.

"We can't serve you," said the agitated woman behind the register.

Johnson did not budge. "Young lady," he replied without raising his voice, "I am a state senator and I intend to eat here in the state cafeteria."

The woman went to see her supervisor. A few minutes later, she returned, defeated. "Give me your money," she told him.

Johnson and Salome found a table, but as soon as they sat down, senators on both sides stood up and walked away. The two did not let this demonstration spoil their moment of triumph. The cafeteria in the State Capitol of the commonwealth of Georgia was officially desegregated.

"I had done what Morehouse College had trained me to do," Johnson said.

The fight to obtain a boxing license for Muhammad Ali, if Johnson was to take it on, would be among the toughest of his political career. Since Ali's last official appearance in the ring—against the aging Zora Folley at the old Madison Square Garden on Eighth Avenue between Forty-ninth and Fiftieth streets in New York City, in which he defended his crown for the ninth time with a seventh-round knockout—people who knew a heck of a lot more about the sweet science than an outsider from, for heaven's sake, *Georgia*, had failed in dozens of attempts to put the deposed champion

back to work. Georgia was, after all, where the Ku Klux Klan still held rallies at Stone Mountain, noted for its monumental carving of Civil War generals Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson and Confederacy president Jefferson Davis on horseback, and where an ardent segregationist, Lester G. Maddox, resided in the governor's mansion.

Elected officials and boxing commissioners throughout the United States refused to support Ali's bid for a boxing license. "The boxing commissioners were afraid that they would lose these patronage jobs, which is all they were," said the *New York Times*'s Robert Lipsyte, who wrote about Ali extensively in the 1960s and 1970s. "It was very easy to turn him down. It was a wonderful way for all these hacks to show their allegiance to the governors or mayors who appointed them."

Nor was Ali permitted to leave the country while he remained free on bail. Proposals for title bouts in Japan and Canada were turned down. In Canada, Ali was to be escorted by federal marshals after posting a $100,000 cash bond and to stay on foreign soil for less than twenty-four hours, but the Fifth United States Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans denied his request without comment. The Gila River Indians in Sacaton, Arizona, whose reservation was outside the jurisdiction of the state's Athletic Commission, refused to sanction a rematch between Ali and Folley. The Gila River tribal council determined that giving Ali a license would "desecrate the land some of our brave boys have walked on," although other factors may have played a role in its decision. "The story I got," former *Newark Star-Ledger* columnist Jerry Izenberg said, "was that there was a call from the Interior Department asking whoever was on the tribal council, 'Do you really want to keep getting that poverty money?' and then there was a change of heart."

Despite the growing antiwar movement on college campuses, and the profound effect on public opinion of the ghastly images appearing in dying color on the evening news and in the weekly magazines, many Americans stood behind the Johnson, and subsequently the Nixon, administration's campaign in Vietnam, or at the

very least considered Ali unpatriotic for his refusal to serve. Nonetheless, those lured by the potential record-setting payday of an Ali comeback fight continued to search for a receptive politician and, on several occasions, it appeared they just might succeed.

In December 1969, Florida governor Claude Kirk loaned his support to a bout in Tampa between Ali and a certain fighter out of Philadelphia. This fighter did not possess a long reach, did not throw many traditional combinations, and could, at times, be quite vulnerable. Yet he did not back off for an instant, and in the view of those who closely followed boxing, he was more formidable than anyone Ali ever faced, and that included Sonny Liston. The fighter was Smokin' Joe Frazier. "I think Mr. Frazier can easily beat Mr. Clay," Kirk said. "You know, there was some talk that Mr. Clay lost his title because of politics, instead of due to fisticuffs. And I'd be glad if we could promote a fight in Tampa to settle this." Within days, however, after fierce opposition emerged—an editorial in the *Tampa Tribune* proclaimed, "We Object Conscientiously"—the governor changed his mind.

"While I would like to see Frazier put his fists right on Mohammed Blah," Kirk said, "I have heard from enough people in Florida to know that they do not want the fight to take place in Florida. It comes as a surprise to me that a man who lacks the courage to fight for his country could have the guts to get into the ring. . . . I see no reason why an alleged draft dodger should be in a position to lay claim to any title."

Months later, Ali's attorney, Bob Arum, launched an effort to stage the fight in the future capital of professional boxing, Las Vegas, Nevada. Arum, who along with Don King would become the premier promoter during the last quarter of the twentieth century, persuaded Ali and Frazier to sign contracts. Meanwhile, the well-known handicapper Jimmy "the Greek" Snyder secured the approval of Governor Paul Laxalt. Nobody stood in the way—well, almost nobody. Arum was about to go into a meeting in the basement of a hotel on the Strip with members of the Nevada Athletic Commission, Governor Laxalt, and Snyder when the phone rang. It was Bob Mayhew asking for Snyder. Mayhew was an important

player in Vegas. "Jimmy went white," Arum recalled. "You work with us for the resort's interests," Mayhew reminded Snyder. Snyder did indeed. Mayhew explained that their boss did not want Ali to fight in his state. The call ended and so did the negotiations. Their boss was Howard Hughes. The reason for his opposition was the usual one: Ali's stance on the draft.

"The governor was embarrassed," Arum said, "but I got him off the hook. I told him, 'Look, I'm going to pull the application,' which is what I did."

Some proposals were downright bizarre. One was for Ali to fight in a bull ring in Tijuana, another at a rodeo arena in Tulsa.

