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In one corner was the brash yet beleaguered, undefeated heavyweight champion, Muhammad Ali. Many in the media, as well as his opponent, insisted upon calling him by his given name, Cassius Clay—the name under which he had captured both Olympic light heavyweight boxing gold in 1960 and the professional heavyweight title in 1964—rather than by his chosen Islamic name. Not only was the media fanning moral panic over Ali’s affiliations with Malcolm X, black Muslims, and the Nation of Islam, but the champion’s very public refusal to abide by the U.S. military draft and his unwillingness to fight in Vietnam had made him a lightning rod for patriotic bombast.

Standing diagonally opposite Ali in the ring during the pre-fight introductions was Canadian heavyweight contender and local Toronto favorite, George Chuvalo. More than four years Ali’s senior, he had been a professional fighter for almost a decade. Though touted early on as a potential championship contender, Chuvalo entered this fight with a pedestrian professional record of thirty-four wins, eleven losses, and two draws.

This bout—the histories of the two boxers, the build-up to the fight, and how it unfolded—is the subject of The Last Round: Chuvalo vs. Ali, a documentary by the National Film Board of Canada (NFB). Released to a certain amount of fanfare in Canada—it was awarded a special jury prize at Hot Docs 2003, the Toronto international documentary film festival—The Last Round was written by Stephen Brunt, one of Canada’s most accomplished sportswriters. Brunt has written extensively on boxing for the national newspaper, The Globe and Mail. He is also the author of Facing Ali (2002), which profiles a series of boxers who lost to Muhammad Ali and is yet another contribution to the recent popular fascination with the self-proclaimed greatest heavyweight of all time.

Despite Ali’s enduring fame, The Last Round is primarily about Chuvalo. Today, in large part because he spent fifteen rounds in 1966 being whacked around by (but not succumbing to) Ali, Chuvalo remains well known in Canada. (A 2004 television documentary about the ancient Olympic games that was produced in Canada but distributed internationally used modern athletes as “talking heads.” While Canadian gold medallist Donovan Bailey, well known in the athletics community, discussed sprinting, many viewers outside of Canada must have been left wondering who the Chuvalo fellow talking about boxing was.)

Early in his professional career, Chuvalo had been a contender for the heavyweight crown. Indeed, he spent years ranked among the top ten fighters in the world and was an accomplished professional athlete. But untimely losses—a twelve-round war with Floyd Patterson in 1965 and a battle for the World Boxing Association heavyweight title with Ernie Terrell later that same year among them—meant that by 1966 Chuvalo was no
longer considered among boxing’s elite. (In addition to Ali, Terrell, and Patterson, Chuvalo fought and lost to all the prominent heavyweight boxers of his era—Joe Frazier, George Foreman, Jimmy Ellis. A 1969 knockout of Jerry Quarry was the most high profile of his seventy-three career victories.)

The fight celebrated in *The Last Round* was originally scheduled to be a bout between Ali and Terrell to unify the heavyweight title. After the fight shifted among many different host cities, because of civic discomfort with Ali, it landed in Toronto, whereupon Terrell pulled out. Chuvalo—seizing upon the opportunity—stepped in, only to find out that the Ontario Boxing Commission was unwilling to sanction the fight as a championship bout. Despite the apparent mismatch—many in the boxing press were predicting a quick bout, and some Las Vegas bookmakers were no longer taking bets on it—Chuvalo lasted all fifteen rounds with Ali. After winning by unanimous decision, the champion claimed that no one had ever hit him harder than Chuvalo. Toronto sportswriter Milt Dunnell claims that it was “the best fight Chuvalo ever fought, and in my book Chuvalo won the fight.”

*The Last Round* will inevitably be compared to the Academy Award-winning documentary *When We Were Kings* (1996) because they celebrate a particular bout as representative of its era and because of Ali’s centrality to both films. This, however, is far from a fair comparison: the 1974 “Rumble in the Jungle” between Ali and George Foreman in Zaire was a more compelling bout, to say nothing of its greater importance to boxing history. Moreover, Ali is a more charismatic central figure than Chuvalo, and Foreman a more classic antagonist than Ali (who has become a beloved and heroic figure forty years after the venom he inspired in the 1960s).

As with most biographical films, *The Last Round* must choose, at least implicitly, between emphasizing the actions of its central character and the boundaries imposed on him by the social context in which he lived. Oftentimes, this is a divide more easily bridged in documentaries—where historical footage can provide important context—than in feature films. One way in which *The Last Round* does a good job of recapturing Toronto in the 1960s is through its use of archival film footage, especially footage shot in the black-and-white *cinema verité* style that D.A. Pennebaker popularized in his intimate portrayals of celebrities, and which was popular at the NFB at the time. The rest of the film is composed of extensive interviews with Chuvalo, documentary footage of Ali from the 1960s, and talking heads such as Bert Sugar, Robert Lipsyte, Jimmy Breslin, and Canadians Milt Dunnell and Barry Callaghan. However, the failure to give Ali’s perspective a current voice, while perhaps not surprising given that this is a Canadian production and Ali suffers from Parkinson’s disease, is nonetheless a striking absence.

The ways in which Ali became a lightning rod for many of the important public issues of the 1960s—the Civil Rights movement, and anti-Vietnam War sentiment—are readily taken up within *The Last Round*. However, this is a film primarily about a Canadian boxer and his one big shot, hosted in his hometown. Outside of Maple Leaf Gardens’ founder Conn Smythe’s staunchly pro-military opposition to a draft avoider fighting in his arena, there is little in the film to suggest that similar domestic issues were important at the time in Toronto. Ultimately, viewers, especially Canadian viewers, are left to wonder about Canadian themes. Mississippi may have been burning, but what was the mood in Protestant, provincial “Toronto the Good”?
Where filmmaker Joseph Blasioli succeeds is in sketching out the two combatants, contrasting the son of poor Croatian immigrants struggling to eke out a living as an athlete in Canada with the sudden fame of the Louisville heavyweight. Nevertheless, *The Last Round’s* success depends entirely upon Chuvalo’s believability. The actual progression of the fight plays a small role in the film. Chuvalo, while able to take a punch, was outclassed by the faster, younger Ali from the outset. Barring one of his heavy blows landing flush, Chuvalo seemed destined to lose. The viewer is left waiting for the dramatic peak, the watershed moment. So, to assert its narrative relevance, *The Last Round* seeks to recuperate Chuvalo by making the underdog heroic. (“He didn’t win,” says the film’s narrator, “but neither did he lose.” Actually, he did.) The Rocky Balboa allusions are not subtle: the local journeyman, the Great White Hope, in his hometown, battling the charismatic, black champion.

This portrait of Chuvalo makes for compelling viewing, despite the fact that he disputes the film’s claim that his “tenacity, his courage, his unwillingness to surrender defines him.” Chuvalo says he would much rather be known as the former world champion than the guy who went fifteen rounds with Ali. *The Last Round* is, in the end, a big treatment for a small story and its claim that “this fight marked the turning point of [both boxer’s] lives” clearly oversteps the mark. Ali had not yet been stripped of the title, nor had he fought Frazier and Foreman. For his part, Chuvalo may have been the man of whom Ali noted: “He was the toughest man I ever fought. He took all my best shots.” But the “turning points,” the events that would inspire the greatest sympathy among Canadians—losing two sons to drug overdoses and another son and his wife to suicide—were unimaginable to the fighter who went the distance with The Greatest.