

An Encounter with Muhammad Ali in New Zealand's Hutt Valley

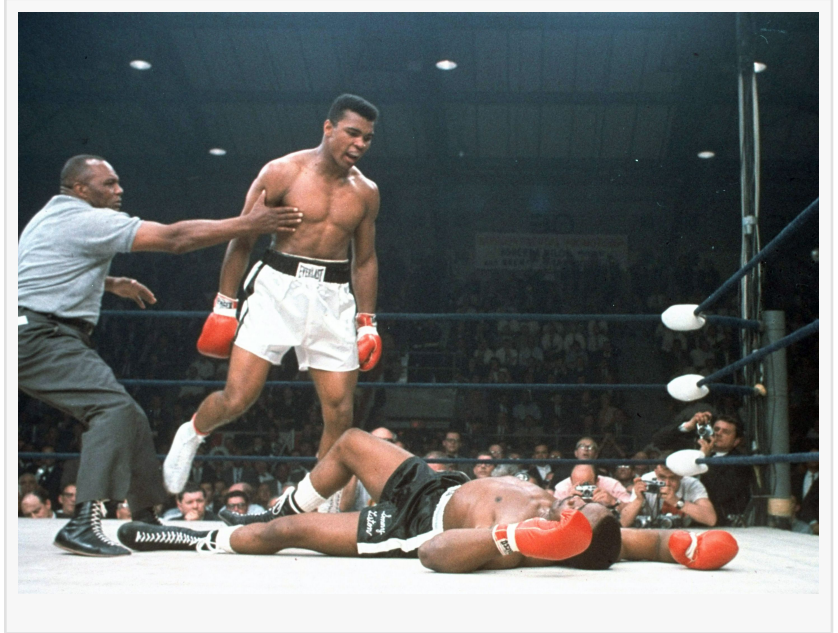
The night I nearly dropped into Ali's lap.

NAPIER, HAWKES BAY, NEW ZEALAND, June 8, 2016

/EINPresswire.com/ --

Napier, [MSCNewsWire](#), Wednesday 8 June 2016 - The death of Muhammad Ali brings back the time in 1979 when Hutt Valley boxing enthusiasts brought to New Zealand the most recognisable persona on the planet –Ali. The centrepiece of the club fund-raising scheme was a dinner at the Trentham Race Course.

Tickets were \$100 each. There were no free ones. I duly stumped up, anticipating that I would not be disappointed. And, I wasn't. Though not in quite the way I had expected, writes [National Press Club](#) president Peter Isaac.



Curiously, the price of the tickets, rather than the opportunity to rub shoulders with the pre-eminent global celebrity of the era who as world heavyweight champion was also the pre-eminent athlete, determined the theme of the evening.

The throng was now in the upstairs bar of the race course members stand and everyone was obviously determined to redeem their investment in their ticket. The focus was on the bar tenders. It was now that Ali demonstrated his first trick. There was no fanfare. Suddenly he was among us. Though not of course drinking.

Nobody seemed particularly surprised. The business at the bar accelerated. Ali seemed happy enough chatting with the Hutt Valley boxing officials who had arranged his visit. The hubbub increased in volume.

Presently, the compere of the evening Bill McCarthy called the meeting to order. Or tried to. Ali chimed in now announcing that this was the moment we were to see his biographical film The Greatest, the one with the enchanting score.

Nobody wanted to put too much distance between they and the bars. Ali and his wife of that era Veronica Porsche now sat down on the front row of the seats laid out before the screen. Helpfully, as I imagined it, I thought I would lead the way, and plopped myself down beside Veronica.

Eventually the film began. A problem now was that a particularly resolute imbibor kept insisting on silhouetting himself on the screen, several jugs in each hand, and walking front of Ali, his wife, and of

course, me.

On the third iteration, I thought I had better do something about this intrusion as the man took the same route in search of re-fills.

My course of action took the form of my standing up and seeking to stall the man's progress, and directing him to a less-intrusive path.

His course of action was to shove me aside with his fistful of empty jugs.

Off-balance, I gyrated over Ali's lap. There was just enough time to conjure up the form that his instinctive reflexes might take, before recovering my balance while bestowing a sheepish smile on Veronica, as equally impassive as her husband.

Later we went down to the dinner itself. Ali amiably delivered some old jokes, notably the one to the effect that Larry Holmes was so ugly that when he cried his tears ran upward to avoid coursing down his face.

There were some catcalls, notably from someone who was quite an important businessman in Wellington at that time.

"I know you," said Ali pointing to the man. "You follow me from place to place. Same person. Different form."

Later we adjourned upstairs. The busy bar trade resumed. Ali looked at his watch. Grasped Veronica by the hand – and melted out into the night. He had done what he said he would do and in the time he had allocated to do it.

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