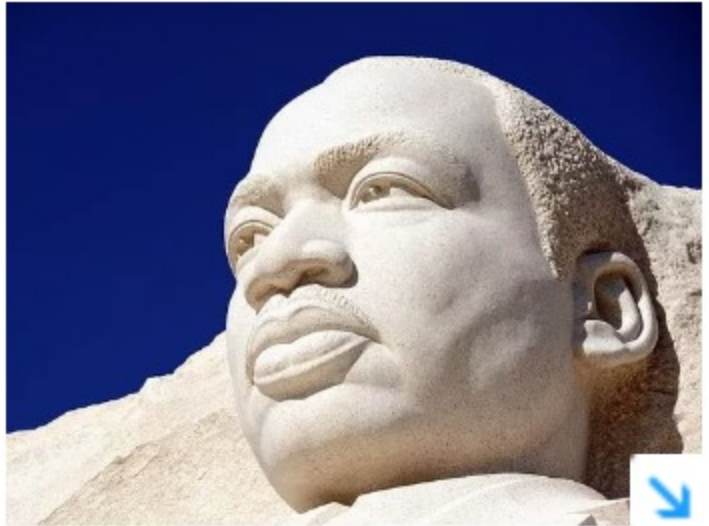




From boyhood to his last days, King pursued equality

USA TODAY NETWORK Matt Alderton, Special to USA TODAY Published 4:56 p.m. ET Feb. 2, 2018



(Photo: Karen Bleier, AFP/Getty Images)

Although his name is ubiquitous and his message universal, what most Americans know about Martin Luther King Jr. as a person could probably fit on a cocktail napkin. Those celebrating his legacy as part of Black History Month should therefore begin by learning more about his life.

A good place to start is with his name. He was born Jan. 15, 1929, as Michael King Jr. On an inspiring trip to Germany, his father decided to change his own name and that of his 5-year-old son to honor Martin Luther, who incited the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s.

King's message of love and equality began germinating shortly thereafter.

"When he was 6 years old, one of his best friends was a boy who was white. They loved playing together. But when they started going to school, his friend told him: My father said I can't play with you anymore," says Brad Meltzer, author of the children's book *I Am Martin Luther King Jr.* "His parents explained: It's because you're black and he's white.

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Young Martin was so mad that day. He wanted to hate his friend and his father. But his parents told him to do the opposite — that he should love his friend, even though his friend hurt him."

King continued choosing love during his education at segregated public schools in Atlanta, where he skipped grades nine and 12. He began attending Morehouse College at 15 and graduated in 1948 with a degree in sociology. Although his father and grandfather were Baptist ministers, he intended to become a lawyer or doctor; he decided to enter the "family business" only when Morehouse president Benjamin Mays convinced him that Christianity could be a catalyst for social change. King subsequently attended Boston University, where he earned a Ph.D. in theology. While in Boston, he met his future wife, Coretta Scott, They married in 1952 and had four children.



Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. makes his last public appearance at the Mason Temple in Memphis, Tenn., on April 3, 1968, one day before his assassination. (Photo: Associated Press)

At just 26 years old, King cemented his future as a civil rights leader when he moved to Montgomery, Ala. There, in 1955, the local chapter of the NAACP chose him to lead a boycott of the city's segregated buses after Rosa Parks famously refused to surrender her seat to a white passenger. When the Supreme Court later ordered Montgomery to desegregate its buses, King became a national figure and co-founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to advance the cause of racial equality through nonviolent protest — a principle he learned as a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi and later codified in his *Letter From Birmingham Jail*, written in 1963 after he was arrested while protesting segregation in Birmingham, Ala. In all, King, was arrested 29 times.

"His *Letter from Birmingham Jail* was written in the margins of a newspaper and even on toilet paper," Meltzer says. "Today, it has been read by millions of people."

"It is one of the great moments in American history. But what must be remembered is that the march didn't mean that King's work was done. His battles continued, marching from Selma to Montgomery. And as I tell my own children, the 'I Have a Dream' speech wasn't the ending of the story. His battle still continues today."

Brad Meltzer, author of the children's book *I Am Martin Luther King Jr.*

Of course, King's most famous words weren't penned in jail. Rather, they were delivered from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., where he declared "I have a dream" in front of more than 200,000 people demonstrating for civil rights as part of the historic March on Washington in August 1963. His stirring words helped secure passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and earned him the Nobel Peace Prize.

