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## Winning Combination

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## Winning Combination



**In his new book, Dave Kindred '63 gives readers a ringside view of sports' most flamboyant partnerships.**

*“One afternoon in Las Vegas, while in bed with Muhammad Ali ...”*

To absorb this portion of the opening line of Dave Kindred's new book, *Sound and Fury*, the reader might anticipate something along the lines of those trashy, half-truth celebrity bios that crowd the best-seller lists. Instead, it is the launching point of an ambitious journey. In his foreword, the author declares his intention: “to recover Muhammad Ali from mythology and Howard Cosell from caricature.” Besides, he adds, “The real stories are better.”

Kindred has firsthand knowledge of many of those stories through the long relationships he enjoyed (and sometimes suffered) with both men. He met Ali first, in 1966, just three years after graduating from Illinois Wesleyan. As a sports reporter for the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, Ali's hometown newspaper, Kindred had an enviable number of one-on-ones with the heavyweight champion. Over time, their professional encounters mellowed into friendship. The book describes how the two would sometimes drive around the city with Kindred's 4-year-old son sitting in Ali's lap. It's no surprise that whenever Kindred's editors heard Ali was in town, it was Kindred they told to “go find him.”

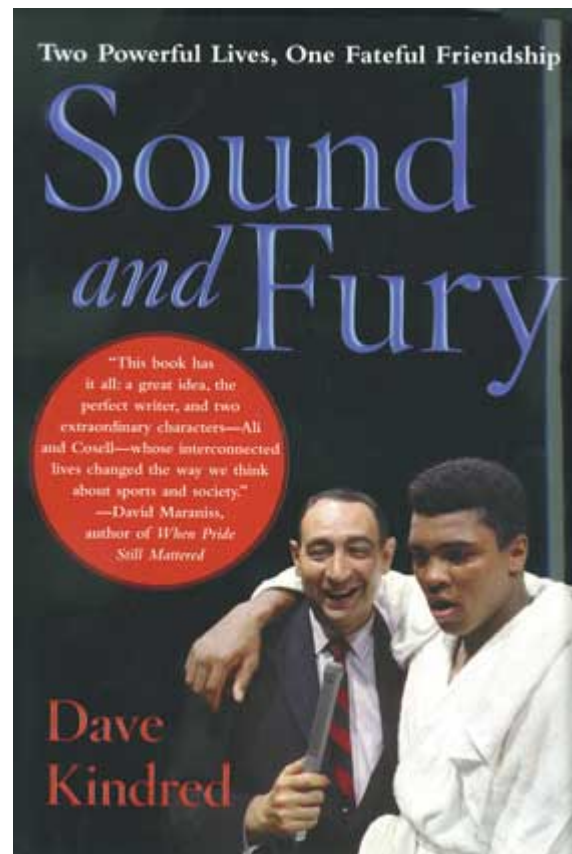
Of course, that alone does not explain what Kindred was doing that memorable afternoon in Las Vegas. Then again, “explaining” Ali's antics might be a fool's errand. Better to stick to the facts, as Kindred does in describing the bed-sharing incident, which happened in 1973. The reporter entered Ali's hotel suite, full of “hangers-on, sycophants, con artists, sportswriters, and other reprobates.” From the bedroom, the boxer shouted, “My man. Louisville, come in here.” Lifting a corner of his bed sheet, he told Kindred, “C'mon, get in.”

In their time together, Kindred had heard Ali spout his bragging couplets and spellbinding soliloquies “in shower stalls and toilets, in funeral homes, log cabins, mosques ...” So this latest request didn’t seem that unusual. With the sheet pulled over their heads, Kindred got his interview, feeling as he did so “more like schoolboys on a sleepover hiding their mischief.” Ali, in all his naked glory, ended their conversation with his trademark bravado: “Tell the people in Louisville this will be *nooo* contest because I am the greatest of *alllllll* times,” and the slightly dazed writer headed out to file his exclusive.

In many similarly unguarded moments, Kindred observed Cosell — who, in the 1960s and ’70s was TV’s boldest, brashest sports broadcaster. The two men had known each other from 1984 until Cosell’s death in 1995 at the age of 77, with Kindred cast mostly in the role of willing listener. During one encounter described in book, Kindred arrived early for breakfast at Cosell’s Long Island home and caught a glimpse of the sportscaster, sans toupee, “shuffling barefoot from the bedroom, skeletal in a white undershirt and white boxer briefs.” Noticing Kindred, Cosell showed his surprising capacity for self-effacement as he struck a body-building pose and announced, “A killing machine the likes of which few men have seen.”

