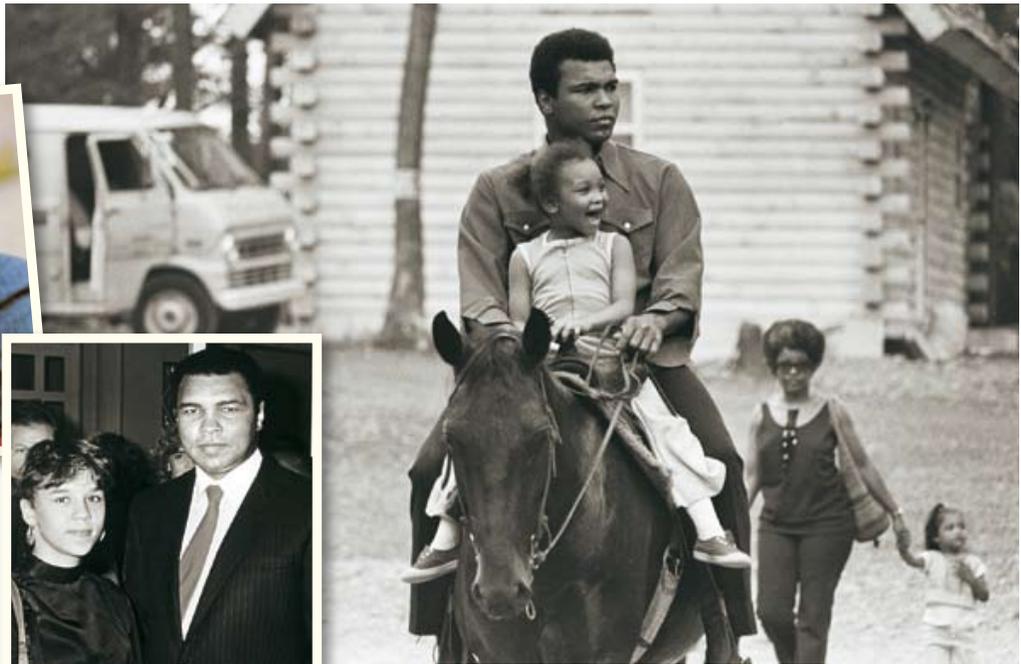


Maryum with her father at his training camp in Deer Lake, Pennsylvania, 1978. Inset: Maryum today, aged 46

# ‘He really was THE GREATEST’



Boxing legend Muhammad Ali fought his way to three world heavyweight titles and could talk the talk ringside, but little is known about his life when the gloves came off. Here MARYUM ALI (known as May May), the eldest of his nine children, gives YOU an exclusive insight into growing up with one of sport's most iconic stars >



**Clockwise from far left: Maryum as a toddler with her dad; horseriding together in 1973, followed by her mum and her sister; and dining out in New York in 1988**

**A** S SOON AS I could walk and talk, I knew that my father was famous. A simple trip to the convenience store would end up with 50 people surrounding our car and I knew it wasn't normal. My father loved people, so he would talk to them and entertain them. I would see celebrities such as Tom Jones and Sammy Davis Jr on TV and the next thing I knew they would be at our house in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. I knew my father was up there and how much people admired him.

**Sometimes it was frustrating sharing my father with the world,** but it was great, too. I have a picture of Sammy Davis Jr giving me a kiss when I was a baby. My father loved introducing me to people I idolised. I saw Tom Jones on TV and said, 'Ooh, Daddy, look at that good-looking man.' I thought he was a fair-skinned African-American man because he had an afro. My father took me to meet him when I was about four. He said, 'My daughter loves you. She says, "Tom Jones" all the time.' I was embarrassed because I was very shy, but Tom was so nice.

**I was a daddy's girl.** Whenever my father was going to a fight I would say, 'I want to go with you,' and a lot of times I did because I cried so much he gave in! He was a really good dad. We loved going with him to his boxing training camp in Deer Lake, Pennsylvania. I have a photo of me drying my father with a towel after he had finished training [on previous page]. He would always eat dinner with us. His Aunt Coretta was his chef and he loved good home-cooked food.