Perhaps the most unconventional of all surfaced from the mind of Murray Woroner, a Miami promoter who achieved a degree of success with *The First Christmas*, *Easter the Beginning*, and *July 4, 1776*, radio recreations of historic events delivered as modern newscasts. Woroner had already put together Ali's only "fights" during the exile, the results decided by machine instead of man. Over a hundred variables (the ability to absorb a punch, punching power, tendency to get cut, courage, and so on) compiled by boxing experts were fed into a National Cash Register computer in Dayton, Ohio. Among sixteen greats in Woroner's *All-Time Heavyweight Tournament and Championship Fight*, broadcast over nearly four hundred radio stations, Ali lost to James Jeffries, the Great White Hope from the early twentieth century. Ali filed a $1 million suit against Woroner for defamation of character for losing to Jeffries, but it was dropped when he was paid $10,000 for a computer match in 1969 against Rocky Marciano. Marciano, forty-five, who retired undefeated in 1956, took the challenge seriously, shedding about fifty pounds and putting on a new toupee.

"He was so happy to be back," said Ferdie Pacheco, Ali's longtime doctor, who took part in the production. "He wanted to fight for real." Too real, for Ali's comfort. "He did hit Ali several times hard," Pacheco said. "Ali told him, 'Hey, if we play *that* game, then I'm going to start punching you and they're going to start sewing

you up.'" Marciano was quite impressed with Ali. "My God, the kid is so fast," he kept saying.

The finished product drew a fair amount of coverage, a commentary on a sport lacking in excitement since the banishment of its charismatic leading man. Love Ali or hate Ali, it would be nearly impossible to find anyone in America who was neutral toward the man in the late 1960s. People wanted to see him between the ropes, no matter how contrived or commercial the enterprise might be. "I could announce tomorrow that Muhammad Ali will walk across the Hudson River and charge twenty dollars admission," Teddy Brenner, the Madison Square Garden matchmaker, once said, "and there would be twenty thousand down there to see him do it. And half of them would be rooting for him to do it and the other half would be rooting for him to sink."

The computer fight was shown on closed-circuit television on January 20, 1970, a Marciano left hook knocking Ali out in the thirteenth round. It was reported at the time that after fans complained in England about the outcome, a new version was shown a week later with Ali triumphant. Marciano, the story said, was seen with his arms raised in protest after the fight was halted because of cuts. However, David Woroner, Murray's son, who was involved in a documentary about the fight in recent years, said the England story was a hoax. In any case, Marciano died in a plane crash in Iowa on August 31, 1969, only three weeks after the filming was completed. He never knew the outcome, since seven different endings were shot to protect against any leaks.

According to Pacheco, for Ali's official comeback Woroner proposed that Frazier (recognized as the titleholder in New York and several other states), Jimmy Ellis (the survivor of the eight-man elimination tournament organized by the World Boxing Association in 1967 to fill the vacancy), and Ali slug it out in, of all places, a movie studio in South Miami, with two fights needed to produce the champion: Ellis versus Frazier, then the winner versus Ali. Under one plan, only the combatants, their corners, a film crew, a physician, and the judges would be allowed to attend, and then, immediately

afterward, the entire group would be sequestered for several weeks to keep the results secret until the film could be developed and distributed to closed-circuit outlets. Not surprisingly, Pacheco said, the project proved far too enormous for Woroner, a novice in the high-stakes universe of professional boxing, to pull off. "We had a child playing with dynamite," he explained. "All we needed was a Don King or a Bob Arum to come in and take the reins of the thing and put a few million dollars behind it, and we would have been off and gone, but we did not have a Don King or a Bob Arum, and we did not have a million dollars. All we had was a good idea and nobody to do it."

In July 1970, Ali flew to Charleston, South Carolina, to fight for real. So what if it was only an exhibition and instead of Frazier, Ali was to square off against a much less imposing Joe (Bugner), and the equally unspectacular Jeff Merritt? He would be back in his comfort zone, the spotlight, tossing punches and barbs, doing the famous Ali shuffle, *being* Ali, presumably a huge step toward a fight against Frazier or another high-caliber opponent. What mattered was that the barrier would finally be torn down, and that boxing commissioners from other states might then reconsider and offer him an opportunity to earn a living in his chosen profession while he awaited his fate in the judicial system. In 1970, with the nation more opposed than ever to U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia, these political pawns were not dealing with the same pressures they encountered in 1967, 1968, and 1969. ABC prepared to tape the exhibition for its popular Saturday afternoon show *Wide World of Sports*, while writers from some of the top newspapers made the trip. The long-delayed return of Muhammad Ali to the ring against anyone, anywhere, was a major story.

The fights were scheduled for County Hall, the proceeds going to help subsidize young, underprivileged boxers. Everything was proceeding smoothly until, only two days before the event, the county council voted unanimously to call the whole thing off. To this day, the event's promoter, Reggie Barrett Jr., blames the cancellation on South Carolina congressman L. Mendel Rivers, the

conservative Democratic chairman of the House Committee on Armed Services, who, Barrett claims, complained to former council chairman J. Mitchell Graham that he was being ridiculed by his fellow legislators in Washington for allowing a convicted draft dodger to fight in, of all places, *his* district. Barrett quickly suggested an alternative site, the Charleston Speedway, a dirt racetrack about ten miles outside of town, but when he took Ali to check it out, the ex-champ's response closed the matter for good.

