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# Athletes of Purpose

50 PEOPLE WHO CHANGED THE FACE OF SPORTS

Arnold B. Cheyney

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

 GOOD YEAR BOOKS

D E D I C A T I O N  
*To the memory of Coach Junius B. Ferrall 1911–1995*

A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

**M**ost athletes, however gifted or average, have at least one coach that made a significant difference in their lives and added many memories. My personal memory, among many, is of the half-time pep talks of my football coach. Coach Junius B. Ferrall's admonitions ran something like this: "Play your best, for you will replay these games in your minds the rest of your lives." Sure, Coach, you bet!

Now in my seventies, I am startled from time to time because I still replay those 1940s games in my mind. I say to myself, "If I had only. . . ." Coach Ferrall made a difference in my life and in the lives of countless others.

*Athletes of Purpose* gave me great joy in its writing. Much of the credit for that joy goes to the children's department of the Wooster Public Library. The staff helped me time and again with my search for background material. Denise Cheyney, my daughter-in-law, was very helpful with her knowledge of the Internet, as was my wife, Jeanne, who once again spent much time proofing the many drafts of the manuscript. Any shortcomings herein are attributable to the author.

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Book design by Foster Design.

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Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN 978-1-59647-351-5

Previous ISBN 0-673-58667-7

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# Athletes of Purpose

Herbert and Estella Aaron had eight children during the Great Depression. The family lived in Mobile, Alabama, among other poor black families. Henry was their third child. Their home had no windows or lights, but they did have a kerosene lamp, love, and space around them—space to play ball.

Baseball was Henry’s favorite sport. He gathered bottle caps and hit them with a broomstick. Caps that went the farthest he called home runs; shorter ones he called singles and doubles. He wrapped nylon stockings or cloth around old golf balls and bound them tightly together to make baseballs. Henry then tossed them on the roof of the house and caught them as they tumbled down. For a change, he tossed them over the roof, ran around to the other side, and caught them before they hit the ground.

Henry stopped playing high school football for fear he might hurt himself and ruin a baseball career. In high school, he learned that Jackie Robinson, an African American man, had broken the color barrier and was playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers in the all-white major leagues. Henry skipped school in the afternoons and listened to the radio at the pool hall as the announcer described Jackie’s playing.

When the high school principal found out about Henry’s absences, he expelled him. Henry did not tell his parents, but he did go to school. He just walked in the front door and out the back and went on to the pool hall. Shortly thereafter, his father stood in the pool

hall entrance looking at him. After a long talk about the necessity of a high school education, Henry went back to school.

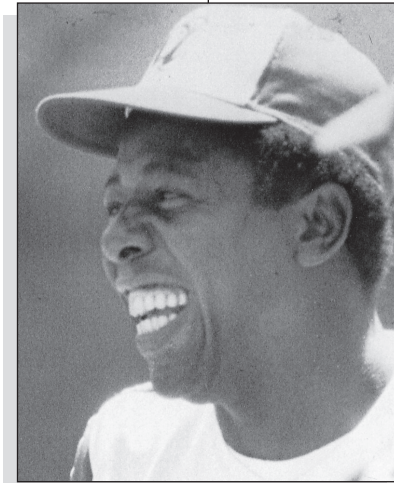
A baseball scout heard about Henry and his baseball talent. He signed Henry with the Indianapolis Clowns of the Negro American League. Soon the 18-year-old was batting

fourth in the Clowns’ lineup, playing shortstop and hitting over .400. Henry’s practice in hitting floating bottle caps and racing around the house to catch his “baseball” was paying off. The Clowns won the Negro League World Series, and Henry was still able to graduate from high school, to the delight of his mother and father.

Henry joined the Milwaukee Braves and was given the nick-

name “Hank.” In 1954 the Braves called him to their spring training camp. One of the regular players had fractured an ankle sliding into second base. The next day, Hank Aaron was playing left field for the major league team. In April he hit his first big league home run.

Becoming a major league player in the 1950s was not easy. Hank was subjected to racial slurs and anonymous death threats. He countered this cowardice by his dignified manner and excellent playing. As he got older, he married and started a family, and his accomplishments on the baseball field grew. By the time he retired from baseball after the 1976 season, he had hit more home runs in his career than any other player in the history of the game.