“Two Powerful Lives, One Fateful Friendship” is the subtitle of Kindred’s book. Though the friendship to which it refers is between Ali and Cosell, the term could apply as aptly to Kindred’s own relationship with the pair ... perhaps more so. True, Ali and Cosell were inextricable — and not just through their pre- and post-fight broadcast banter enjoyed by millions. As the great-grandson of slaves and the son of Polish-Jewish immigrants, both fought Goliath odds. Both lorded over their domains with unrelenting energy and skill. Pride led both men to episodes of self-destruction, and both felt the Promethean pull of age and illness drag them from their soaring orbits. But could two such unquenchable egomaniacs ever really bond as friends?

It’s one of *Sound and Fury*’s many open questions. Kindred strives for vivid accuracy upon which readers draw their own conclusions. As Oscar-winning screenwriter and boxing doyen Budd Schulberg wrote in his *New York Times* review, among the book’s virtues is the “dead-on honesty that has characterized Kindred’s career, from *The Courier-Journal* to *The Washington Post* to *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and his many sports books.”



In his new book (above), Dave Kindred tells how the two men were instrumental in each other’s rise to prominence.

Howard Cosell was one who saw “the beauty and cultural significance of sports,” writes Kindred in *Sound and Fury*, which was published in February by Free Press. The same can be said of Kindred’s floating, stinging prose, as demonstrated in excerpts from his book that follow. — *Tim Obermiller*

\* \* \*

*The young Ali (known in his early boxing days by his birth name, Cassius Clay) was quickly renowned for his cockiness and photogenic features. But it was his brilliant, unorthodox fighting style — described below by Kindred — that was his true bread and butter.*

He was a genius. It wasn’t his hands or his feet. Light-heavyweight champion Jose Torres said, “Watch his brains.”

The frustration of chasing him, the inability to touch that unprotected chin, the confusion caused by his snake-lick jab snapping against your face — it wore a guy out mentally as much as physically. There also was Clay’s conversation during the fight. Is that all you got, sucker? The hell of it was, during all this Clay also would rain fists on you. *Sports Illustrated* did a photo shoot to capture his hand speed. From sixteen and a half inches away, his jab landed against a balsa board in 0.19 seconds. The magazine reported, “His fist actually covered the distance in four/one-hundredths of a second, about the period of a blink of the eye.” Editors timed a six-punch combination in 2.15 seconds. Two jabs, a hook, a right to the body, another hook, a finishing right. Imagine. Count one thousand one, one thousand two. You have been hit six times by a two-hundred-pound professional fighter who never misses.

\* \* \*

Cosell gave up a lucrative law practice to become a sports broadcaster, telling friends, “I can’t help but go to the top. All the rest are sons of the wild jackass.” Like Ali, Cosell had the talent to back up his bravado. Kindred writes:

Cosell’s voice moved New York quickly. He hammered consonants and followed the harshness with abrupt slides into hushed tones, each movement a signal of his feeling for the subject at hand. He could read a note to the milkman in a way that let listeners know his great and abiding disappointment in being left two quarts rather than three. Cosell’s staccato rhythms were so eccentric as to demand a listener’s attention, but to say the voice succeeded because it cut through the clutter of broadcasting’s neutral sounds was insufficient to define it. The critic Ron Powers would call it “one of television’s most inspired creations — a voice that was virtually a finished character in and of itself.” If the voice, directed to a few people in a room, was too much — its melodrama shamefully obvious — it became, on the air, a perfect answer to the hyperbolic demands of television.

\* \* \*

*As a converted Muslim and conscientious objector, Ali refused to serve in the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War and was banned from boxing in America for four years. When the Supreme*

*Court finally ordered a lift on this ban in 1970, his greatest years as an athlete were behind him. Even so, he returned to the ring to reclaim his heavyweight crown in 1971 at Madison Square Garden against an undefeated Joe Frazier. Kindred watched the "Fight of the Century" from first-row ringside.*

Early, Ali moved easily. He shouted to Frazier, "Don't you know I'm God?" Frazier seemed clumsy, taking jabs and crosses as punishment for his gracelessness. Ali separated his words with punches: "Don't . . . you . . . know . . . I'm . . . God?" Three rounds, four rounds, five, Ali did what Ali always did — what Frazier's strategist, Eddie Futch, knew he would do. Go to the ropes and wait. Ali might con the innocents with his minute dancing and two resting. Even as he leaned back to keep his head out of Frazier's reach, he looked down into the first press row at ringside, popping open his eyes. He bellowed, "No contest! NOOOO contest!"

