



GLOVES OFF WITH LAILA ALI

ALTHOUGH SHE HAS LEFT THE RING, MUHAMMAD ALI'S DAUGHTER STILL RACKS UP CONQUESTS – EXCEPT FOR ONE UP-AND-COMING CHALLENGER

BY ELIZABETH RAHE

Laila Ali has met her match. The undefeated super middleweight boxing champ, entrepreneur and aspiring recording artist is up against Curtis “CJ” Muhammad Conway Jr., a not-even-flyweight, 2-year-old dynamo with the face of his grandfather, Muhammad Ali, and the iron will of his mom, The Greatest’s most renowned daughter. We pick up the action as mother and son are boarding a plane to Phoenix to visit the elder Ali for Father’s Day.

Round 1: CJ wants to get out of the stroller, and Ali relents, momentarily letting her guard down. CJ seizes the opportunity and takes evasive action.

Round 2: Ali grabs his arm to prevent escape, and CJ throws himself to the mat. All heads turn, and many recognize the famous pair.

Round 3: Ali picks him up, and CJ screams, delivering a barrage of kicks. Onlookers attempt to referee, offering motherly advice and lollipops – which are not on his training regimen.

The decision: CJ in three rounds, TKO.

It’s a testament to Ali’s forthright nature that she shares this tale of motherly frustration with *City & Shore*. She is talking on her cell phone while driving to a rehearsal for one of her glamorous gigs, as a BET Awards presenter. “He had me looking like one of those mothers who has no control of her child. He was just really tired. It was naptime...He is the most loving baby – he’ll give anybody a kiss – but when he’s cranky, he’s going to let you know.”

She also admits that with his dad, retired NFL wide receiver and sports broadcaster Curtis Conway, CJ is a perfect little angel. “I’m trying to figure out what I need to do to get better control of him...while he’s young.” She also has another incentive for figuring her toddler out. Ali and Conway are expecting their second child in April – she’s hoping for a girl.

If her past record is any indication, CJ won’t have his mom on the ropes for long. Control and success – backed by killer confidence and intense preparation – have been hallmarks of her adult life, as evidenced, most notably, by her prowess in boxing and her graceful turn with ABC’s *Dancing With the Stars*. (She made the finals in 2007, but to her chagrin, lost to Apolo Ohno and Joey Fatone.) She also has served as a television host, including for NBC’s *American Gladiator* with Hulk Hogan.

Now 32, Ali has joined with Miami-based International Beauty Brands to develop Laila Ali fragrances, hair- and skin-care products. (Available through www.lailaali.com and soon at Wal-Mart, CVS and Sears.) She also has turned her attention to the recording studio, laying down soulful stylings for her first album. She has been working with a voice coach and recently hired a manager for her singing career. “I’m going in the Pop/R&B direction. Music with a message and commercial appeal!” she writes on Facebook. “I’m taking my time because I have high standards for myself.”

A self-described perfectionist, she keeps a close rein over her career and the image she portrays to the world, especially to her “younger sisters.” However, she is honest about the challenges she

“He’s as sweet as can be, but he’s all over the place... got a lot of energy,” Ali says of her 2-year-old son, CJ.

Young Laila snuggles with her dad, Muhammad Ali. During her early years, she experienced the glare of his fame.

has faced, detailing her successes as well as her struggles in her 2002 autobiography *Reach: Finding Strength, Spirit & Personal Power* (with Ritz, Hyperion). She says she wrote the book to help girls who may need to be inspired in life. “Girls look at me now and say, ‘She’s so beautiful; she’s so lucky; her dad’s Muhammad Ali; her life must have been easy.’ They have no idea.”

Laila Ali was born in Miami Beach, while her dad was training with Angelo Dundee at 5th Street Gym, but she grew up in the

the girls stayed with their mom. (Ali had seven more children from other relationships.) As a teen-ager Laila got into negative behaviors – skipping school, stealing her mom’s car. She got caught shoplifting and went to juvenile hall for several months.

Afterward, she spent time in a treatment community for troubled youth. There she encountered young people who had faced horrific circumstances, and she writes about gaining perspective, humility and spiritual peace. In her book, she praises the judge, Roosevelt F. Dorn, for the placement. “By locking me up, he set me free,” she says.