## Reading

1. In your estimation, who are the best major league baseball players in the game today? What makes each one great? Share your choices with your classmates.
2. What is your favorite sport? What nickname would you choose for yourself in that sport? Why?
3. Major league baseball records are constantly being made and broken. What are some recent ones that are important to fans and players?
4. Write a title for the biography of Hank Aaron. Compare your title with those of your classmates.

## Social Studies

1. Hank Aaron was elected to the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 1982. Where is it located?
2. Hank Aaron had a record 755 home runs during his career. Whose record did he break?
3. What baseball stadium is the closest to your home? What is the name of the home team that plays there?
4. Prepare a report on Little League Baseball for your classmates. Where is its headquarters?

## Further Reading

Deane, Bill. *Top 10 Baseball Hitters*. Springfield, NJ: Enslow Publishers, 1998.

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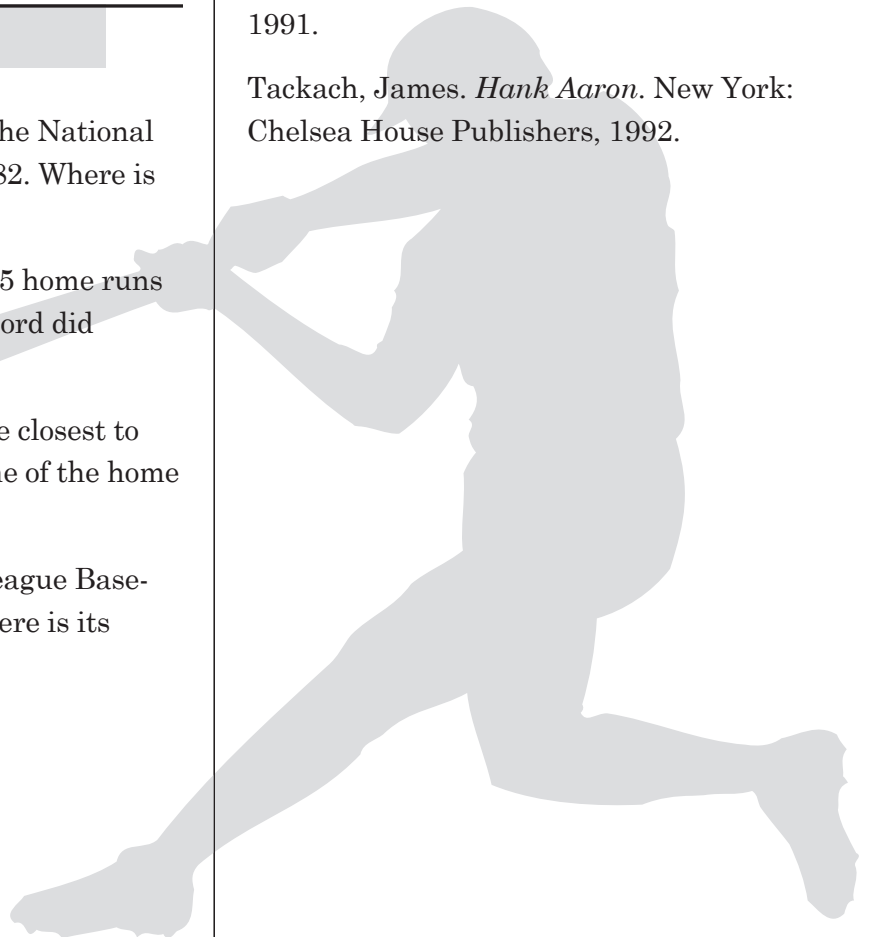
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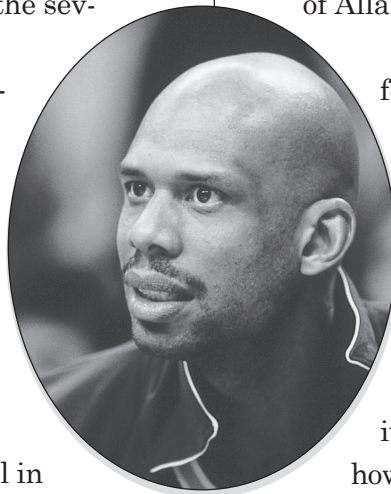
At birth, Ferdinand Lewis Alcindor, Jr., weighed 13 pounds and was 22½ inches long. As a pro basketball player, he was 260 pounds and 7 feet 2 inches tall.