**My dad was a poet; he was the first rapper!** He said those things like 'float like a butterfly, sting like a bee' and had always been fascinated with poetry. He said this about Sonny Liston [the boxer Muhammad beat to win the world heavyweight title in 1964]: 'He will fall in round eight to prove I am great. And if he wants to go to heaven, I'll get him in seven... If you want to lose your money,

then bet on Sonny.' He used to say silly little things to us like: 'Don't be a fool, stay in school if you want to be cool.'

**There wasn't a mirror my father could pass by without looking in it.** He would stand next to me and look in the mirror and say: 'I'm still handsome; you get your looks from me.' He would often say, 'I am the greatest.'

**My father didn't want us to be idle rich kids,** but he didn't push us to make a lot of money or tell us to become lawyers or anything. His parents had encouraged him to be someone and he asked me: 'If everybody was born for a purpose, what do you think you were born for?' I said, 'To make people feel better; to fix people up.' I'm a social worker now, working in gang prevention in LA.

**My father has always said that the best moment of his life was when I was born [in 1968].** Not because I'm the favourite - I'm not - but because I was his first child; because the miracle of birth is such a blessing. My birth was probably the bright light in his life during a difficult time when he was exiled from boxing and had his title taken away for refusing to accept the draft into the army and fight in Vietnam on religious grounds. Luckily there was a Supreme Court appeal and he won by a unanimous decision [in June 1971]. As a teenager I asked him, 'What gave you the courage to stand up against the American government in that way?' He said, 'God is not going to judge me on my boxing. My faith Islam says, "Do not go to war; it's not a just war." I can be living in lavish homes, hobnobbing with the rich and famous, but if the people in my

community are not allowed freedom, all that means nothing. Take away the money; I don't want the heavyweight title. What good is all that to me if my people do not have freedom of religion?'

**My favourite memories with my dad were going to prayer services at the mosque in Chicago or LA.** We would pray and read and he would talk to me about life and spirit. Those moments are with me every morning when I wake up. He would tell me, 'Say your prayers before you eat. Worship and exercise your spirit as much as your body.'

**One day I was in my grandmother's kitchen and said to my father, 'You're too old to box, Daddy, don't do it.'** Children are painfully honest. I told him, 'You're going to get hurt' [he was 37]. He kind of chuckled and I think I hurt his feelings a little bit. His wife at the time [Veronica Porsche] didn't want him to box either. And we were right: he did get hurt. His body was going against him but he didn't want to hear that. We watched him fight Larry Holmes on satellite TV in 1980 and I remember that night felt like a funeral. You could hear a pin drop the next day at school because my dad lost. It wasn't my ego I cared about, though, I just didn't want him to be hurt.

**The people who loved him saw his speech and his body slowing down;** what the ravages of boxing were doing to him. We could feel it, too. I think he should have retired in 1974 after his fight against George Foreman, but like any boxer, he didn't know when to quit. I don't have regrets, though, and neither did he. My father has always danced to the beat of his own drum. He had to retire when he was ready and I respect ►

## MUHAMMAD ALI'S LIFE STORY

**HE WAS BORN CASSIUS CLAY** in Louisville, Kentucky in 1942. The legendary boxer won a gold medal at the 1960 Rome Olympics when he was 18, and he went on to become the world heavyweight champion three times. He is considered one of the greatest heavyweights in the sport's history and was crowned Sports Personality of the Century by the BBC in December 1999.

**HANDSOME, CHARISMATIC** and brashly confident, with catchphrases such as 'float like a butterfly, sting like a bee' and 'I am the greatest', Muhammad is as famous for his beliefs as for his boxing. He converted to Islam, changed his name and in 1967 refused to fight in the Vietnam war on religious grounds; he was arrested, found guilty of refusing induction and stripped of his heavyweight title.

**EXILED FROM THE SPORT** for nearly four years, he appealed and the Supreme Court reversed the conviction in 1971. Returning to the ring, he had more wins in the 70s, with the 'Rumble in the Jungle' fight against George Foreman and the 'Thrilla in Manila' against Joe Frazier. In 1978 he won the heavyweight title for a record third time, with his victory over Leon Spinks. Muhammad's last fight was in 1981 - he lost to Trevor Berbick - by which time he was showing symptoms of Parkinson's, although he was not diagnosed for another three years.