"When I parked the car," Barrett recalled, "he said, 'Let's go. I ain't getting out here in any ring and letting a bunch of rednecks shoot me like they did Martin Luther King and Medgar Evers. I'm out of here.' " (Evers, a prominent Civil Rights activist, was gunned down after returning from a meeting with NAACP lawyers on June 12, 1963.)

A dispirited Ali, his hopes dashed once again, flew back to his home in Philadelphia. "For days, I refused even to answer the phone," he wrote in his 1975 autobiography. "I had resolved that Charleston and Jackson [an earlier effort to obtain a license in Jackson, Mississippi, fell through] would be my last rejections, and if all that was left now was to serve the five-year jail term and forget boxing, I was prepared."

Leroy Johnson worked the phones. Johnson was not about to spend hard-earned political capital on trying to beat the system if the system was not beatable. He needed a road map to circumnavigate the anti-Ali forces that would surely mobilize in opposition as they did in Tampa and every other city when a fight appeared on the horizon. Within a few days, he found one. Georgia did not have a state boxing commission, which meant that the authority to sanction prizefights was solely in the hands of local governing bodies— in the case of Atlanta, the city's Board of Aldermen. Johnson could not believe his good fortune. A number of the board members, black and white, owed their positions to his influence. "It was like putting a rabbit in the berry patch," Johnson said. On the night

before every election, the Negro Voters League in Atlanta, in which he was one of the leading figures, passed out a ticket to black voters that listed the candidate for each contest who had received the league's endorsement. "You took it to the polls with you and you voted for whoever the ticket said," Julian Bond said. Johnson then asked a friend in the Fulton County district attorney's office to conduct a thorough investigation of Robert Kassel and his New York associates. If there was one thing Leroy Johnson knew about professional boxing, it was what everyone else knew, that practically since the days of bare knuckles, the sport has attracted more than its share of shady characters.

Johnson, once he was informed that the group was not connected to organized crime, phoned Kassel's father-in-law, Harry Pett. "I can get Ali a license to fight in Atlanta," Johnson said.

To understand why Johnson was so confident requires more than an awareness of his considerable political skills. An examination of how far Atlanta had advanced over the previous decades, especially on the important issue of race relations, is also imperative. Leroy Johnson would have gotten nowhere in the Atlanta of 1950 or 1960. The Atlanta of 1970 was the centerpiece of the *New South*, a term used in the 1880s by *Atlanta Constitution* editor Henry Grady to describe a region that, with the breakup of the pre–Civil War plantation economy, was evolving into a more industrial society.

"The old South rested everything on slavery and agriculture, unconscious that these could neither give nor maintain healthy growth," Grady said. "The new South presents a perfect democracy, the oligarchs leading in the popular movement—a social system compact and closely knitted, less splendid on the surface, but stronger at the core . . . and a diversified industry that meets the complex need of this complex age." Hailing the arrival of a New South became a recurring theme in the land of Dixie. "There have been about four 'New Souths' announced over time," Bond said. "'*This* is the New South,' and fifty years later, '*this* is the New South.'"

This was, undoubtedly, a *new* Atlanta, described by ex-mayor William Hartsfield in the late 1950s as "the city too busy to hate." Black police officers, required for years to put on their uniforms and receive their daily assignments at the Butler Street YMCA, were now based at headquarters and allowed to perform the same functions as their white counterparts. Prior to those changes, "if you were a black policeman and you saw a white guy coming out of a bank with money in one hand, a gun in the other," Bond pointed out, "you had to hold the guy but you could not arrest him. You had to call for a white policeman."

A prominent role in the city's evolution was played by Ralph Emerson McGill, the former editor and publisher of the *Atlanta Constitution*. "It was Ralph McGill and others like him who bridged the gap between the black and white communities and made it possible for Atlanta to be different from Mississippi and other areas of the South," Johnson contended. "His articles always created an atmosphere of tolerance, of moving forward, and, without that kind of atmosphere, I'm not so sure we would've been able to do anything." Also helping to bridge the gap was the arrival of the Atlanta Braves baseball franchise from Milwaukee, which, featuring future all-time home-run king Hank Aaron, began play in the spring of 1966. "Whenever you can get blacks and whites in the same forum," Johnson said, "it tends to release and remove some fears that might have existed between the two."

Advances in the city's business community were just as momentous. The Atlanta Life Insurance Company, established by Alonzo F. Herndon, a former slave, had grown into a very prominent financial institution. The *Atlanta Daily World*, founded in 1928, was one of the nation's most influential black papers. In the 1940s, WERD became the first African American-owned and operated radio station in the United States. With black institutions such as Morehouse College, Spelman College, Clark College, Atlanta University, and Morris Brown College, the academic environment was thriving as well. "Black people flocked to Atlanta," Bond said. "It had this reputation as a center of black middle-class life. You

could get a job at Delta or Coca-Cola, where, in New York, you might not be able to work for these companies. Things appeared to be going on. It was a place you wanted to be."

The accumulation of political power was perhaps the most significant development. During the election of 1969, the number of African Americans on the Board of Aldermen rose from one to five while Sam Massell, who received more than 90 percent of the black vote, was elected the first Jewish mayor in the city's history. The victories gave Johnson more leverage than ever. When the moment became appropriate, he would surely collect on those IOUs. With the opportunity to help launch Muhammad Ali's comeback, and pick up a nice paycheck, the moment had arrived. Johnson went to city hall to meet with Massell. Johnson was not about to take any chances with such a delicate matter. "The mayor could always, because he was the mayor, flex his muscles," Johnson explained. "Could we override that? Possibly, but you try to anticipate problems and resolve them. If I had the Board of Aldermen and the mayor, then I would have a clear shot."

