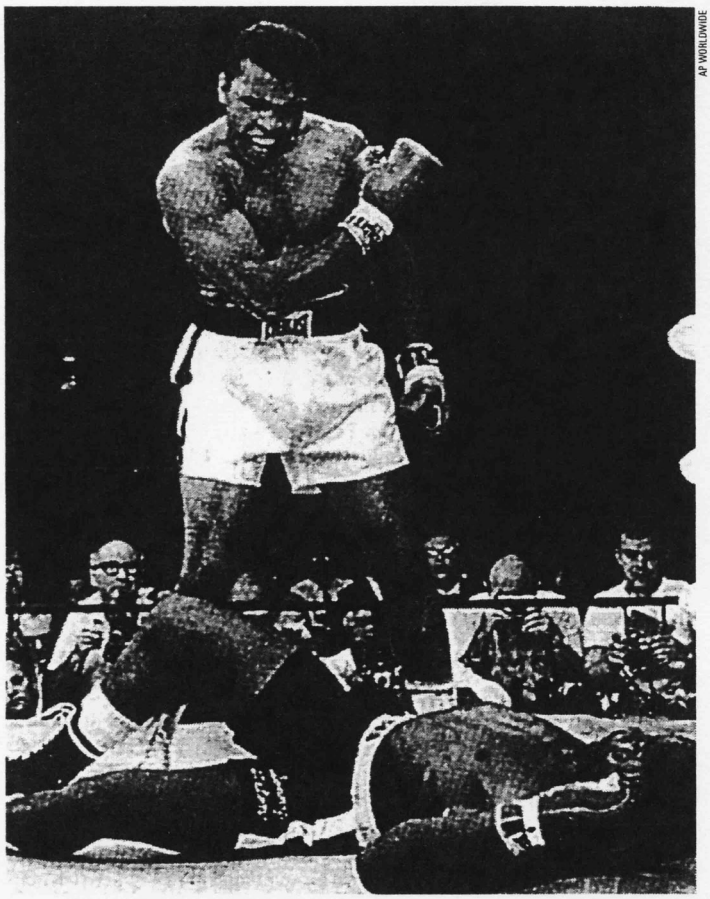
Athletes for the Ages

When Sports Meets Politics

In an echo of past imperial glory, a supremely confident young warrior named Cassius Marcellus Clay won fame in the brutal arenas of Rome, just as the American Century was beginning to show the cracks and strains of empire. The Olympic year of 1960 would soon be outstripped by "The Sixties," and no one embodied them more than the newly christened Muhammad Ali: Whether converting to what the ruling class viewed as a bewildering and dangerous religion, partying with Hunter Thompson or Norman Mailer, boosting Howard Cosell's career, reading poetry in the Village, or, most ominously, refusing to fight the Viet Cong, Ali took hold of America's hydra-headed monster of race, religion, and class and beat it like a gong.



AP WORLDWIDE

The frustrated youngster, who threw his gold medal into the Ohio River when he found that even an Olympian was judged solely on melanin content, grew into the man who faced down the entire military-industrial complex as thoroughly as he had that equally fearsome bully Sonny Liston, achieving lasting victory over both. He lost skills and money in the three-plus years he was barred from boxing, but his principled stand won him respect all over the world.

Sport can be suffused with tribal hatreds that leave behind trampled soccer fans or burning, overturned cars, and politics often sully games that only the supremely naive feel should be simple contests of strength, speed, agility, and graceful sportsmanship. Yet Ali, using only that most basic tool, the human hand, whether clenched in a fist or held outstretched in a gesture of trust, reconciliation, and peace, showed that it can also be luminous and poignant.

It was, in fact, Ali's trembling, stricken hand that lofted the Olympic torch in '96, and until the bomb went off, we all forgot for a while that politics hang over sports like so many swastika banners festooning 1936 Berlin. But politics ultimately look small and unimportant next to the triumphant, beatific howls of Picabo Street and Michael Johnson, or the desolate rictus of a fallen Mary Decker, or, especially, the Führer's constipated anger as thousands of good Germans eschewed xenophobia and cheered Jesse Owens's four gold medals. —R.C. Baker

Love on the Subway

New Yorkers make the mistake of believing their own bad publicity. How else to explain the 700 cops deployed at Shea for John Rocker's protection, with nothing more to show for their overtime checks than tracking down an errant ball ejected from the stands? While west of the Hudson we're universally viewed as pushy, mean, violence-prone (insert ethnic slur here), you have only to drop a glove on the 7 train and nine people of five different races and three sexes will rush to retrieve it before you exit the closing doors.

So why did we buy the hype of brother on brother violence, blood in the streets, and stadium conflagrations that were predicted for the Subway Series? Perhaps a fuse was lit by the Rocket's beaning of Mike Piazza during the battle for the Merc Cup (Wall Street's bauble awarded to New York's interleague champ each year). So when the fall's big dance began, outside agitators couldn't have asked for more than Roger's conscious/unconscious / overly emotional / brain-locked (pick one) attempt to finish the job in Game Two with a shard of bat right out of Steve Yeager's worst nightmare.

Still, that ludicrous moment was diffused a couple of games later by the preternaturally mature Derek Jeter, who cleanly fielded yet another shattered bat head and paused for a theatrical beat before wryly smiling and handing it off to a batboy. We all needed that moment of dark humor, because this series was becoming just too much to bear: no true fan could stand to lose to those scumbags across town, but all of us had friends, coworkers, family and lovers who would suffer no matter what the outcome.

So while the rest of America greeted our bountiful curse with indifference (as evidenced by abysmal TV ratings), we turned to each other, if not necessarily for succor, then at least without hatred. Joe Torre's face said it all: throughout the series he looked like a man who'd just spent way too long on a stalled D train—haggard, edgy, exhausted, and just praying for this ride to end. Yet the subway is part of the reason New Yorkers do what seems so hard for so many other Americans—we joke, argue, even despise and disdain each other, but somehow manage to live jammed together with less homicide than history and current events give us reason to expect.

Indeed, the most flagrant fan attack was perpetrated at yankees.com, where visitors the morning after victory were greeted by a photo (captioned "yankees suck") of a man's shaven, spread buttocks (cognoscenti noted his wedding ring) exposing an anus that looked to have spent serious quality time with the business end of one of those broken bats. While love is myriad in its expression, hate always gets the best lines, so perhaps this Yankee-hating hacker could have expressed even more to his brethren by uploading the same photo with a different headline: "Thuh-uh-uh-uh-uh-uh-uh YankeeesWin!"—R.C. Baker