



Dave Anderson

The Underdogs

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia, Sunday, June 29—Perspective is always sculpted by the upper hand. As a black, Muhammad Ali often speaks of oppression in America, but in this Southeast Asian nation dominated by his Muslim religion, the champion sees no evil in the atmosphere surrounding his fight with Joe Bugner for the world heavyweight title.

Sports
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heaven."

"I didn't know," Ali keeps saying, "there was a place on earth where so many people were together in

Malaysia's pastel flowers and thick foliage supposedly form a tropical "garden of races," but it's really more like a mine field. Ali is content because the ruling Malays are his Muslim brothers. He had tea today with the King, the Yang Di Pertuan Agong, and he has dined at the palatial palm-shaded home of Malaysia's wealthiest tycoon, Tun Datu Haji Mustapha, who recently ordered two 707 jets for his personal travels. Ali accepts the power of the beige-skinned majority that has created seething minorities—the yellow-skinned Chinese in their slacks and miniskirts, the mocha-skinned Indians and Pakistanis in their turbans and gowns, the Communist terrorist out there in the jungle. The minorities are Joe Bugner's people here.

The minorities identify with the 25-year-old Englishman for both political and emotional reasons. They know that like them, Joe Bugner is the underdog. They probably don't realize that, like them, Joe Bugner has always been the underdog.

Escape From Hungary

Joe Bugner sounds like an Englishman now with his clipped accent. But with his curly blond hair and chiseled face, he resembles the Hungarian he once was. He was born in Szeged, an industrial city near the Yugoslav border. He was 6 years old when the Hungarian revolution occurred. His father remained. He seldom speaks of his father now. But he escaped with his mother and his older brother, Bill, a freedom fighter.

"I shall never forget hiding in a cornfield," he says. "We saw these huge figures in the dark and thought they were Russian soldiers, but they turned out to be sandbags. I've never been so petrified in my life. After that you can see why no one in the boxing ring, not even Ali, can scare me."

He also remembers Soviet tanks clanking along, leveling trees in a show of strength. After he got to England, he took body-building courses that turned him into a Malibu Beachboy. Even now he thinks "extreme strength is something beautiful." His muscles made him a schoolboy discus champion. But he gravitated to Andy Smith, a Scot who owns a boxing gym outside London, because he had been ignored by discus coaches.

"With any real encouragement in the discus," he says, "I'd never become a fighter."

His critics contend that he still isn't a fighter. None of the two dozen correspondents here from the United Kingdom give him a serious chance against Ali in the title bout.

"He freezes," says Reg Gutteridge of the London Evening News. "He has no movement."

"He has a key in his back," says Ken Jones of the Sunday Mirror. "He's too mechanical."

"He's not English," says Neil Allen of the Times. "He's a Hungarian with a Scot trainer."

"When the bell rings," says Hugh McIlvanney of the Observer, "it's not a bugle for him."

Joe Bugner's stiff style made an easy target for Ali in Las Vegas in a unanimous 12-round decision more than two years ago. Five months later he lost another 12-round decision to Joe Frazier, but Andy Smith, who has emerged as a father figure for his gladiator, believes Bugner matured in that London bout.

"He had been a man swathed in chains," Smith says, "but when he got off the floor against Joe Frazier, he put his guts between his teeth. There always had been something holding back the greatness in this young man."

Ali by a Knockout

One theory is that Joe Bugner was wrapped in the chains of intimidation when an early foe, Ulrich Regis, died the next day after an eight-round decision. But his critics claim he couldn't punch hard before that tragedy. His boxing education involves 51 victories, 1 draw and 6 losses—to Ali, Frazier, Larry Middleton, Jack Bedell, Dick Hall and Paul Brown in his first professional bout nearly eight years ago. Unless the morning sun melts Ali, and it could melt Bugner just as easily, the champion should retain his title, perhaps by an eighth-round knockout.

The minorities here will lose again.

But at least Joe Bugner gives the minorities somebody to root for even if he is the British Connection, a link to the British colonialism that governed the Malay Peninsula when the Muslims were the underdogs.



Not that the Muslims always win. At the dazzling sitdown dinner party for more than 200 guests at Tun Datu Haji Mustapha's home, Coca-Cola and orange soda were served in keeping with the Muslims' nonalcoholic tenets, but somehow Drew (Bundini) Brown, one of All's handlers and a non-Muslim, found the scotch he always does. He once even ordered a martini while dining with the champion and several other Muslims in a New York restaurant.

"Put it in a water glass," Bundini quietly told the waiter. Moments later, as the waiter departed to get the martini, Bundini called him back and whispered in his ear.

"No olive," Bundini said.



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