Massell, in office for less than a year, was not overly thrilled with the idea. Believing he knew the pulse of the city better than anyone—a special light was installed in his car allowing him, between engagements at night, to read every local publication, including the Greek, the Jewish, and the union newspapers—the mayor recognized that despite evidence of improved relations between whites and blacks there were still people in Atlanta who were not too busy to hate. After hesitating briefly, he gave his consent. "I owe you one," Massell said, according to Johnson. The mayor served on the draft board during World War II and was familiar with the laws dealing with conscientious objectors. "I knew it was a legal position, so that was part of what dictated my opinion and judgment," he said. In exchange for his support, Massell extracted a commitment from Kassel's group to hand over a check for $50,000 on the night of the fight to the Metropolitan Atlanta Commission on Alcoholism and Drugs for information leading to arrests and convictions. The drug problem in the city "was just surfacing," Massell recalled. "We

had a large influx of hippies, flower children, maybe second to San Francisco. They flooded the streets."

The next assignment for Johnson was much tougher. The governor of Georgia did not owe Leroy Johnson a damn thing. Furthermore, the suggestion that Lester G. Maddox, who ascended to power largely on his opposition to integration and refused to attend Dr. King's funeral in 1968, calling him an "an enemy of the country," might actually assist a black convicted draft dodger seemed ludicrous. In fact, he had opposed a bid a year earlier for an Ali match in Macon.

Maddox became famous, or infamous, in July 1964 when he and his supporters, wielding pick handles, prevented five blacks from entering the Pickrick, a fried chicken restaurant he owned. Maddox also waived a pistol in the air. A photo of the incident, which took place the day after President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights bill, appeared in papers throughout the country. Three years later, Maddox became governor even though he lost the popular vote to conservative Republican Howard "Bo" Callaway. Because of a write-in campaign for former governor Ellis Arnall, Callaway failed to secure a majority, sending the decision to the Democrat-controlled Georgia State Assembly, which, naturally, chose a fellow Democrat, Maddox.

The meeting got off to a rough start, with Maddox insisting to Johnson that an Ali bout in downtown Atlanta would incite violence. "Governor, there is nothing in Ali's history which suggests that he's an instigator," Johnson countered. The senator made a strong argument, but Maddox was not swayed. Johnson moved on to the subject of welfare. He believed that the governor was one of many Southerners during that era who assumed that every black person's fondest desire was to remain forever on the public dole. "Ali wants to work for a living," he told Maddox, "and not be on welfare. To do that, he needs to fight." Maddox held his ground again.

Finally, Johnson pulled out his last card. A few months earlier, the governor's son, Lester Maddox Jr., twenty-six, had been

arrested for burglary. Remembering he heard a judge explain that he was giving the governor's son "another chance" by keeping him out of jail, Johnson said to Maddox, "Governor, everybody deserves *another chance*." The use of the identical phrase did not escape Maddox. "On with the fight," he told Johnson. The phrase apparently stuck in the governor's mind. "I think Clay deserves another chance," he said at a press conference. "Clay's proud of his race. I think a man should be proud of his race. Besides, if I was against him, what could I do about it? . . . At least he was expressing his real convictions. And if he's made some mistakes, everyone else has made some, too, you know."

Soon afterward, however, Maddox reversed course, claiming he gave his initial blessing without knowing that Ali had been formally convicted of draft evasion. Johnson was stunned. He became convinced that the White Citizens' Council, adhering to the same segregationist views as the Ku Klux Klan, must have gotten to Maddox. Yet the senator was savvy enough to recognize that the last thing he could afford at this critical juncture was to be involved in a public fight with the governor of Georgia, a fight he would most likely not win, and which might very well cost him his only opportunity to stage the Ali bout in Atlanta. Johnson referred to Maddox as "a man of great compassion," certain "he meant the kind things he said about giving Mr. Clay the opportunity to redeem himself."

Maddox might have come to a sincere change of heart or been simply posturing in an appeal to his supporters. Under Georgia law, though ineligible to run in November for a second consecutive term, he was a candidate for lieutenant governor. (Maddox was victorious, serving in the post from 1971 to 1975. Elected to replace him as governor was Jimmy Carter.)

If a fight could be arranged, if Leroy Johnson were to prevail against Lester Maddox, or anybody else who might attempt to thwart his efforts, who would then be Ali's ideal opponent in the ring? Who would draw the most attention—or, more precisely, the most dollars? Making history was an admirable objective, but

prizefights are made, first and foremost, to make money, not history. The obvious answer was Joe Frazier, who, with his victory over Jimmy Ellis at the Garden in February, was the only official heavyweight champion, the heir to the throne Ali was forced to abdicate. Yet landing Frazier was not the first order of business for Johnson and Kassel. Frazier was not going anywhere. He and Yancey "Yank" Durham, his trainer and manager, could not possibly turn down the opportunity to rid themselves of the one remaining obstacle in their path and secure the most lucrative payday of their careers.

The first order of business was landing Muhammad Ali. Nobody took very seriously Ali's declarations that he was done with boxing.