Fiercely independent, she left home at 18 and soon had her own manicurist salon. She started taking college classes, eventually earning an associate’s degree in business management. While at a friend’s house, she saw her first women’s boxing match on television and was intrigued. Although she had not been athletic, she saw herself in the ring and began training. Muhammad Ali, the

father, was not happy when she told him, she says in her book, but he relented, saying, “Okay, come over here and show me your left jab.”

In 1999 at age 21, she made her boxing debut, knocking out her opponent in 31 seconds, and she went on to amass a 24-0

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Los Angeles area. In *Reach* she describes feeling disconnected from her famous father and beautiful mother, Veronica Porsche. Laila, along with her sister, Hana, spent their early years in the family mansion, which was often crowded with people drawn by their father’s fame. Their parents divorced when Laila was 8, and

record with 21 knock-outs. Her last fight was on Feb. 3, 2007, in Johannesburg, South Africa, with Nelson Mandela looking on. Some fighters have claimed that Ali avoided meeting them in the ring, which she denies. After giving birth to CJ on August 26, 2008, she started training again but soon retired from the ring, citing lack of challenge. "There was one specific girl [Ann Wolfe] I wanted to fight, but we couldn't make that fight happen. There were stories I was afraid to fight this girl, but it's absolutely not true."

Ali is outspoken about her view of the sport. "Boxing is a shady business," she says. "It's not as organized as other sports." She is outspoken in general, which she admits gets her in trouble sometimes. "It's impossible for me *not* to say what's on my mind."

With her natural athletic ability, Ali says she wishes she had gotten into sports in her youth. "That would have made a tremendous difference in my life...I was busy being a bad girl." Her desire to promote athleticism in young women has led to her

When asked about her shyness comment, she clarifies. "I'm not shy in public, but in my life, I tend to be reserved and to myself. I'm always confident in my own skin. I psyche myself up, say a prayer and ask God for strength, whether I'm fighting or going on stage."

Her first public singing performance was at her wedding reception on July 22, 2007, when she serenaded Conway with Oleta Adams' *Never Knew Love*. (Ali had been married previously to Johnny "Yahya" McClain, who became her manager; they divorced in 2005.) Although she is moving ahead with her music, she is wary of making a career shift that could threaten her cherished privacy and family life.

Conway agrees. "I hope she can be as successful as she wants to be...without all the hoopla and media attention that can come with it. You know, we live in L.A., so walking out of the grocery store is an event..."

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involvement with the Women's Sports Foundation, and she is currently president-elect.

Conscious of her status as a role model, Ali chooses projects that reflect positive messages, with a focus on health, wellness and self-esteem. She has been the subject of three *Got Milk?* campaigns, including one with her dad that included the line "Father knows best." (Ali insisted that his daughter change from a tank top into a more modest shirt for the shoot). She has served as a spokeswoman for Subway's Eat Fresh campaign and for the American Heart Association's Start! Walking Day.

At 5 feet 10 inches tall, she calls herself a big girl, adding, "That's not a negative comment. That is so important for young women to hear...that a beautiful woman doesn't have to be a size 6. It's important to be healthy, eat right, work out. The body will adjust to where it needs to be. My main thing is about being healthy – not harming our bodies with improper eating habits, drugs or smoking."

Ali is a sought-after motivational speaker, appearing earlier this fall at women's empowerment conferences hosted by California First Lady Maria Shriver and *Essence* magazine. In June, she spoke at the non-denominational Agape International Spiritual Center in Culver City, Calif., her church since age 12. Her topic – *Tapping Into You - Discovering Your Limitless Potential* – could be her mantra. "You see it, you believe it, and you go do it," she says in a promotional video for the event.

In March she gave the crowd at a North Carolina women's conference a taste of her singing voice. Expressing her shyness at this new venture, she adjusted her dress, shushed the crowd, chuckled at herself and then belted out a few lines from *Hey Mr. Goodman*. (Listen to a preview at www.lailaali.com.)



with people jumping out of the bushes just to get a photo."

