

Interview with **Edwin Pope**

Date: June 19, 1989

Interviewer: Madison Davis Lacy, Jr.

Camera Rolls: 2152-2154

Sound Roll: 271

Team: A

Interview gathered as part of *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s*. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

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Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize II*.

[camera roll #2152]

[sound roll #271]

00:00:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Is there a glare, or are you OK?

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:00:20:00

Interviewer:

OK, Mr. Pope. Tell me a little bit about your background. I was particularly interested in an emphasis on your family's perceptions and assumptions about Black people, especially sports figures. And give me that Joe Louis story that I mentioned to you earlier.

00:00:32:00

Edwin Pope:

Joe Louis won the heavyweight championship when I was about eleven years old and growing up in, in Athens, Georgia, and just really getting into the newspaper business. I remember my first salary in the newspaper business was two eleven-cent movie passes a week, and that probably contrasts with what Joe Louis earned from the heavyweight championship and what today's champions earn. In any case, Joe Louis was my first real sports hero and he was also my father's real, true sports hero. My father never went outta house at night, but he listened to the radio for all of Joe Louis' fights and I felt that we were sort of united in this bond that we had with Joe Louis. But as soon as I graduated from the University of Georgia, went to work for United Press in Atlanta. One of the first interviews I had was Joe Louis, who was then on a sort of exhibition tour, after coming out of the Army, and I had my picture taken with Joe Louis at the Atlanta airport, beautiful picture. I was very proud of it. Took it back over to Athens, showed it to my father. He was absolutely outraged. Told me not to come back in the house again as long as I had that picture. And I really had a very difficult time with that. I couldn't understand how idolizing him as a sports hero he could draw that perception that it was wrong for me to be standing there beside him because he was White—he was Black and I was White. Eventually it, it was all settled in our household, but it was very tough for my father as well as for me because that was the way he'd grown up. That wasn't the way I had grown up, but that was the way he'd grown up and I had to try to understand that.

00:02:34:00

Interviewer:

Let's jump ahead in time now to the month before, then Cassius Clay, I think 1964, he was about to fight Sonny Liston here in Miami. What did you think of this fighter as contrasted with someone like Joe Louis? Tell me about your perception.

00:02:53:00

Edwin Pope:

Oh, I think I probably was a lot like most of the other writers, not many of whom are still around, but most of them were a lot older than I was and they really didn't take Cassius Clay very seriously. This was before Cassius Clay became officially Muhammad Ali, and they thought he was just a loudmouth, just a braggart who had won the Olympic title, but that he wasn't nearly ready to take on a person like Sonny Liston. I believe that most of the writers felt that Cassius Clay would be champion someday, but very few of them had any idea that he would beat Sonny Liston February 25th, 1964. I remember they took a newspaper poll of forty-six writers and only three picked Clay-Ali and one of those just did it for a gag. So that's how little people thought of Clay-Ali. One of the odd things about that fight in 1964 was that none of us really knew what to call Cassius. You didn't know whether to call him Cassius Clay, Muhammad Ali, or what.

00:04:08:00

Interviewer:

Let's stop down a second.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #3:

Speed.

00:04:15:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:04:17:00

Interviewer:

OK, give me that, that Joe Louis story one more time in Athens, Georgia.

00:04:21:00

Edwin Pope:

I grew up in Athens, Georgia, and I was about eleven years old when Joe Louis won the heavyweight championship. He was really my first sports idol, even though back then you couldn't see your sports idols. There was no television in the late 1930's. All you had was radio and you had to use your imagination. He was, Joe Louis was also my father's idol. And I felt that this was a—my father and I really didn't do a whole lot of things together. He was a very quiet, withdrawn man, but I felt that this was a real bond that I had with my father. Every time Joe Louis fought, we'd be in front of that old Philco radio, punching and rooting for Joe Louis. But then as soon as I got out of the University of Georgia and went to work for United Press in Atlanta, I had my picture taken with Joe Louis at the Atlanta airport. That was about 1948, and he was doing a series of exhibition fights. I was very proud of that picture. I took it back over to our old home in Athens, Georgia and showed it my father and he hit the ceiling. I really couldn't understand it, but he took violent exception to my having my picture taken with a Black. And we went around and round about it and it took a long time to get this settled. I had to try to remember how my father grew up and he had to try to realize, I think, that times were changing. And it was very difficult for both of us. I think that was really the first, I was eighteen years old by then—twenty years old when I got out of

college, and I think that was really the first sense I ever had of any racism in sports or out of sports.

