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LOUISVILLE, Ky. ---- Just as the red carpet was going up for the opening of the Muhammad Ali Center, a group of lifelong residents from young Cassius Clay's neighborhood were getting down in Chickasaw Park on the west side of town. The men were gathered around a picnic bench to watch college basketball on a funky TV set with a rope-a-dope antenna.

Chickasaw Park is on 61 acres of lush land along the muddy Ohio River. It is the same Ohio River that runs near the downtown Ali Center. It is the same Ohio River into which Ali allegedly threw his 1960 Olympic gold medal after being refused service in a Louisville restaurant.

Chickasaw Park was created in 1922 specifically for African-American use. Featuring winding paths and tennis courts, it was one of the last parks designed by Frederick Olmsted, best known for co-designing Central Park in New York.

Ali ran through Chickasaw Park as part of his training regimen. He grew up a mile away from the park in a small three-bedroom ranch house at 3302 W. Grand Ave.

"Our family lived on Greenwood," said Rodney Noble, 49. "He used to run from 34th and Grand down Greenwood. He would run around this park on the street there are sidewalks today and go back. His goal was to beat the bus. He remains a hero to people here."

Added Earl Reed, 44: "I ran the mile. I know he ran the mile. He never ran for distance. He lost a lot of track meets because he was running while shadowboxing."

Charles Bundrent looked at the African-American men, who numbered around a dozen. They call their gathering The Office. Bundrent is the unofficial president.

Every winter, Harold Buford leads a posse from The Office to Chicago to watch the University of Louisville basketball team play De Paul. Buford, 44, had it down: "Palmer House. Ronny's Steak House. Beef and Burgundy. They all know us." They all laughed.

These guys know what they want. Robert Rogers, 45, said: "Ali knew at an early age what he wanted. And he went out and got it."

For example, when visitors first enter the Ali Center exhibition space, they see a red

Schwinn bicycle. At the age of 12, Cassius Marcellus Clay had a similar bicycle stolen from the front of the Columbia Auditorium near downtown. He was fighting mad. When Clay reported the theft, he met police officer Joe Martin, who was white. Martin ran a boxing program for the Louisville Parks Department and gave the 12-year-old Clay his first lessons. In six weeks, Clay won his amateur debut in a three-round decision. He weighed 85 pounds. Today, you measure his weight in gold.

"We're excited about the center, even though we can't afford to go to the 'gala' event," Rogers said. "The center is a way to let the people know the struggles he went through. Young people here really don't know him."

As the president of The Office, it became Bundrent's duty to call the patriarch of the group.

Marcus Anderson was the first boxer to win the national Golden Gloves three years in a row (1964-66). As a professional, he fought as a junior lightweight. Anderson sparred with Ali in 1959 and 1960.

Anderson, 59, promptly answered the bell and joined The Office.

He walked with a cane as the result of Brown's syndrome, a deterioration of the bones. Anderson is legally disabled. He is a retired heavy-equipment operator from the DuPont factory in Louisville.

"In 1959, we trained at Columbia Gym operated by Martin," Anderson said. "There were three or four people in the gym on a Friday night. Ali and I would box 15 rounds. After the first time, he said, 'I'm the winner and champion of the world, Cassius Clay!' So the next week, we went 15 rounds, and I didn't let him get the jump on me. I said, 'I'm the winner and the new champion!' When we'd leave the gym, we would go to 9th and Broadway. There was a skating rink there. He could skate; I couldn't. But I was 14, and he took a liking to me."

Ali took Anderson under his wing when Martin brought the Louisville Golden Gloves champs to Indianapolis to fight the Indiana champs.

"It was the first time I had ever been out of town," Anderson said. "I was scared. I was in the back of the van. It was Muhammad, Jimmy Ellis and the rest of the champs. Ali kept saying, 'What's wrong?' He'd say: 'Come on, you're with us. You're going to cook just like everybody else is going to cook.' We got up there, and I fought the second fight. I won by a decision. When I got back to my corner, Ali and Jimmy Ellis were standing right there in the corner. I jumped out of the ring and right into their arms."

Ali, Ellis and Anderson all attended Central High, which legally was segregated until 1956. Ali knocked out Ellis in the 12th round of a 1971 championship fight at the Astrodome in Houston. In 1997, Anderson told the Louisville Courier-Journal:

"Ali stands alone. But you've got to mention Ellis. He never ducked anybody. When he fought, he came to fight."

Anderson and The Office maintain there is a Louisville style of boxing.

"By sparring with Ali, I learned how to slip punches and move my head," he said. "If you look at film, you will see when a man threw a right hand at Muhammad Ali, he would just turn his head."

Anderson swung his head.

"Or he would pull back like this," Anderson said, cocking his head backward.

"Ali had a sense of how to slip a punch," Anderson concluded.

Anderson then snapped his head back toward the Ohio River, where Ali's gold medal might or might not have settled. Who knows?

Ali's fourth wife, Lonnie Ali, is also from Louisville. In a separate conversation, she said: "The river story has become mythical. At different times, depending on what mood he is in, he will tell you he did. Or he might tell you he didn't. He likes to keep people wondering."

He knows a youthful ripple of wonder can be found in old rivers.