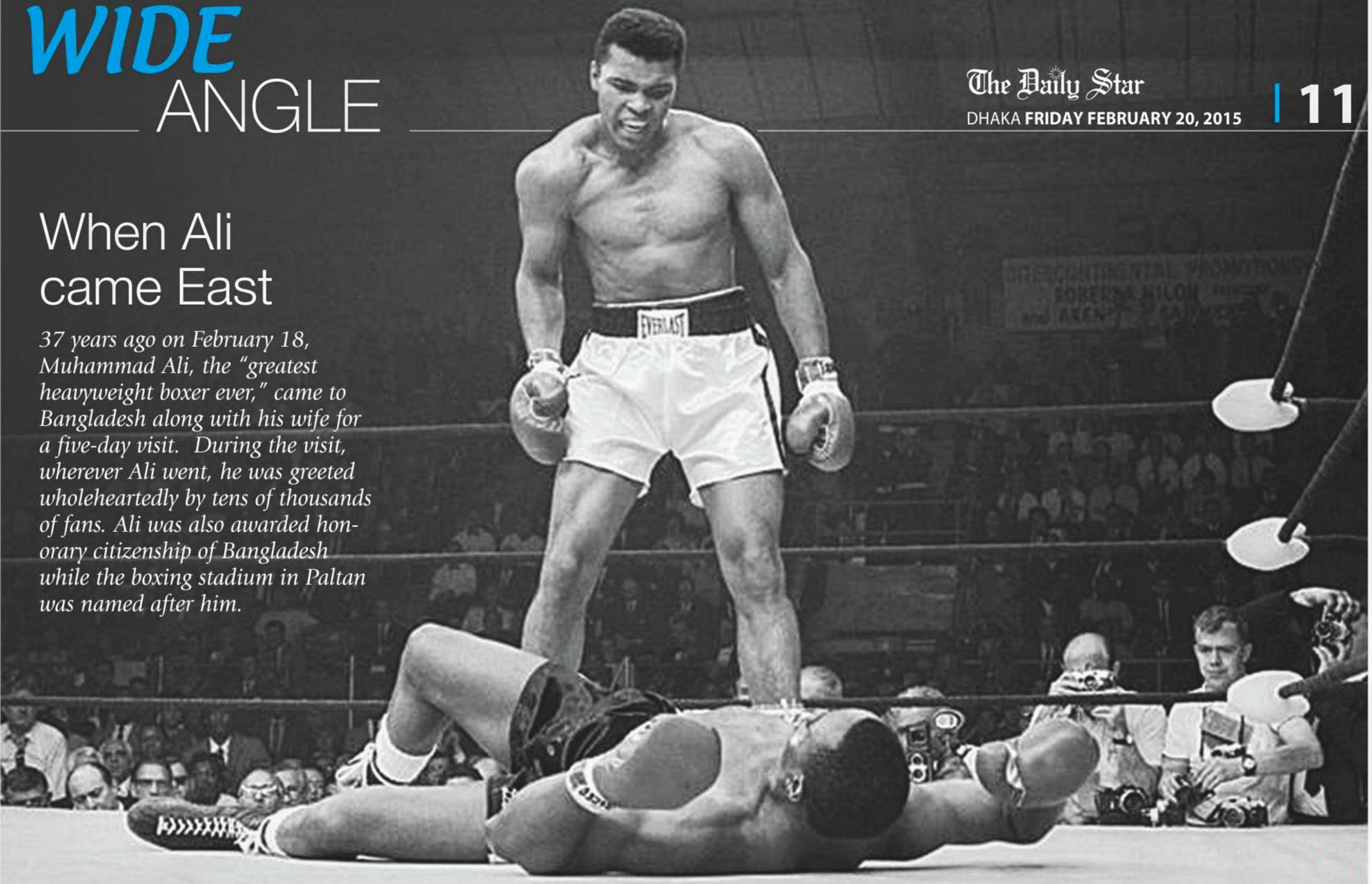


When Ali came East

37 years ago on February 18, Muhammad Ali, the "greatest heavyweight boxer ever," came to Bangladesh along with his wife for a five-day visit. During the visit, wherever Ali went, he was greeted wholeheartedly by tens of thousands of fans. Ali was also awarded honorary citizenship of Bangladesh while the boxing stadium in Paltan was named after him.



BANGLADESH I LOVE YOU

Reginald Massey

Since my early youth I have been fascinated by Bengal, its culture and its people. I read all about Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Henry Derozio, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Tagore, Nazrul Islam, Jamini Roy and other amazingly creative people. No other region of South Asia had produced such a large number of artists and poets.

In London, in the seventies, when I was chairman of Seven Stars Films I met a leading Bangladeshi businessman named Ghiasuddin Chowdhury and he said that it would be a good idea for me to make a film about Bangladesh. It was a new country which was created by the forces of history and the blood of its brave martyrs. After much thought we decided that the best person to project Bangladesh would be the Black Muslim boxer Muhammad Ali ('The Greatest') who was universally loved and respected. In fact, American President Jimmy Carter and his mother had great affection for Ali.