"They can come up tomorrow," Ali wrote in *Esquire* during the spring of 1970, "and say: 'We want you to fight Joe Frazier in Madison Square Garden for millions of dollars with no taxes. Here's your license to fight. We're all ready.' I'll just tell them: 'I'm sorry, but I'm through now. . . . I can't sleep under but one roof, can't eat but one meal, can't wear but one suit, and can't ride in but one car, and I got plenty of that. So why do I want to fight? I don't need no prestige at beating up nobody. I'm tired. And I want to be the first black champion that got out that didn't get whipped.'" Ali even volunteered to hand over his belt to the Frazier-Ellis winner in the middle of the ring, but the offer did not prove he was finished. The only reason Ali was not fighting was that no boxing commission or politician let him fight. Boxing was what made him famous.

"Had somewhere during that period he discovered that he had as much talent with the trumpet as he had in the ring and could get as much attention as the world's greatest brass player, I think going back into the ring would not have mattered," the *Times*'s Robert Lipsyte suggested. "But I think that a lot of this goes back to that desperate striving for affirmation, and the only way he had ever gotten it, and would continue to get it, was as a boxer." In fact, in the same *Esquire* article, Ali described how he would approach Frazier differently in the ring from the way his former sparring partner, Ellis, did. He did not exactly sound retired.

"Ellis wore himself out, got weak," Ali wrote, "couldn't take no punishment in close . . . *I'd be pickin' and pokin' . . . throwing water on Joe's smokin'. . . . It might shock and amaze ya, but I'd destroy Frazier.*"

In April 1968, Lipsyte was strolling down Van Ness Street in San Francisco in search of breakfast when he was spotted by Ali, who was on his way to address an antiwar gathering at the Civic Center Plaza. His car pulled up to the curb. "He was looking for people to talk to him," Lipsyte said, "particularly people who remembered him when he was the champ. He was glad to see reporters. He wasn't getting the attention that he wanted." The most attention Ali received in the late 1960s came during the lectures he delivered on college campuses. The students applauded his courage in taking on the Establishment, and let him know they still considered him the true heavyweight champion.

"They loved him," Pacheco recalled. "We walked in there, and you would think that he was ready to run for president."

Ali needed more than attention. He needed money. The limited streams of revenue during his hiatus—lectures for about $2,500 a crack, a short-lived appearance in a Broadway musical called *Buck White*, a $225,000 deal with Random House for his autobiography—could never come close to the riches available to him in the fight game. (*Buck White* closed after only four days. According to producer Zev Buffman, Ali gave an inspired effort when he performed in front of a preview audience but could not maintain the same level the following night when the critics showed up. "There was no fire," Buffman said.) "For a brief moment in life," according to Pacheco, "he tasted the wonderful fruits of having a lot of money, and then, all of a sudden, he tasted poverty again. Ali was stone broke." So broke, Pacheco said, that friends gave him money. "You're talking about $100 here, $200 there," he added. "You love the guy, and he means something to you, you just don't want to see him scuffle."

Even people who did not know Ali personally assumed he was in financial trouble. A New York Hilton Hotel employee once

informed him that he owed $53.09 in charges billed to his room and, from then on, needed to pay for room service in cash.

"This don't bother me none," Ali said. "Word probably got around, he's not the champ no more, he's busted, you better get your money up front. That's the way it is. When you the champ, you can sign and sign and sign." Ali handed the clerk a fifty and a five. "The manager of the hotel was so apologetic, asking for autographs," Lipsyte said. "The whole thing was really bizarre." Ali coped as well as possible, given the circumstances. "You could put him in the worst dump of a hotel and it would not bother him at all, as long as there was a bed, a wash basin, and a bathroom to use," Pacheco said. "He didn't give a shit. He didn't seem to get insulted."

To this day, one question related to Ali's economic difficulties remains: did Joe Frazier give him money?

In the 2000 HBO documentary *Ali-Frazier I: One Nation . . . Divisible*, Frazier claims he put "some love in his hand," meaning cash. Butch Lewis, a friend, said Frazier gave Ali $2,000 for an overdue hotel bill. Joe Hand, an administrator for Cloverlay, the Philadelphia corporation established in 1965 to oversee Frazier's finances, recalled that during a board meeting, "somebody in the office said, 'We just lent Ali some money.' Yank and Joe said they wanted to do it. I don't know if it was Cloverlay's money or not." Ali biographer Thomas Hauser said, however, that when he ran the Lewis story by Ali in 1990, Ali was emphatic that it was not accurate. Hauser left it out of the manuscript. "There were lots of other anecdotes in the book that one might consider equally embarrassing that Ali had no problem with," Hauser said. "From that, it seemed to me he was probably correct in denying that it happened." Pacheco also expressed his doubts. "I don't think Ali would have asked for it or accepted it," he said. "Frazier is a tough guy from Philadelphia. He had no reason to give anything to Ali."

In April 1969, Ali opened up about his troubles, and it cost him dearly. During an interview with Howard Cosell, Ali acknowledged that he hoped to return to boxing to clear up some of his debts.

The Black Muslims suspended him for one year and took away something far more valuable to him than his crown: his name.

"Mr. Muhammad plainly acted the fool. Any man or woman who comes to Allah and then puts his hopes and trust in the enemy of Allah for survival is underestimating the power of Allah to help them," Elijah Muhammad, the group's head, said in a statement that ran in *Muhammad Speaks*, the Nation of Islam publication. "This statement is to tell the world that we, the Muslims, are not with Mr. Muhammad Ali, in his desire to work in the sports world for the sake of a 'leetle' money." Ali retracted his comments. "He was right and I was wrong," he said several months later. "I don't need boxing to make a living. What my leader did was worse than my five-year sentence, worse than 15 years at hard labor." At the same time, however, he added, "I don't want to fight Frazier—he wants to fight me—but I would fight him if the terms are agreed."