00:06:17:00

Interviewer:

Now, you know, you told Sam though when you were in co—you were in high school, you had a friend who was a basketball player and it occurred to you, it never really occurred to you that he wouldn't have wanted to go to say, like, the University of Georgia to play basketball. Am I getting the story straight? What was—

00:06:32:00

Edwin Pope:

When I was in high school in Athens, Georgia, I had a, I was the team manager for basketball and I had a friend, a close friend who was Black and he was a star for the Black high school in Athens, Georgia. They were strictly segregated at that time. And we used to sit around and talk at night over at the University of Georgia, out on the steps and, and I used to wonder occasionally, it would just come into my mind subliminally how good he could have been on our White team in our White school at Athens High school, or at the University of Georgia, but such a thing was so totally out of the question. I never really got wrapped up in it because he'd never entertained any idea of it either. I think it came up in conversation a couple of times and he would just sort of laugh and shrug and it seemed so, so farfetched that we didn't even try to deal with it.

00:07:43:00

Interviewer:

I grew up in the South in Birmingham, Alabama, in a Black high school. And we used to say, Wow, the White kids don't wanna play us 'cause they know we're good. How'd you, how, how, how'd you gu—as a White child, kid in Athens, how did you feel about the talented Black stars like?

00:08:00:00

Edwin Pope:

Well, I didn't feel any way because we never saw any Black stars. They weren't allowed to compete on the same level so we were totally ignorant of, of how good Black athletes were, or Black scholars, or Black anything or anybody. Because the only contact we would have would, would be social, something like running a soft drink stand and one of our partners, there were two of us boys that were White and one of the guys was Black, and after he finished he'd go back where he lived and we'd go back where I lived, so, there was really no

perception of, it's hard to realize now but no one even, none of us even thought about it. Now, it came up in the fight business because a lot of fine White fighters ducked a lot of great Black fighters through the years. But if you were living in a small town in the South in the 1940s, it would have taken a lot to make you think about it.

00:09:15:00

Interviewer:

Let's stop down.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

[cut]

00:09:20:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:09:22:00

Interviewer:

OK, you told me about a poll before the Clay-Liston fight in 1964, forty-six writers. How did you vote?

00:09:29:00

Edwin Pope:

Well, the forty-six writers picked Sonny Liston, three writers picked Ali, and one of those three did it just for a gag. I, I voted totally the Liston ticket. ***I thought Liston would absolutely take this kid apart and, and just kill him.*** I didn't think, ***I mean, Liston was an absolute thug.*** I didn't think this kid had a chance.

00:09:54:00

Interviewer:

OK. That's it.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

[cut]

00:10:08:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:10:10:00

Interviewer:

How did other sports writers react to Cassius Clay when he burst on the scene? Tell me that again.

00:10:14:00

Edwin Pope:

I don't think they took him seriously. I think most of them felt that Cassius Clay would be champion eventually, but they certainly didn't give him a chance against Liston. You have to remember that a lot of the writers of that time were older, or they certainly seemed older to us then than they do now —Reg Smith, Jimmy Cannon, Al Buck, Lester Bromberg—a lot of good writer, good writers of great reputation from New York. And they, having been around Joe Louis, I think they resented Cassius Clay's, his loudness, his brashness because Joe Louis set a standard that unfortunately, for a lot of other fighters to come after him, they, these other fighters were judged by, a standard of decency, gentlemanliness—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Edwin Pope:

—always conducted himself in, in a way that made people love him.

00:11:08:00

Interviewer:

We rolled out so we're gonna change here.

[cut]

[camera roll #2153]

00:11:14:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:11:16:00

Interviewer:

Talk to me more about sports writers, Cassius Clay bursting on the scene and manipulation. You said all of a sudden there was a writer that they could—a fighter they couldn't manipulate.

00:11:26:00

Edwin Pope:

Traditionally writers and fighters have always gotten along together. Writing—fighting has been a real, a treasure-trove of material for writers, all the way from Jack London to Ernest Hemingway to Jimmy Cannon to Red Smith. Writers love fighters and fighters loved writers. Always had great relationships. Joe Louis would do anything, sit still for anything you wanted to do, sit down and talk to you all day. Anything you wanted was fine that, that most fighters could help you with. And suddenly, in Cassius Clay, before he become Muhammad Ali and after, you had a fighter that, I don't know whether manipulate is a right word or not, but you had a fighter that wouldn't do what you, exactly what you wanted him to do. He wasn't always at your beck and call. It was very disconcerting to a lot of the older writers. I think they resented this. I don't think they saw a new wave coming, a new generation, any, any great sociological change, but they weren't comfortable with Cassius Clay, or Mu—before Ali or after he became Muhammad Ali. He was an, a real unknown quantity for them, as well as everybody else.