The couple met when a mutual friend introduced them at a party at Conway's house, and their relationship slowly grew, he says. Conway, 39, describes his wife as a woman of substance and conviction. "I have seen her turn down projects that exploit her beauty. She wants women to understand that their power is within." He also tells of her nurturing side, saying she is very much a wife and mother, as well as an excellent cook. "She would rather cook than go out. She wants to know what ingredients are going into her food."

Ali, in turn, praises her husband's strong character, which helps keep her on track. "Curtis is one of the few people who will tell me what I need to hear, the way I need to hear it to get my attention. He makes me want to be a better person." She also says he is the nicer of the two, describing herself as standoffish.

After experiencing the way her father's fame attracted hangers-on, Ali keeps her guard up when it comes to meeting new people. "I have the same friends I had before I became a so-called celebrity.

I'm not saying that's a good thing; it's just true," she says.

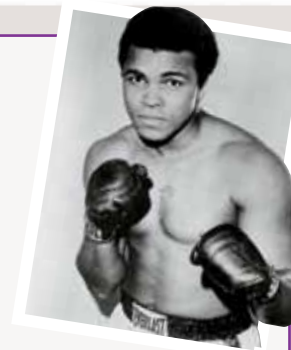
Hairstylist Lijuana Freeman says Ali is the same caring person she knew from her nail salon days, when the two would swap services. "It surprises people how down-to-earth she is," says Freeman, who now lives in Walla Walla, Wash. "She is always concerned about everyone else's needs."

Foremost on her list, Freeman says, are Conway and CJ, who have greatly enriched her life. "Everything is lighter, less serious. I've seen this light come over her...this beautiful, unspeakable joy. CJ has brought her peace and a deeper meaning." Her challenge now is finding balance, Freeman adds. "She's a perfectionist, in everything she does."



Ali married former NFL wide receiver and broadcaster Curtis Conway in 2007, and the two are expecting their second child in April.

The Champ is still making the rounds



Greeted by chants of "Ali, Ali, Ali," Muhammad Ali returned to Miami Beach Sept. 23 to celebrate the reopening of the 5th Street Gym, where he trained under Angelo Dundee at the start of his career. Suffering with Parkinson's disease for many years, the 68-year-old champ sat at a table leafing through a book on his life. He did not speak. However, he still communicates.

"He can say more with a wink than most people can with a speech," Dundee, 89, told *The Miami Herald*. "We talk about fun times. He laughs about it. He's a good kid. A sincere, honest human being. I ain't never had an argument with him, never had a contract."

Ali made the trip from his Phoenix, Ariz., home, where he lives with his fourth wife, Lonnie. Her sister, Marilyn Williams, who helps with his care, accompanied Ali to Miami.

At a Parkinson's conference in Chicago this July, Lonnie Ali spoke about caretaker challenges with the condition, which causes a degeneration of the central nervous system, affecting motor skills, speech and other functions. She told the *Chicago Defender* that she chooses to focus on her husband's abilities, rather than his limitations, and on helping him raise awareness about the disease.

"Muhammad has never allowed the illness to stop him from doing what he wanted to do, to pursue his interests, his hobbies, his passions in life. I feel like anything I can do to help support him in that effort, I'll gladly do," she said. "Just knowing he is appreciative of what I am doing, him giving me a hug and thanking me...to me that's very rewarding."

Ali also speaks of the need for balance. "When you have a lot of projects going on and you're trying to be successful, you lose *me* time. Being a mom and a wife you tend to focus on taking care of the things that need to get done that day. It's constantly a struggle."

Still, she insists on being very hands-on at home, cooking, doing housework, taking care of CJ. In addition, Conway's three children from his previous marriage are in and out of the couple's San Fernando Valley home for visits.

"I think if I wasn't a public person, I would be a stay-at-home mom," she says, adding that she has purposely stepped away from some projects to spend time with her son – and soon her second child. Her father, who struggles with Parkinson's disease, once told *People* he regrets that he did not get to raise his children, because of his boxing career and divorce.

His daughter is not having any of that. "I was raised by nannies. I don't want that for my son. Besides, I'm very private...and I have a hard time delegating."

Moreover, even on the most challenging days with her 2 year old, The Greatest's daughter considers CJ the greatest gift.