**NOW SUFFERING ADVANCED PARKINSON'S** and living in Arizona with his fourth wife Lonnie, Muhammad has full-time care. His speech is extremely restricted but he can talk in a low voice. His daughter Hana - he has seven and two sons - says he still goes out using a wheelchair but can walk with assistance, and has retained his sense of humour. A committed humanitarian, he has continued his charity work for The Muhammad Ali Parkinson Center in Arizona, Unicef and many other causes.

**DESPITE HIS FAME**, little is known about his life outside the ring. Now *I Am Ali*, a documentary from British director Clare Lewins, is set to change this, delivering moving insights into Muhammad as a father and husband. At the centre of the film are fascinating tape recordings of conversations he had with his children during the 70s, which have never been heard before, as well as home movies and archive footage. For a man who had a powerful and expressive voice that has almost been silenced, these audio snippets are all the more poignant.



From left: Muhammad at the Hollywood Walk of Fame with daughters Maryum (right) and Hana in 2002; collecting an award with Maryum the following year

◀ him as a man who made his own decisions.

**There were issues between my father and mother and he was unfaithful.** He wasn't a perfect man but he's still a good person. My father never said he didn't make mistakes, and I think kids admire their parents more if they're honest with them.

**I'll never forget the day my parents got divorced.** I was in third grade and it was all over the news and in the magazines. I was on my way to school thinking, 'OK, everyone knows my business.' I heard my teacher Mrs Hoffman tell the other kids, 'Do not mention Maryum's father's divorce.' When I walked in, all the kids were looking at me. I thought, 'Well you've already said enough!' It was hard. My family lived under a microscope, but it's made me very tough.

**There are some kids who will let a divorce make them hate their parents, but my father didn't raise me to hate anybody.** He encouraged us to be friends with our siblings but some of his children's mothers didn't want their daughters to be friends with the other daughters, because they saw themselves as scorned women. But my father always fought for the unity of his family.

**My father and I were always close, even after the divorce.** When I was living in Chicago [with my mother] he would ask, 'When is your volleyball game, when is your basketball game?' He would schedule his visits around them, which was unbelievable for me.

**I have been married but divorced after three years.** I'm open to being married again, but I am not the kind of woman who has to define herself by marriage. My father didn't put me off marriage, but I'm very cautious because of all the divorces I've

seen in my family - and I don't want children. I'm the eldest of 11 (including my mother's other children) and I helped to raise two sisters on my mother's side of the family. If I really want children, I'll adopt.

**My father's wife Lonnie is a loving person but she's not our mum** - and over the years there has

been 'the stepmother dynamic' that sometimes happens in families. My father's dream was to live on the same street as all his children and their husbands and his grandchildren, but that hasn't happened. He has houses in Arizona, Michigan and Kentucky and we drive to see him wherever he is at Christmas or on holidays.

**Parkinson's is an aggressive disease, it's degenerative and**

**takes away motor functions, and my father has had it for 30 years.** But he's not in any pain. He's not bedridden. Spiritually, he's in a good place. He doesn't want people to feel sorry for him; he is at peace; he loves his life. I believe life is predestined and he has a beautiful legacy of standing up for his beliefs. He told me: 'When you are in your casket, you're not taking your house, your car, your rich friends or your career with you. What am I taking? The decisions I made with my family, my friends, what I learned from my mistakes, what I did on this earth and how I used my celebrity.'

**I've seen my father sharp, young, bright and fighting and I've seen him through the gradual progression of Parkinson's.** But I just love him; he is a blessing. People ask me what it is like living in his shadow. But it's not a shadow, it's cool shade. ❑  
*As told to Elaine Lipworth*

■ *I am Ali will be in cinemas from 28 November and is available on blu-ray, dvd and as a digital download*

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*People ask what it is like living in his shadow...it's not a shadow, it's cool shade*  
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