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Parkersburg businessman may claim title as "The Greatest" Muhammad Ali fan

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Gary Traugh displays some of his Muhammad Ali collection in his Parkersburg home.

If anyone is a contender for the title as "The Greatest" Muhammad Ali fan, it may very well be Gary Traugh.

The Parkersburg businessman followed the athletic career and post-boxing accomplishments of Cassius Clay aka Muhammad Ali throughout the former heavyweight champion's life.

Ali died June 3, 2016 at the age of 74. His funeral is Friday June 10 in Louisville.

It is a sad occasion for Traugh, who can mark times in his own life by Ali milestones.

Traugh shared that he also shed tears when Ali lost to Frazier in 1971 and again watching Ali light the Olympic cauldron, completing the torch relay at the 1996 Olympic Games. The final tears came when he had an opportunity to meet his hero about seven years ago, attending a private lunch with Ali in Louisville.

His son Cyrus sat on Ali's lap for more than an hour at the event.

"It was surreal," Traugh said of the experience. "He blessed my son."

As a boy, Traugh was introduced to his hero watching a fight on TV and instantly became enthralled with Ali's skill and charisma.

"I just fell in love with him," Traugh said. "I started playing like I was Ali, trying to box like he did. For years, I was bit by the Ali bug."

Traugh sold his KomPak convenience stores, familiar staples in the Mid-Ohio Valley, a few years ago. He now owns a coin Laundromat, Tornado Express in Parkersburg.

For a time Traugh became a boxer himself, with about 30 amateur fights and 14 pro bouts. He was even known as the KomPak Kid.

"I developed my style by watching Ali," he said.

Traugh's home now has enough Ali memorabilia to put together a respectable shrine or hall of fame in itself, including many rare items.

He estimates that he has about 200 items with Ali's signature.

A well known West Virginia connection to the champ was Tunney Hunsaker, the late former Fayetteville police chief who was also Clay's first pro opponent.

He figures prominently amongst Traugh's collection.

Traugh owns five of the 10 programs from the fight still in existence from that 1960 fight – two of them autographed by both fighters, no less.

"I think my two (programs) are the only ones signed," Traugh said.

One of the most valuable items in his collection are Clay's fight gloves from the 1959 Golden Gloves tournament, a year before Clay won a gold medal in the Olympics.

Traugh's most recent addition to his collection is two "checks" from a school workbook, signed by a young Clay who was learning how to manage money and make bank transactions.

"They're dated '1952,'" said Traugh. "So now I know that I have the earliest known Clay autograph. I had often wondered where his schoolwork had gone."

Traugh also just bought a gold nugget, which is shaped like the continent of Africa, believed to have belonged to Ali.

"It has a diamond in it where Zaire is located," Traugh explained. "It's in a case that has a plaque that reads 'Given to Muhammad Ali for the Foreman fight in Africa.' There is a letter from Bundini Brown (a former member of Ali's entourage who was also a frequent corner man). The letter (from Brown) states, 'This was given to Muhammad Ali for the Foreman fight in Zaire, Africa. Muhammad gave it to me in 1981.'"

Rumble in the Jungle, indeed.

"I'd like to find out more about it," Traugh said of the gold nugget. "Everyone in Africa loved Ali. They treated him like a God."

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