00:12:53:00

Interviewer:

Now, the, the, the weeks and months or whatever before the fight a lotta hype, lot of energy going down. Was, did, was there any doubt on your part as to whether Liston could beat him?

00:13:05:00

Edwin Pope:

No, no, I had no doubt whatever that Sonny Liston would absolutely demolish Cassius Clay. Not a doubt, not a doubt. At one time I believe Liston was a twenty-to-one favorite. Liston was a very, very tough egg. He did time in Jefferson City, Missouri for, for really bashing some heads in, and he fought the same way as he acted on the street. He was merciless. He wasn't the fastest guy in the world, but he had a left jab that would just hit you like anybody else's left hook. ***And the very idea of this spindly kid from Louisville, just out of the Olympics going in there with Liston, who'd had so many fights in and out of the ring, and having a chance, was impossible for anybody to digest.*** No one of any standing, everybody says now, We knew Cassius Clay was gonna be great, and a lotta people had the idea he was going to be great. Believe me, no one thought he had a Chinaman's chance against Sonny Liston. It was a complete shock.

00:14:20:00

Interviewer:

All right now, describe the fight as you remember it.

00:14:26:00

Edwin Pope:

Fights are hard to describe because they, they happen so fast. They're unlike anything else in sports. The only thing you get, a real sports writer gets nervous at in sports is a big championship fight. You don't get nervous at the World Series, you don't get nervous at the Super Bowl, you don't get nervous at the Master's golf, you don't get nervous at Wimbledon. The only thing you get nervous at would be the Kentucky Derby that much [holds fingers close together] but a big fight where sometimes you really think you might have a heart attack. And that night I remember I was completely calm because I saw no likelihood of anything untoward happening, and I sensed this lack of tension all the way down the press row whereas in so many other fights, Patterson-Johannson, many, many other fights you'd feel almost as though you were about to faint before the opening bell because unlike a football game, there were no parameters. There's no nine innings or four quarters. It can be over just like that. But that night when Cassius Clay, who had just become Muhammad Ali, went in against Sonny Liston, I didn't feel any tension at all with the writers. But, as the fight went on, Clay came out dancing and jabbing and it became apparent pretty soon that Liston

had his hands full. I think Liston might've been the last person to realize it. Then Cassius Clay tried to quit about the fourth or fifth round after getting some sort foreign substance in his eyes, probably some grease that had come off of Sonny Liston's eyebrows and around his mouth that his trainer had put on. Cassius Clay tried to stop right there and his trainer Angelo Dundee said, Look big boy, this is for the championship. Get back in there. He didn't push him out there as a l—as people have reported, but he did berate him until Clay went on back out there. Then Clay took command of the fight and Sonny Liston quit after the seventh round, just before the eighth round I believe, started sitting in his corner, holding his shoulder, saying he couldn't lift his shoulder. Everyone was absolutely electrified, stunned, stunned. I remember I had a c—I saw a picture later of it—and I had a, a cigarette just dangling from my lips that obviously I had started to light, and I was so shocked when it was all over and Cassius Clay went leaping up into the air that I never even lit the cigarette. I was just standing there staring in stupefaction at this scene. And then Cassius Clay grabs Bundini Brown, his, one of his trainers, and he grabs Angelo Dundee then grabs his, another one of his old trainers, Luis Sarria, and he's leaping up and down hysterically. He runs over in front of the reporters, I told you. I told you I was gonna win. You didn't believe me. I'm the greatest. I'm gorgeous. See? See? See what I am? I'm the greatest, I'm the greatest. And we were just sitting there slack jawed, and there was Liston. Nobody ever figured out whether he really had a hurt shoulder, whether—some people thought the fight was fixed. I never felt that way. But it was a stunner.

00:18:16:00

Interviewer:

I think I remember you did write that you didn't think he was prepared though, didn't you?

Edwin Pope:

No, he didn't train at all. He was—

Interviewer:

Start again but say "Liston didn't train..."