By the summer of 1970, Ali was still often referred to by the media as Cassius Clay even though six years had gone by since he went public with his new identity, declaring Clay a slave name. As Ali did not formally change his name, the *New York Times* typically added the phrase "also known as Cassius Clay" after calling him Ali in the original reference. In the late 1960s, Robert Lipsyte argued to his superiors against any references to *Clay*, but it did no good. A. M. Rosenthal, the paper's conservative managing editor, Lipsyte said, "waited a long time before he would allow Ms. in the paper." Ali understood. Once, when a friend started reading to Ali a story written by Lipsyte, the writer apologized for referring to him as Clay. Ali put his hand on Lipsyte's shoulder.

"I know it's not you," Ali assured him. "You're just a little brother of the white power structure."

To members of the fourth estate who grew up in the 1940s and 1950s and believed that black professional athletes were supposed to be respectful, subservient, and eternally grateful for the privi-

lege of amassing more fame and fortune than they could have ever imagined, Ali was still Cassius Clay. Unlike their icon, Joe Louis, who proudly served his nation in World War II, the seminal event of their lifetime, Clay was precisely what an athlete was *not* supposed to be: bombastic, defiant, pontificating on social and political issues outside his limited scope. Conversely, to many younger writers, Ali was a pivotal figure in American culture precisely *because* he saw beyond the narrow parameters of his sport. They, too, greatly admired Joe Louis, but World War II had not shaped their value system.

Despite his popularity among college students, Ali did not buy into the whole left agenda and was not afraid to let them know it.

"He could be kind of off-putting when he made fun of dope or when he mocked interracial relationships," Lipsyte said. For the speech in San Francisco, "he had a beautiful day, a big audience, everyone thrilled that he was there. The first thing he did was kind of twitch his nose at the cloud of pot that was coming up from the audience and he made some comment about that. The heads [potheads] got up and left, and then he got into one of his redbirds stay with redbirds and bluebirds stay with bluebirds and the checkerboard [interracial] romances got up and left. Later, he told the booking agent, 'I guess I'm just too strong for the audience.'"

Whatever his social or political leanings, few attracted a crowd as easily as Muhammad Ali. One day, he and Ferdie Pacheco were in a limo heading down Broadway with the British promoter Jarvis Astaire, who was, according to Pacheco, considering the idea of hooking Ali up for a third time with English heavyweight Henry Cooper. Ali won both fights, in 1963 and 1966. In the fourth round of their initial encounter, Cooper became only the second opponent to put Ali on the deck. Ali was in real danger of suffering his first defeat. Enter Angelo Dundee to the rescue. He bought some much-needed extra time by enlarging a split that had already opened up in Ali's gloves. Ali recovered and stopped Cooper in the fifth round.

"How do I know if you still have any drawing power?" Astaire asked.

"How much money do you have in your pocket?" Ali responded.

"Two thousand dollars," Astaire said.

"I'll bet you two thousand dollars," Ali proposed. "Let me out at this corner. I'll walk up to that corner over there. I won't say anything. I won't holler or raise my arms or acknowledge who I am. I'll walk straight to that corner and I'll stand still. By the time I get over there, I'll stop traffic. The police will have to come."

Astaire accepted the bet.

Ali stepped out of the limo. He walked only a few yards before people began to chant his name.

"By the time we got to that corner," Pacheco said, "you could not move on Broadway and Forty-second. From sidewalk to sidewalk, you couldn't see the street. It was all just people."

According to Pacheco, Ali did not believe his banishment from the ring would last too long. "They can't help but get to me," Ali told him. "I'm the best there is. I'm where the money is. If not this year, next year." Maybe he was the best there was and maybe, with all the people in the business who stood to profit from his return, *they* would have to get to him eventually. Then again, maybe not. With every rejection, every time a boxing commissioner or elected official blocked his path, Ali, in his most insecure moments, must have wondered if his career was, indeed, over. "There were a lot of ups and downs that raised and lowered his spirits," Lipsyte acknowledged.

There was another concern: Ali was running out of time. In boxing, time is every fighter's one truly indestructible opponent. The day comes, whether it's Jack Johnson or Jack Dempsey or Joe Louis, when the punches are no longer as powerful, the reflexes as precise, the will as persistent. In his normal style, Ali relied heavily on speed and intelligence to overcome flaws—he held his hands low and leaned away from punches instead of slipping them. The longer Ali, twenty-eight, stayed away from competition, the longer the odds of him staging a successful comeback. "I knew that

unless my exile ended soon, the tools of my trade would wither," Ali acknowledged.

Pacheco was also worried. Prior to the layoff, because of Ali's ability to escape any sustained punishment, "there was nothing for me to do," Pacheco said. That would certainly not be the case after the layoff. "He was getting too flabby, and the edge wasn't there anymore," he added. "I wasn't worried about a comeback happening. I was worried it would happen too late for him. But even if it had been too late, he would have done it anyway."

During the exile, Ali jogged on occasion and trained at his familiar hangout, the Fifth Street Gym in Miami Beach. He sparred with Jimmy Ellis. Yet no amount of working out could possibly compare with getting into a real fight against an opponent out to knock him senseless.