The problem was how to get to Ali. Many trips to Los Angeles were under-

taken and eventually Ali agreed that he'd introduce Bangladesh to the world. But first he had to solve a small matter in the boxing ring. He was scheduled to fight Leon Spinks which he thought was only a small problem. But Spinks beat him on points. Ali was devastated. He thought that he could not face his fans in Bangladesh and I had to convince him that his defeat would make no difference. The government and the people of Bangladesh would welcome him nonetheless. He asked me: "Brother Reg, are you sure?" I replied, "You have my word for it."

Full marks to President Ziaur Rahman and his officials. Ali, his wife Veronica and his entire entourage were state guests and treated like royalty. He was given the citizenship of Bangladesh and taken to all the important areas and sites of Bangladesh from the tea gardens of Sylhet to the tiger-infested Sundarbans and the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the fabulous sun-soaked beaches of Cox's Bazar. I, with my film crew, filmed Ali enjoying the sheer beauty of the country.

He was brilliant, especially when speaking directly to camera. Ali was a natural communicator and I am glad that in spite of his serious health problems he still survives.

Bangladesh I Love You, when cut and edited, was screened in United Kingdom cinemas by Lord Grade's distribution company. It was greatly appreciated and well received. That was my small contribution to put Bangladesh on the world stage.

But all enterprises of this nature and magnitude are a team effort. There were many people, Bangladeshis, British and American who pitched in wholeheartedly. The New Zealand author and journalist Marc Alexander was the main anchor-man and my chief cameraman was Lewis "Rory" MacLeod, a Scotsman pure and unashamedly unpolluted.

What is seen on the screen is the final result of long planning, hard work, hard bargaining and absolute sincerity of purpose. I insisted that Bangla music be included as well as a traditional

Bangladeshi Islamic marriage ceremony be filmed. The scene where the father of the bride bids farewell to his beloved daughter still brings tears to my eyes.

Normally 'firanghi' cameramen would not be allowed anywhere near a new Muslim bride of the upper Bangladeshi class. While I was directing the scene, "Rory" asked me: "Reg, can I continue shooting?"

I replied: "Rory, continue filming! You may not understand this but you are filming history."

Personally I feel it is a pity that the film has not been commercially released in Bangladesh. After almost 40 years the younger generation must be made to realise what immense opportunities have been missed.

(Reginald Massey, Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and Freeman of the City of London, has written many books on South Asian subjects. His book SOUTH ASIA: Definitions and Clarifications is required reading in leading world universities. Massey wrote this article exclusively for this issue of Wide Angle)

Life sketch

Born as Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr. on January 17, 1942, into an African American family of Kentucky, Ali took to boxing at 12 years of age, almost by accident. But he showed his talent early and turned a professional right after winning a gold medal in the light heavyweight category of the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome. During a professional career of just over two decades, Ali won the world heavyweight title three times and enjoyed an overall 56 to 5 win/loss record.

Outside the ring, Ali gained worldwide popularity for his anti-war and anti-racial stance while becoming a household name across the Muslim world for embracing Islam.

At 73 years of age and incapacitated by Parkinson's disease, Ali currently lives in Arizona. He was admitted to hospital quite a few times over the last couple of years with various ailments.

FAMOUS QUOTES

"Allah is the Greatest. I'm just the greatest boxer."

"Float like a butterfly and sting like a bee, the hands can't hit what the eyes can't see."

"I ain't got no quarrel with them Viet Cong -- no Viet Cong ever called me Nigger."

THE BOY WHO 'KNOCKED OUT' ALI

Anisur Rahman

The most exciting part of Muhammad Ali's sojourn in Bangladesh was probably the mock fight against a young boy at the Dhaka Stadium. Even though Ali took the fight as yet another stage to entertain the crowd and those watching on TV, it meant a whole lot to that young boy.

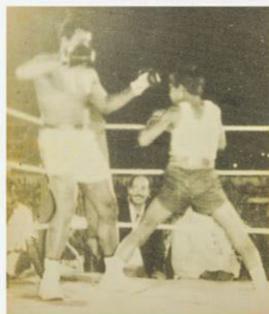
Mohammad Giasuddin was only twelve years old when he got this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to fight the "greatest ever boxer," after being selected as the junior boxing champion. The skinny and fleet-footed young boy was bubbling with enthusiasm as Ali arrived at the ringside, wearing a red gown and eyes hidden under dark glasses.

"Fighting against Muhammad Ali was the greatest achievement for me because such an incident doesn't happen in everyone's life. Whenever I remember that day, I feel a different type of pleasure," recalls Giasuddin, now a bulky and bearded businessman approaching 50, as he turns over the pages of dusty old magazines at his Basabo house.