00:18:25:00

Edwin Pope:

Sonny Liston, it was obvious that he wasn't ready. He was out with different girls every night. He was, he would put on the, the music of Night Train and do a little rope skipping and little speed bag, but he wasn't sparring much. Every time somebody would bring it up he would say, Oh, I'm just gonna knock the guy's head off in the first round and shut him up. He spent half of his time walking around a golf course with a little kid he had befriended. It was quite clear that he didn't think Clay was in his class.

00:19:10:00

Interviewer:

Let's stop now.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

Interviewer:

OK.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

I mean, like, were you comfortable with it? Did you, you know, what did you call him, stuff like that?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Speed.

[picture resumes]

Camera Crew Member #3:

We have speed.

00:19:23:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:19:25:00

Interviewer:

Were you comfortable with Cassius Clay's name change to Muhammad Ali? What did you call him, what did you think about it?

00:19:32:00

Edwin Pope:

I don't think many of us in the writing business were real comfortable with Cassius Clay joining the Nation of Islam and changing his name to Muhammad Ali. On the other hand, it wasn't, it didn't seem near as big then as, as it turned out to be. We didn't realize what was going on. To most of us it was about the same as a Baptist standing up and saying he'd become a Presbyterian, or an Episcopalian saying he'd become a Baptist or something along that line. We didn't really realize what was involved. There was a little trepidation because Malcolm X had been in the headlines quite a bit, and it may have been that some people perceived this as, as a little bit of a threat to themselves. We didn't, I guess the most practical application was that we didn't know what to call Cassius Clay. We didn't know whether to call him Cassius or Muhammad. We felt very strange calling him, his wife at that time called him Ali, most of the people called him Ali. But you wouldn't call him Clay, you would've called him Cassius, and it seemed odd to call him Muhammad. So it was a strange situation.

00:20:58:00

Interviewer:

OK. Let's stop down.

[cut]

[camera roll #2154]

00:21:07:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:21:10:00

Interviewer:

Tell me how you came to know Clay during that bus trip that you took in, I think it was later that year.

00:21:17:00

Edwin Pope:

For the second Ali-Liston fight, which was scheduled for Boston about a year after Ali first dethroned Liston, Ali's people had this idea that it would help promote the fight to, for him to drive his own bus all the way from Miami to a little place called Chicopee Falls, Massachusetts, where he would train. Well, little did we realize that Ali was going to actually drive the bus. So, we went over to his house in northwest Miami. There were four White writers: myself, George Plimpton, Bud Collins of the *Boston Globe* and Mort Schernick of *Sports Illustrated*, and the rest of 'em were sparring partners, trainers, Jimmy Ellis later to become champion was one of 'em. So we were all piled on the bus with a lot of fried chicken and soda pop and took off, and Clay is behind the bus—behind the wheel of the bus and had this terribly disconcerting habit of, while he was driving along seventy miles an hour, of turning around to address everyone on the bus, without lookin' at the highway. And everybody was constantly on the edge of their seats. Also, he would lean out the window, window at every opportunity and wave to people and announce that, he'd, I'm Muhammad Ali. I'm the greatest and I'm driving this bus up to Chicopee Falls, Massachusetts, where I'm going to kill that mean old Sonny Liston again. I'm gonna take the gorilla's head away from him and bash him in it, bash him in the head with it. On that bus trip I gathered a different perception of Muhammad Ali. Up until then I had saw—seen him as sort of a hostile, somewhat bristling person when you would try to approach him. On that trip it became very apparent that he was basically, enormously sweet-natured, very compassionate, very friendly, altogether taken up, though, with his new role as a Muslim. He would make a lot of jokes about everything but being a Muslim. We had a lot of things go wrong on that trip. The bus broke down outside of Fort Bragg, North Carolina. He had to hire another bus. I recall as we drove away in the new bus with the old bus sitting there in a—pulled over to the side of the road with the—the tires caught on fire—and Ali leaned out the window and said, Goodbye little red bus. I was too good for a little bus like you anyway. But several of the fighters got sick on the road. We never stopped to stay in a hotel or anything. We just went straight from Miami to right outside of Boston for four days, and when we got there none of us had bathed in four days and we'd just been eating in roadside places, we looked like a convention of chimney sweeps. But he would, when he wasn't driving he would come back there and hunker down in the seat beside you, and even though he was very slim and almost wiry at that time he was still, had such a big frame, he would just squash you up against the side of the, of the bus and you'd be trying to type. And Ali didn't read very well. He was rejected for the Army partly because he, he couldn't read very well. And he would look over at what you were typing and he would make comments, make some editorial comments on your editorial comments, I like that, or I don't like that, but actually he really didn't know what you were writing. But he was a very empathetic, just a nice person. No matter what preconception you got on that bus with Ali with, it would have been absolutely impossible to get off disliking him.