Ali was skeptical about the comeback happening in Atlanta. Anybody would be skeptical that, of the fifty states in the Union, Georgia, with its shameful record on civil rights and governed by Lester Maddox, would be the one to embrace a black man who chose not to obey the law of the land. During their first conversation, Leroy Johnson stressed to Ali that Atlanta was everything the rest of Georgia was not—progressive, tolerant, a beacon for a New South. "I want history to show that it was a black man that assisted you in beating the system," Johnson told Ali. "Brother, I like that," Ali replied.

In August 1970, the Board of Aldermen approved a permit for Ali to fight, presumably against Frazier, on October 26 at Municipal Auditorium, a dusty 5,000-seat arena perhaps best known for Friday night wrestling shows put on by the promoter Paul Jones (the state-of-the-art Omni would not be completed until 1972). Robert Kassel arranged for a press conference at the Marriott Hotel in downtown Atlanta to make the formal announcement. Ali came in from Philadelphia, but after so many failures, he was not about to celebrate his return to the ring just yet. After schmoozing with Sam Massell and other city leaders, Ali retreated to his room. According to Kassel, the press was not informed he was in

the building. "I told Ali I would call his room and have the phone on speaker," he said, "so he could hear the goings-on, so that when he realized we were presenting a license, he would come down."

The key players in securing the permit—which included Jesse Hill, the chief actuary of Atlanta Life—came to the press conference, except for Massell. It was one thing for the mayor to give his official support; it was quite another, given the amount of antagonism that remained toward Ali, for Massell to be seen on the dais with the other dignitaries. "I had done what I needed to do," he explained. "I knew it was not a popular thing." Midway through the session, Kassel took the phone off the speaker. "Champ," he whispered to Ali, "why don't you come down. Everybody is here. The flashbulbs are going and the cameras are on." A few minutes later, Ali made his grand entrance. Nobody made grand entrances like Ali. The reaction, Kassel said, was "pandemonium. They were shocked he was there."

Within a few days, Johnson spoke with Yank Durham, who made the important decisions in the Frazier camp. Johnson soon realized that Durham might be even tougher to bring on board than the hesitant mayor and the segregationist governor back home. The close calls in recent months made Durham perhaps even more wary than Ali. "We've been down the primrose path before, and it always collapsed," he told the senator. Yet Johnson emerged from the conversion with a ray of hope. Durham, he claims, assured him that if he was able to put Ali in the ring against another fighter first, he would have a date with his man.

Johnson went to work right away on arranging an Ali exhibition bout. He ruled out Municipal Auditorium, because it was too accessible to the white community, which might incite the kind of violent response Maddox warned him about in their earlier meeting. Maddox would then be able to make a pretty strong case that staging another Ali fight in October would be too risky. Johnson contacted his good friend Hugh Gloster, the president of Morehouse College, who agreed to allow the school's gym to be used for the event. Morehouse was situated in an African American neigh-

borhood. Johnson believed it would insulate the bout from the "intrusion of the White Citizens' Council and the Ku Klux Klan." The Klan, in fact, was planning to hold a rally at Stone Mountain three days after the Ali exhibition. The group, in an advertisement that appeared in the *Atlanta Journal*, promised "prominent speakers" and "cross lighting" and reminded people to bring their robes.

Ali went into training and dropped about 15 pounds, though on the eve of the exhibition he tipped the scales at a portly 221, still about 10 pounds above his standard fighting weight. Asked about his return to fighting, he said, "I have a lot to see in eight rounds."

What he—and everyone else—saw, in three separate bouts against the unheralded heavyweights Johnny Hudgins, Rufus Brassell, and George Hill, in a hot, crowded college gymnasium, was not very impressive. Against Brassell, his first opponent, he threw light jabs. Against Hudgins, he let himself get hit. Finally, after the first of four rounds against Hill, some of the 2,700 fans registered their disapproval with a response rarely associated with an Ali show: they booed. Ali's assistant trainer and lead booster, Drew "Bundini" Brown, who coined the slogan "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee," decided to do something about it. "I kept talking to him in the corner, reminding him of what he went through to get here, and he perked right up," said Brown, in Ali's corner for the first time since he was kicked out five years earlier for pawning his championship belt to a barber in Harlem for $500. "Bad financial straits characterized Bundini's life," Pacheco said. "He couldn't hold on to a nickel. As soon as he got money, he spent it."

Brown drank too much, but nobody fired Ali up as well as he could. If Ali did not feel like training, Brown found a way to make him train. Ali was so fond of him that, according to Pacheco, even Dundee could not do anything about it. "Angelo recognized he had to accept Bundini because the kid wanted him," Pacheco said. "If he didn't accept Bundini, the likelihood was that *he* would get fired. He tried to just act as if Bundini wasn't there. When he stole the belt, Angelo didn't say anything. Ali thought he was funny. It was like a court jester."

Responding to Brown's pep talk at Morehouse, Ali began to show flashes of the preexile Ali—the famous footwork, the flurry of combinations, the crowd-pleasing entertainer. The boos ceased and the cheering got loud, and soon Ali was done for the evening, though it was clear that he was a long way from being at his best and that nothing less than his best would be necessary to reclaim the crown. Although Ali downplayed Frazier's abilities, he was aware of how formidable an adversary Frazier would be. "In 1967, I was working for WKCR, a student radio station at Columbia," Ali biographer Thomas Hauser said. "I taped an interview with Ali. That was the first time I met him. It was right before he fought Zora Folley. I asked him who he thought would be the toughest of the young heavyweights out there for him and he said, 'Joe Frazier.'"