Giasuddin first took interest in boxing after watching Ali on television at the age of 6. He took up the game around that time when he went to watch a practice of champion boxer AK Asadullah at the Basabo ground. One day

Asadullah asked Giasuddin whether he would like to learn boxing and his reply was an instant yes.

But getting selected for the fight against Ali was a different story altogether. In fact Giasuddin was not meant to fight against Ali at all. It was MA Rouf, a boxer



Little Giasuddin shaping up to pack a punch on Muhammad Ali

PHOTO: COLLECTED

from Bangladesh Army, who was selected for the fight. But that plan had to be dropped as Ali was in no mood to fight, having just lost his heavyweight title to Leon Spinks and earned a swelling under his eyes in return.

So the organisers instead selected Giasuddin, from amongst

a dozen or so young boys, for a mock fight aimed to give people as much entertainment as possible without getting serious. For Giasuddin, though, it was a completely different matter of rubbing shoulders with the world's greatest ever boxer.

"In the first bout, Ali tried to scare me but I didn't pay attention. I rather went forward like a boxer. At one point, Ali started to scream to frighten me. But I kept my nerve and tried to hit him on his face. But to be honest, I could not reach his face as he was too tall; so I kept punching on his belly," recalls Giasuddin.

There was a lot of drama in the third and last bout as Ali pretended he was dizzy from the hits and fell on the floor as the referee counted from one to three. Ali was declared to have been knocked out by young Giasuddin, much to the cheer and laughter of the spectators.

After that match, many people from his neighbourhood and beyond came to see Giasuddin. Even 37 years later, and after almost 32 years since a motorbike accident cut short his boxing career, Giasuddin still evokes people's respect when they discover that he was the boy who knocked Ali out.

What about the promised land?

Atique Anam

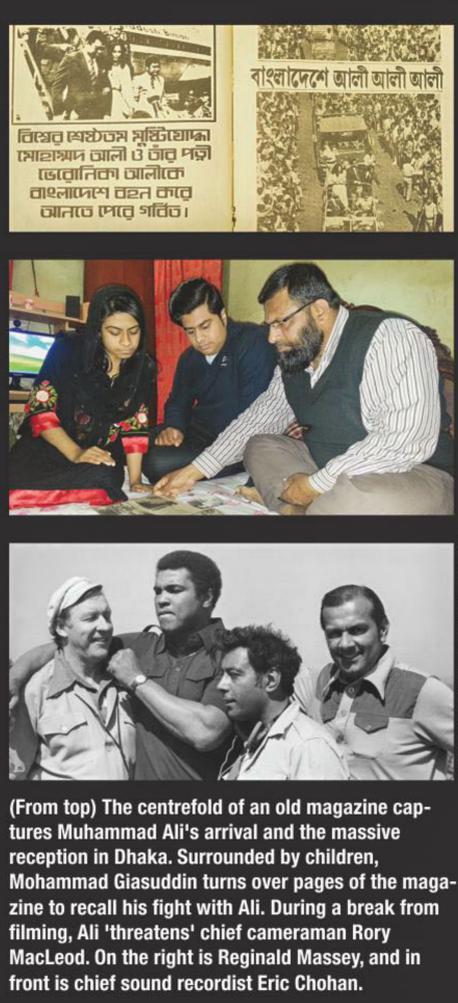
Ever since Muhammad Ali's historic visit to Bangladesh 37 years ago, there has been this occasional speculation in local media as to what happened to the piece of land in Cox's Bazar which was promised to the legendary boxer.

The common belief is -- thanks to the lack of proper research and investigation -- that the then government, which had patronised Ali's tour, had made the promise but later failed to make good on that. But The Daily Star's investigation has finally found out the real story and the man behind the promise. And the story is a simple one.

Akhtar Newaz Khan Babul was the son of a local landlord and had inherited much of his father's property around the Kolatoli beach and other places in Cox's Bazar. When Ali and his entourage came to the city, Babul was one of those willing to make his presence felt. A public reception was organised by the Cox's Bazar Mohkuma administration where Babul was chosen as one of the speakers. In an act of sheer bravado, the then 25-year-old student leader declared that he would gift Ali with a piece of land at the Kolatoli beach, not mentioning the size of it, on behalf of the people of the city.

Ali reacted by saying that he would like to build a dream home there one day. Later, as Ali wrapped up his five-day tour to Bangladesh, he commented that he had home to come to in case he ever was banished from his native land.

But after that declaration, since it was more of a symbolic nature, no one felt the need to register the piece of land in Ali's name. So like many other verbal promises made in our country, this one too was never realised, giving birth to more of a myth than a reality.



(From top) The centrefold of an old magazine captures Muhammad Ali's arrival and the massive reception in Dhaka. Surrounded by children, Mohammad Giasuddin turns over pages of the magazine to recall his fight with Ali. During a break from filming, Ali 'threatens' chief cameraman Rory MacLeod. On the right is Reginald Massey, and in front is chief sound recordist Eric Chohan.