In the elementary grades, Lew was awkward and uncoordinated, but he exercised and practiced and soon was able to hold his own on the basketball court. In the seventh grade, he was given the number 33 to wear, never realizing, at the time, that he would be wearing it throughout his career. In the eighth grade, he made his first “dunk,” jumping high and putting the basketball down through the hoop.

For his high school education, he chose to go to a private Catholic school, Power Memorial in New York City. In his 3 years there, the team lost only one game and had a 71-game winning streak! He finished high school with 2,067 points. Naturally, many colleges wanted him to attend their schools. Lew chose UCLA, the University of California at Los Angeles, where Coach John Wooden stressed the importance of grades as well as basketball. At that time, freshmen in college could not play on the varsity squads in regular-season play. UCLA’s varsity had recently won the national basketball championship. In the fall of 1965, a game was organized in which the freshmen would play against the varsity in UCLA’s new 12,500-seat arena. The freshmen beat the varsity players 75 to 60! Lew made 31 points.

For the 3 years Lew played varsity basketball at UCLA, the team won three

national championships. Overall, they won eighty-eight games and lost only two. During this period, Lew took instruction in the Muslim faith. He graduated with a degree in history from UCLA and later officially changed his name from Lew Alcindor to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, “the powerful servant of Allah.”



Of course, teams in the professional basketball leagues wanted him to play center for them. He decided that each one should make its best offer. Kareem would take the best of those. He signed with Milwaukee even though the other team offered to give him much more money than it had originally planned. He proved, however, to be a man of his word.

Kareem was voted the league’s Most Valuable Player several times. The Los Angeles Lakers offered him a lifetime contract. Back in southern California, he not only played basketball, but he married and had four children. Another career, television, opened up for him. In 1979 “Magic” Johnson joined the team and the Lakers began winning even more games.

The 1988-89 season would be his last. He had played professional basketball for a record 20 years, and he was the oldest player in the National Basketball Association. Kareem ended his career with 38,387 points, and the Lakers retired his jersey, number 33.

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## Reading

1. After reading Kareem's biography, make up a title that best expresses what you think of him.
2. Draw a picture of Kareem playing basketball as a professional. Add a caption below your picture explaining what he is doing.
3. After reading one or two other biographies about Kareem, list three positive character traits that you find in his life story. Compare your list with those of your classmates.
4. Kareem studied and then embraced the Muslim faith. What distinctive beliefs do you have? List some of them.

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## Social Studies

1. Kareem remarked that even though a basketball player can make a basket from 25 feet, it does not make him the kind of person who can tell you how to live your life. What does this statement mean to you?
2. In a reference book, read about Los Angeles, California. Make a list of five places that would interest you if you could visit the area. Discuss your list with your classmates.
3. As a student at UCLA, Kareem majored in history. At this time in your life, what do you think will be your major in college? In twenty-five words or less, write why you would choose that major area of study. Discuss it with your parents and classmates.

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- Sehnert, Chris W. *Top 10 Big Men*. Edina, MN: Abdo & Daughters, 1997.
- Sullivan, George. *Center*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1988.

Twelve-year-old Cassius Clay and his best friend were riding their bicycles in Louisville, Kentucky. Cassius's father had just bought his son a new Schwinn bike. To get out of the rain, the two boys went to the Home Show, where there was free popcorn and hot dogs. When Cassius returned for his bicycle, it was gone. Someone told him to see the off-duty policeman, Joe Martin, at a nearby gym. While Cassius told Joe his story, he was actually watching the boys who were sparring, shadow boxing, and jumping rope in the gym. He would soon know what he wanted to do with his life: box.