Ali's showing at Morehouse was not the point. He would have nearly two months to work himself into prime fighting condition. The point was that Johnson did exactly what Durham proposed, and the city didn't burn. There was little Lester Maddox could say now. "Way down in our hearts, we didn't know if the bell would ring," Brown said. "We didn't know if we could even enter the ring here until we walked out there and did it. . . . I think everyone was expecting someone to stop the fights just as they were about to begin." For many, the evening signified more than the return of one of the world's greatest athletes. "At the time, among Morehouse students, there was enormous interest in Afro-American consciousness and pride," said Alvin Darden, the school's dean of freshmen, who attended Morehouse at the time. "That's why we loved Ali. He was fighting for his liberation—to be recognized as a Muslim, to be recognized for his stance on the war—and this was a metaphor for what we were going through. So it wasn't a boxer in our gym. It was part of a movement."

Johnson was more optimistic than ever. He was on the verge of pulling off something the established boxing promoters failed to do in the nearly three and a half years since Ali was stripped of his title. He was about to land—with respect to Joe Louis and Max

Schmeling, and their historic June 1938 duel in Yankee Stadium—the fight of the century. But Durham was not swayed by the exhibition. He told Johnson that Frazier would not fight Ali in Atlanta. Plans were already in motion for Frazier to take on the light heavyweight champion, Bob Foster. Johnson was angry. "The man gave his word, and I went to a lot of trouble getting a place for him to fight," he said.

Kassel and Johnson needed another opponent for Ali, and time was definitely not on their side. In the late summer of 1970, there remained a distinct possibility that the Supreme Court would decide at any moment against hearing Ali's appeal, which meant he would have to report to the federal penitentiary. "It became abundantly clear that we were sort of pissing against the wind," Kassel said. "Our attitude was to strike while the iron was hot. We couldn't sit around negotiating, trying to convince Yank Durham to do something."

Thanks to Harold Conrad, they found their backup. Conrad, a tall, skinny, ex-sportswriter, was entrusted with an assortment of tasks, many invaluable. He was the model for Budd Schulberg's 1947 novel, *The Harder They Fall*, in whose film version a down-and-out Humphrey Bogart promotes a series of fixed fights involving a trumped-up boxer from Argentina.

"Conrad was a throwback right out of Damon Runyon," Schulberg recalled. "He was running around the boxing world and the mob world. He had no illusions about anything." In February 1964, it was Conrad who suggested that Ali, during his last week of training in Miami Beach for the first Liston bout, visit with four young men from Liverpool. Ali and the Beatles posed for a group of priceless photos. During the exile, Conrad crisscrossed the country in hopes of landing a license for Ali. He was especially useful to Kassel, who, prior to Atlanta, had worked on the promotion of only one bout, Ellis versus Frazier. Also on the payroll was Mike Malitz, a closed-circuit expert, whose father, Lester, was a pioneer in the technology that changed boxing forever. "I wasn't one of the gang," Kassel said. "To be one of the gang, you had to be around for ten years."

The backup was Jerry Quarry. Although he was not particularly consistent (losses to Eddie Machen and George Chuvalo stood out) or clever (he attempted to out-box Ellis and out-slug Frazier), Quarry was ranked number one by *Ring* magazine, the sport's unofficial bible, and was extremely popular. He was a superb counterpuncher, with victories over former champion Floyd Patterson and the highly regarded Thad Spencer. There was an added benefit to bringing Quarry into the equation: Quarry was white. While Ali was adored by many white fans, and the sport and society had come a long way since the search for a white fighter to dethrone the despised heavyweight champion Jack Johnson in the early twentieth century, introducing the element of racial conflict could not help but generate broader interest. There were also many fans who abhorred Ali, including those who would like nothing better than to see a black draft dodger knocked on his ass by a white man defending the United States of America.

On September 10, 1970, Muhammad Ali and Jerry Quarry met at the Hotel Berkshire at Madison Avenue and Fifty-second Street in midtown Manhattan to sign the contracts for their scheduled 15-rounder at Municipal Auditorium. Ali was guaranteed $200,000 against 42½ percent of the net income, and Quarry $150,000 against 22½ percent—the largest purses either fighter had ever secured for one night's work. Established immediately as a 3–1 favorite, Ali wasted no time in selling the fight. Shortly before the press conference began, he approached his opponent.

"I want you to say that you're going to beat me up," he told Quarry, according to Quarry's wife, Kathleen. "You just lay into me and I'll lay into you. People come to my fights for two reasons, either they love me or they hate me. Either way, I make money."

When Quarry took the podium, he was no Ali, but he played the part as well as he could. "I've always wanted to fight him," Quarry said. "He's quick but he's not a big puncher, and I can punch with either hand. I can take a lot out of him. I don't know if he'll be as good as he was. That remains to be seen. But he better be."

Afterward, Ali bumped into Quarry and his wife in front of the hotel. They shook hands and laughed.

"You did good," Ali told him. "You did good."

For Leroy Reginald Johnson, Muhammad Ali versus Jerry Quarry was not exactly the duel he anticipated when he took on the cause. Ali versus Quarry was not the fight of the century. Nonetheless, at long last, Muhammad Ali was scheduled to appear in an official heavyweight bout for the first time since March 22, 1967.

Leroy Johnson was beating the system. Again.