"It is one of the great moments in American history," Meltzer says. "But what must be remembered is that the march didn't mean that King's work was done. His battles continued, marching from Selma to Montgomery. And as I tell my own children, the 'I Have a Dream' speech wasn't the ending of the story. His battle still continues today."

Indeed, King's legacy lives on — even though he did not. On April 4, 1968, King was fatally shot by an assassin while he stood on a balcony at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis.

"Dr. King was killed while he was in Memphis in solidarity with sanitation workers demonstrating in protest of inequitable wages and working conditions," says the Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. "He had 'shown up.' This is one part of King's great witness — he physically stood with others. He literally embodied his work for justice."

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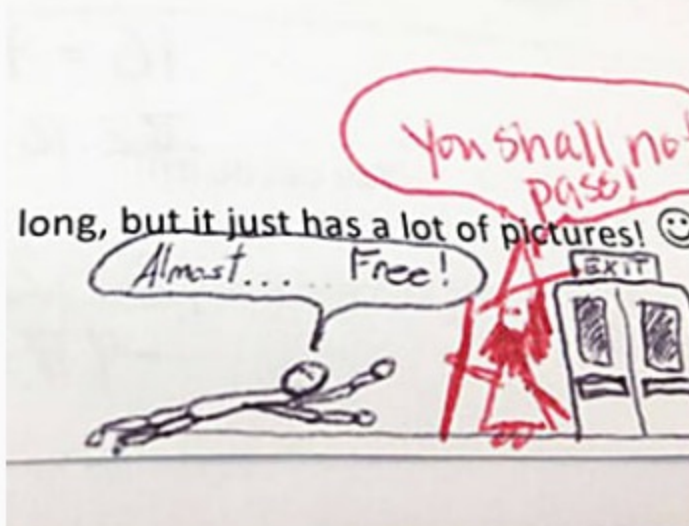
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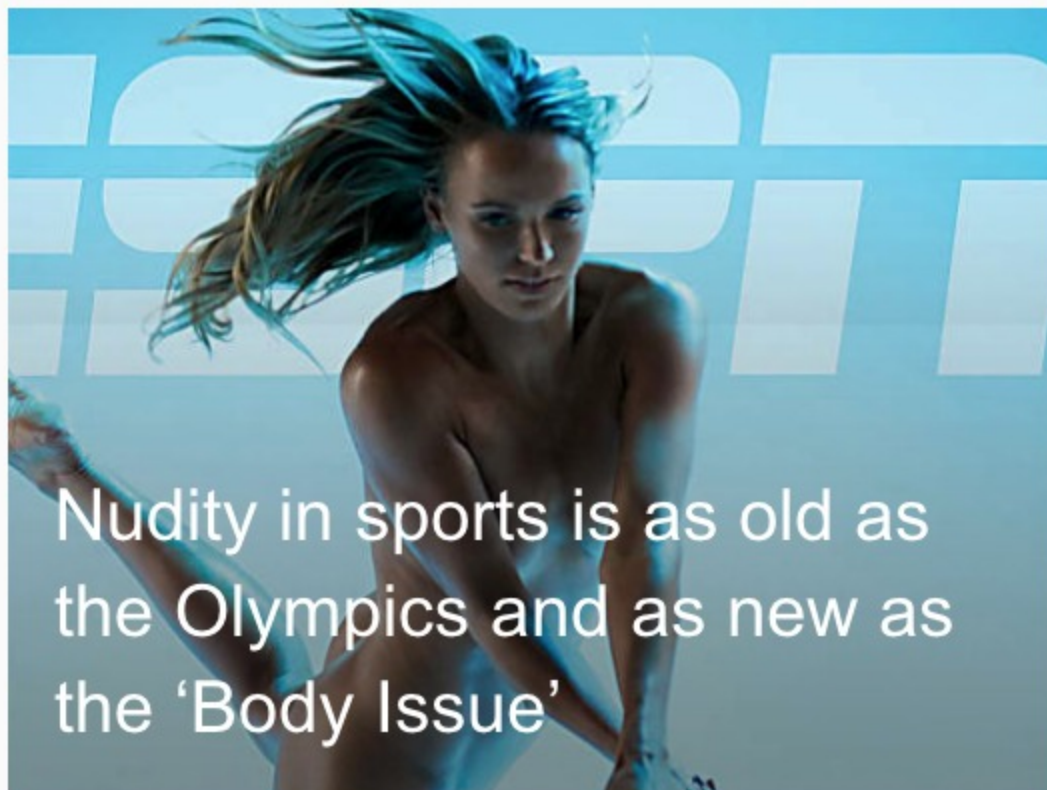
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