

The Backstory Tuesday, January 17, 2012 | By George Lois | Add a Comment

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Happy Birthday, Muhammad Ali: 70 Iconic Images for 70 Years

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Anton Perich

Ali on horseback in Deer Lake, Pa., 1974

Anton Perich: "When I took this picture of Ali on a horse, it brought back a mythical experience from my childhood. In the little chapel in my village, there was an altarpiece depicting St. George on horseback, slaying the dragon. In front of Ali, I was so moved — the champion had the dignity, elegance, strength and beauty of the saint. Ali's horse, like St. George's, lacked none of that. It was a majestic moment, when reality meets mythology."

Anton Perich is a filmmaker and photographer.

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Muhammad Ali's first sounds were "Gee-Gee, Gee-Gee." His beautiful mother Odessa Clay called her son "G-G" for the rest of her life, and years later, Ali would say, "After I won the Golden Gloves, I told Mama that from the very beginning, I was trying to say, 'Golden Gloves.'" So began the life of Muhammad Ali, who celebrates his 70th birthday today. Though many know him as the greatest boxer of all time, few know that it was actually the theft of his bicycle at age 12 that began his boxing career. After the bike was stolen, Ali ran to the police station, threatening to "whup whoever stole my bike." Joe Martin, a white Louisville, Ky., policeman, told him he had better learn to fight, and in his spare time, he took Ali under his wing and taught him the ropes. Ali won his first fight six weeks later. When the referee raised his arm in victory, Ali shouted the iconic words that would become a self-fulfilling prophecy: "I'm gonna be the greatest of all time!"

But what was so incredible about Ali was all the courageous and selfless things he did beyond boxing. In 1975 I called Ali to talk to him about the campaign I was doing for Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, whose book convinced me that he was an innocent man in the slammer. Muhammad was so happy to hear I thought Rubin was innocent. He said, "Absolutely, I'm with you." Ali literally stopped doing a million things to help someone — a fellow fighter — get out of jail. It was so heroic, and of all the times we worked together, it is still my favorite memory of him. I also can't tell you how many times, when we were driving on the road, he'd see a school and make me pull over. He'd meet all 200 schoolkids and sign 200 autographs, often with a kid on his lap. That was just his personality, to be so giving of his time. It seriously got to the point that when I saw a school, I'd think, "Oh my God, here we go again. We're in trouble."

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