Cassius's parents, desiring to keep him out of a gang, signed a parental consent form and Cassius began to learn the art of boxing. Early in the mornings, he ran for miles and skipped rope. During the day, he went to school. After school he cleaned rooms at a nearby college. Then he went to Joe's gym for a couple of hours. Later in the evening, he worked in another gym on timing, rhythm, and counter-punching. By the age of 16, he was 6 feet tall, weighed 170 pounds, and was still growing.

In 1960 he won the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) title, which qualified him for the Olympic Trials. After winning the Trials, he went to Rome, Italy, for the Summer Olympics, proclaiming, "I am the greatest!" He backed up his boast, winning a gold medal. On returning to Louisville, Kentucky, he received a hero's welcome. But because he was black, he could not be served a hamburger and milk shake in a restaurant at that time. In the same restaurant, a motorcycle gang,

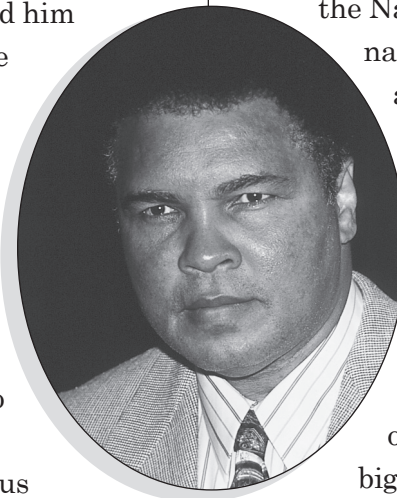
wearing Nazi symbols on their black jackets, could be served. Cassius threw his gold medal into the river.

After the Olympics, Cassius turned professional, and in 1964 he won the heavyweight title from Sonny Liston. After the fight, he announced his conversion to the religion of the Nation of Islam and changed his name to Muhammad Ali. Becoming a Black Muslim brought Ali a great deal of criticism from white and black people alike. But he countered with "I'm free to be who I want."

Ali's rematch with Liston lasted one minute and fifty-two seconds. He went on to beat many other heavyweight fighters, but his biggest fight was against the United

States government. Ali refused to join the U.S. military because he was now a Muslim minister and opposed to war. Ali was banned from boxing, convicted for draft evasion, and stripped of his heavyweight title. After 4 years of costly legal battles, the Supreme Court ruled unanimously in Ali's favor.

Ali came back to win his heavyweight title again, only to lose it and win it once more. He fought in many countries and had a vast following of fans all over the world. A slurring of his speech and other symptoms were diagnosed as Parkinson's Disease, which had been caused by repeated blows to his head. Now Ali enjoys spending time with his wife and eight children, does charitable work in developing countries, and is remembered by many fans as "The Greatest."



## Reading

1. Who would be the best audience for the biography of Muhammad Ali? Practice reading it aloud and then read it to someone you think would find it interesting.
  2. Do any of the incidents in the life of Muhammad Ali bring back memories of something that happened to you? Explain the situations to your classmates, if you feel comfortable in doing so.
  3. Ali enjoyed creating poetry. He wrote about a fight he was to have with Sonny Liston: "If you like to lose money/Be a fool and bet on Sonny." Write a short poem about Ali and share it with your classmates.
  4. In your library, check out one of the books from the Further Reading list about Ali. Report on several items that interest you and that were not mentioned in the *Athletes of Purpose* biography.
3. In a reference book, search for information about Parkinson's Disease. Discuss what you learned with your classmates.
  4. Many people have been treated unfairly in the past, as was Muhammad Ali. Think of a time when you were treated unfairly. How did you cope with the situation? If you had to do it over, would you react differently? How?

## Social Studies

1. Muhammad Ali boxed in many cities of the world: Vancouver, Canada; Djakarta, Indonesia; Dublin, Ireland; Rome, Italy; Tokyo, Japan; Manila, Philippines; Zurich, Switzerland; and Kinshasa, Zaire (now Congo). Find the countries and cities on a map or globe.
2. Those who refused to fight in the war in Vietnam were labeled "conscientious objectors." Look up this term in a reference book. Then make a list of reasons why someone might refuse to participate in a war.

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