00:25:49:00

Interviewer:

Well, now how did you reconcile your new-found, if you will, growing affection for Ali when he refused induction into the service? How'd you feel about that?

00:25:58:00

Edwin Pope:

I was very upset about it, personally and editorially. I didn't think it was right for Ali to refuse induction when other people were over there fighting and, and dying in Vietnam. Remember now that this was before we all knew what a tragic, just transcendently horrible mistake Vietnam was. At that time it was a, almost as much of a situation of patriotism, much like World War Two. Only in retrospect did we see what a terrible thing it was. This was before we saw that. So, I was very resentful of it and so were quite a few other people.

00:26:58:00

Interviewer:

All right, let's stop down.

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK.

[cut]

00:27:05:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:27:07:00

Interviewer:

You were saying in pre-interview that you didn't think that Ali's refusal to be indu-in-inducted had anything to do with his religion, didn't you? Tell me, tell me.

00:27:16:00

Edwin Pope:

I felt that Ali used the religious issue just to keep from going to Vietnam. I must say I considered it a pretty natural reaction, nobody wants to be shot at. And I just didn't think the religious issue was, that he was genuinely refusing induction because of that. People, other people were taking off of, what he did was just a little variation on what other people were doing who were taking off for Canada and dodging the draft that way. I've never been sure of exactly why Ali didn't go into the service. I'm inclined to think I was overly harsh in my assessment of it.

00:28:14:00

Interviewer:

How, well, what about other athletes at the time? I mean, how's it square with other athletes of the time? They, a lotta athletes got off pretty easy.

00:28:21:00

Edwin Pope:

I don't recall the specifics. A lot of—some were rejected because of—football and baseball players usually had bad knees or some sort of arthritic conditions that, Ali was a cause célèbre though. He was a, a unique case. No other athlete used the religious issue to do it. There was a basic freedom involved and those of us who were unwilling at that time to deny him, unwilling to grant him the freedom of his expression were wrong.

00:29:02:00

Interviewer:

OK, change tone now, take me to Yulee, Florida. Tell me that story.

00:29:06:00

Edwin Pope:

That bus ride had one very unpleasant moment. The first night we were out we were stopped at little place called Yulee, Y-U-L-E-E, Florida, up in north Florida, and it's really back in the country. They had to pipe daylight in there. It'd take you a week to get a postcard out there. Ali didn't wanna stop. Everybody else wanted to stop to get some food. Ali said, I don't wanna to stop till we get through Georgia. We wanna get his bus through Georgia because I don't want anybody having to fool with any Ku Klux Klan men, Klansmen or any, as he put it, any Georgia Baptist. And nonetheless, they pulled into this little roadside stand in Yulee, Florida about eleven-thirty at night and Drew Brown, the assistant trainer they called Bundini Brown, went in to try to get some food to take with us and the proprietor refused Bundini. He said, You have to go around to the window outside. Well, Bundini got very upset about it. George Plimpton stepped up and said—and so did Bud Collins and so did I—stepped up and

asked if, how they had the right to do this, wasn't this the United States? And this man says, No, this is not the United States. And he may have had a point there. I think it wasn't a part of the United States at the time and may not be yet for that matter. In any case, Bundini got back on the bus and he was crying, he was sobbing, in terrible shape. And Ali says, I told you not to do that. I told you you're in the wrong part of the country to go in and for a Black person to go in and try to order food. He says, I don't have any damn sympathy for you whatever. And he took, picked up his pillow and started beating him over the head with it, half in jest, half seriously. It was a very touching moment though. Bundini was weeping and talking about having been in the service and fought for his country and was denied just the most basic human right, and Ali, seeming in a wisdom far beyond his years, discerning even advance—in advance the treatment that he knew Bundini would get, and warning him and berating him for trying to defy—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Edwin Pope:

—convention at that time.

00:31:43:00

Interviewer:

Roll out.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, good.

Camera Crew Member #1:

This is the end of sound roll 271, roll 271.

Interviewer:

I think, I think you had a {unintelligible} point—

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:31:55:00

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