

Congressional Testimony of Lonnie Ali "In their Corner: Creating More Opportunities for American Boxers"

Chairman Mackenzie, Ranking Member Omar, and distinguished members of the Workforce Protections Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss H.R. 4624, the Muhammad Ali American Boxing Revival Act. My name is Lonnie Ali, and I am honored to speak to you as the wife and partner of the Greatest boxer of all time, the self-proclaimed, globally recognized and original GOAT, Muhammad Ali. I am honored to be with you to express my support for HR 4624 and to discuss the transformative power of boxing, and also its devastating consequences when proper protections are not in place for its athletes.

My Connection to Muhammad Ali and Boxing

I met Muhammad in 1963 when I was six years old and living in Louisville, Kentucky. Back then, the young Cassius Clay played a role in my life as the hometown hero and a growing global icon whose influence extended far beyond the ring throughout his career. After his retirement from boxing, we married and I stood beside him for more than three decades as his closest companion, advocate, and eventually, his caregiver.

When Muhammad was twelve years old, his brand-new red Schwinn bike was stolen outside an event venue in downtown Louisville, Kentucky. He reported the theft to Officer Joe Martin. Angry and hurt, he told Officer Martin he wanted to find and beat up the thief. Officer Martin responded by telling young Cassius that he better learn how to fight first. Coincidentally, Officer Martin was the boxing coach for the local Police Athletic League boxing club. He invited young Cassius to come to the boxing gym and learn to box. He personally trained Cassius. From these humble beginnings, Muhammad went on to become an Olympic champion and three-time heavyweight champion of the world, earning numerous accolades including the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2005 from President George W. Bush.

Boxing gave Muhammad a platform to speak truth to power, to fight for civil rights, and to inspire millions around the world. He believed that boxing gave him the public platform to serve others, to be the voice for the voiceless. Muhammad often said, "service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth." Needless to say, he lived his life practicing what he preached. He appreciated and utilized the immense platform boxing gave him to serve others and speak out about the issues that moved him.

My Work Today: The Ali Center and Brain Health Advocacy

Today, as Co-Founder of the Muhammad Ali Center in Louisville, I carry forward Muhammad's legacy of promoting respect, hope, and understanding throughout the world. The Center serves as both a museum and cultural institution, celebrating his global legacy, and as an educational institution that inspires young people to find their own greatness. Through our programming, we work with thousands of young people each year, many of whom see Muhammad's journey as proof that their own dreams are achievable.

In addition to my work at the Ali Center, I have dedicated much of my efforts to advancing brain health and research and awareness. Although Muhammad suffered from idiopathic Parkinson's Disease, I understand intimately how neurological conditions can rob athletes and families of their futures. I have served on various boards and continue to support organizations and institutions focused on brain health research because I believe we have a moral obligation to protect the brain health of those who entertain and inspire us through sports. This work has shown me that prevention and early intervention are crucial.

Why I Support the Muhammad Ali American Boxing Revival Act

This brings me to why I strongly support H.R. 4624. Congress has long recognized that boxing needs help. Twenty-five years ago, Congress honored Muhammad by enacting the Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act to address corruption and other problems in boxing. These issues were not new to Muhammad, to Congress, or the country. Indeed, in the 1960s, it was well known that the mob controlled much of boxing. If it were not for a group of Louisville, Kentucky, businessmen who sponsored Muhammad early in his career, and the careful eye and actions of Angelo Dundee, Muhammad may have been exposed to the perils of that world as well. In 1963, Muhammad was called to testify before the New York Legislative Committee on Professional Boxing about allegations of corruption in boxing.

In the late 1990's and early 2000, Muhammad and I were honored to work with the late and honorable Senator John McCain of Arizona to strengthen reforms through the Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act. Twenty-five years later, boxing has suffered a steady decline in both popularity and integrity. Young athletes who might have once seen boxing as a pathway to success now face a system plagued by structural limitations, inadequate safety protections, and limited opportunities for fair compensation. One needs only to understand that HBO, Showtime, and ESPN have dropped boxing programming to know that boxing is in trouble.

I was asked about this bill and felt a personal obligation to assess whether it would be good for boxing and boxers. I certainly cannot speak for Muhammad—as you know, he had a way with words. The perspective I bring is whether the bill reinforces Muhammad's life work. It does.

The Muhammad Ali American Boxing Revival Act will permit another business model to exist alongside the current system that most agree is not serving boxers or the sport of boxing. It is time to permit another system to compete, and it is my sincere hope that this bill is a catalyst for the whole of the sport of professional boxing's renewal and revival. In addition to injecting some much-needed competition into the current system, this bill has significant health, safety, and integrity provisions that will no doubt be good for the sport.

Three elements are particularly meaningful to me:

Minimum Compensation: The bill includes minimum per-round compensation requirements that ensure fighters receive fair pay for putting their health on the line.

Mandatory MRI Testing: The bill mandates that unified boxing organizations ensure that each boxer who participates in a covered match, undergoes MRI and MRA tests of the brain before the first covered match and at least every three years after.

I asked that this provision be amended to include greater frequency of brain imaging tests. I am very happy the amended change to require MRI and MRA tests every three years was made. To me, this demonstrates the serious concern unified boxing organizations will actively show for each and every boxer's brain and overall health.

Performance and Recovery Centers: The bill mandates that unified boxing organizations offer centers or institutes where athletes can appropriately train and recover. For example, as part of my research, I visited the UFC Performance Institute that is available to all UFC fighters. It is truly incredible. Yes, the machines are impressive, but even more significant are the physiotherapeutic and recovery resources available to athletes. I only wish every boxer had access to similar tools and research. This bill will bring that closer to reality.

Muhammad's perspective on boxing transcended its demanding physical aspects. He was well known for his focus on the mental and emotional strength, courage, and self-belief gained through the sport, viewing boxing as a platform for expressing convictions and inspiring others. He believed in the importance of mental fortitude and willpower, professing that the "will must be stronger than the skill." He perfected what he called the "sweet science" of boxing.

If Muhammad were with us today, I know he would want to ensure that boxing remained strong and viable for generations to come, providing opportunities for other athletes to pursue their goals and dreams, just like he did. But he would also insist that they be protected from the dangers he faced and that they receive fair treatment from promoters and sanctioning bodies.

This legislation has the potential to create countless opportunities for young athletes while establishing the safety standards and ethical practices that should have been in place long ago. It can help restore boxing's position as a respected American sport while ensuring that the fighters who make it great are treated with the dignity and protection they deserve. Given its enhanced protections for boxers, I believe Muhammad would be proud to have his name associated with this legislation.

Closing

I encourage you to enact H.R. 4624, the Muhammad Ali American Boxing Revival Act, expeditiously. By passing this legislation, Congress can serve not only today's boxers but also the young people who dream of following in Muhammad's footsteps.

Muhammad's legacy was built on courage—the courage to fight in the ring, the courage to stand up for his beliefs, and the courage to face his illness with grace. I ask you to show similar courage today by supporting this bipartisan legislation that will help restore this once-great American sport while protecting the athletes who make it possible.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration. I look forward to working with you to pass this important legislation and am happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.