A fight master long removed from innocence, Eddie Futch considered Ali's charade an invitation. He told Frazier, "When he goes to the ropes, you go to his body with both hands." Frazier thundered against Ali's ribs, waistline, hips. Six rounds, eight rounds, Ali playing when he needed to fight, Ali putting a glove against Frazier's forehead, as if holding off a child, Ali against the ropes and pitty-pattying taps against the aggressor's noggin, Ali allowing Frazier in. "Come on, man," he said. "Is that the best you got?" After the eighth, Ali's trainer Angelo Dundee scolded him: "Stop playing. Do you want to blow this fight? Do you want to blow everything?"

After ten rounds, Frazier's face had become a grotesquerie of hematomas bulging from his jawline, cheekbones, and brow, squeezing his eyes to slits, his swollen lips pulled back from a mouthpiece once white and now red. Ali no longer danced even the minute of earlier rounds; now he moved on the same plane as Frazier. Whatever notes I made were hieroglyphics of anxiety, unreadable. All along I had felt something shameful at being thrilled by these bloody pieces of commercial brutality, but I rationalized it and justified it as part of the human condition. Will Durant's *The Life of Greece* reported prizefighting fifteen centuries before Christ on the island of Crete where "heavyweights, coddled with helmets, cheekpieces, and long padded gloves, fight till one falls exhausted to the ground and the other stands above him in the conscious grandeur of victory."

Thirty-four centuries later, not on vases but five feet from me, Ali stood in with Frazier, the beauty of it terrible.

\* \* \*



**The year they met, 1966, Kindred (left) had his notebook at the ready as Ali warmed up for an exhibition in his hometown, Louisville. (Photo courtesy of C. Thomas Hardin)**

what seemed unlikely, and for a moment or two in each round he did what only he ever could do. Cosell was sixty years old himself, no longer a phenomenon but still the best in his profession as Ali was the best in his, though fading and glorious. They had come a great distance together to stand in the twilight. Even as the fighters threw punches in the final minute, Cosell did what only he could ever do. His voice tremulous, he paid tribute to Ali by quoting Bob Dylan lyrics:

*May your hands always be busy,  
May your feet always be swift,  
May you have a strong foundation  
When the winds of changes shift.  
May your heart always be joyful,  
May your song always be sung,  
May you stay forever young.*

*In the early 1980s, Ali was diagnosed with Parkinson's syndrome, which was later determined to have been caused by head blows he received in the boxing ring. An overconfident and undertrained Ali had been battered in later fights, such as his loss to Leon Spinks in early 1978. He rededicated himself to his craft and returned to face Spinks later that year, with Cosell and Kindred bearing witness to what was to be the Greatest's last great fight.*

Ali's victory over Spinks by decision on September 15, 1978, was the product of guile and will. Across fifteen rounds — Ali's fifth straight fifteen-round fight in twenty-three months — the sixty-three thousand witnesses in New Orleans' Superdome saw Ali use every old fighter's trick, a heel of his glove in an eye, a forearm scraped across a nose, the bigger man clutching, holding, leaning so heavily on the champion as to double him over. Only occasionally did Ali throw a blurred combination of the kind he once threw in multiples of five.

Yet emotion charged Cosell's broadcast. At age thirty-six, Ali again had done

*About the author...*

**A Career Turning Sports into Prose  
Began at Illinois Wesleyan University**

Dave Kindred has been a newspaper and magazine columnist for 37 years. He has covered sports for the *Washington Post* and the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and is the author of seven books.

Now living in central Virginia, Kindred is a native of Atlanta, Ill. He worked his way through Illinois Wesleyan on a journalism scholarship provided by the Bloomington/Normal *Daily Pantagraph* and also readied for his future career as sports editor for *The Argus*. But it was his baseball coach, the late Jack Horenberger, who might have given the young writer the best single piece of advice he received during his college years. “I can remember hearing this kind of high-pitched voice from the dugout shouting, ‘Kindred, move around! You’re killing the grass!’” he recalled. “So I’ve tried to do that all these years.”



**Writer Dave Kindred in his element. (Photo by Bob Leverone/Sporting News)**

Kindred’s first move, upon graduation in 1963, was to join *The Pantagraph* sports department full-time. He still counts his most demanding journalistic duty being the operation of the sports desk on Tuesday and Friday nights during the Central Illinois high school basketball season.

Kindred received the Red Smith Award for lifetime achievement in sports journalism in 1991. In 1998, he was given Illinois Wesleyan’s Distinguished Alumnus Award, which he regards as “one of the highlights of my life.” He suspects the timing of the award might have had something to do with his *Sporting News* column about the Titans winning the 1997 Division III National Basketball Championship. “I wrote that IWU is ‘what Harvard would be if Harvard had cornfields at the edge of town.’” The comment especially pleased the late Minor Myers, who was Illinois Wesleyan’s president at the time. Said Kindred, “I can still hear Minor Myers roaring: ‘The question is not whether you want a statue, but how big do you want it?’”