

The Brown Bomber

The symbolic weight affixed to Owens in Berlin was shared by the first black heavyweight champion since the days of Jack Johnson: the “Brown Bomber,” Joe Louis. Louis was born Joseph Louis Barrow in Lafayette, Alabama, the seventh of eight children. His father was committed to an insane asylum when Louis was two, and died two years later. Louis’s

mother remarried and moved to Detroit. It was here Louis honed his physique—a physique that would lead *Ring* magazine to call him “the greatest puncher of the twentieth century”—by lifting big blocks of ice up several flights of stairs. (This was also the after-school job for a young teenager named Henry Aaron, who also credited carrying the ice blocks for the strength in his wrists.)

Unlike the defiant Jack Johnson, Louis was a man of few words. He was handled very carefully by a management team that had a set of rules Louis had to follow, including to never be photographed with a white woman, never go to a club by himself, and never speak unless spoken to.⁴⁹ He was given instruction on hygiene and table manners. Sports reporter Russ Cowans gave him diction lessons, and advisors told him, “For God’s sake, after you beat a white opponent, don’t smile.” He was part Jack Dempsey, part Eliza Doolittle.⁵⁰

Louis may have been quiet outside the ring, but inside he was devastating, scoring sixty-nine victories in seventy-two professional fights—fifty-five of them by knockout. Louis often had to go for the knockout rather than risk a judge’s decision, which might put more weight on his skin tone than on his punching prowess.⁵¹

Marcus Garvey was also a great supporter of Louis. He took pride in the Brown Bomber’s ring triumphs, even disrupting the 1935 UNIA convention so that participants could listen to Louis’s fight with Primo Carnera. As Garvey wrote,

If in nothing else, in the realm of boxing, the Negro has raised the status of the black man. As a fact the black man is considered the only dangerous competitor of the white man in the ring and he has knocked him out so often as to leave the impression that he is safely the world’s champion. The American Negro newspapers indulge in sports to a great extent. Sometimes more than fifty per cent of their issues are devoted to sports news and activities. This may not be very constructive but it is very helpful.⁵²

In other words, despite having an image (crafted by his handlers) of scraping and shuffling, Joe Louis and his dominance in the ring repre-

sented much more to poor blacks, and also to the radicalizing working class in the 1930s.

This played out most famously during Louis's two fights against German boxer Max Schmeling in 1936 and 1938. Hitler heavily promoted Schmeling as a living embodiment of "Aryan greatness." In their first bout, Schmeling scored a surprising knockout. Not only did Hitler and Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels have a field day, but the southern press in the United States gloated. One article in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* wrote that the fight proved who really was the master race.

The Louis-Schmeling rematch in 1938 was a political maelstrom—a physical referendum on Hitler, the Jim Crow South, and the correctness of antiracism. The U.S. Communist Party organized radio listenings of the fight from Harlem to Birmingham that became mass meetings. Hitler closed down movie houses so people would be compelled to listen. It wasn't a wise move. Louis devastated Schmeling in one round.⁵³

Richard Wright wrote about the Louis-Schmeling fight for the magazine *New Masses*. In his article, titled "High Tide in Harlem: Joe Louis as a Symbol of Freedom," he set the stage for that historic night:

The Louis-Schmeling fight for the heavyweight championship of the world at the Yankee Stadium was one of the greatest dramas of make-believe ever witnessed in America, a drama which manipulated the common symbols and impulses in the minds and bodies of millions of people so effectively as to put to shame our professional playwrights, our O'Neills, our Lawsons, and our Caldwells. . . .

Each of the seventy thousand who had so eagerly jammed his way into the bowl's steel tiers under the open sky had come already emotionally conditioned as to the values that would triumph if his puppet won. . . .

But out beyond the walls of the stadium were twelve million Negroes to whom the black puppet symbolized the living refutation of the hatred spewed forth daily over radios, in newspapers, in movies, and in books about their lives. Day by day, since their al-

leged emancipation, they have watched a picture of themselves being painted as lazy, stupid, and diseased. In helpless horror they have suffered the attacks and exploitation which followed in the wake of their being branded as "inferiors." True, hundreds of thousands of these Negroes would have preferred that refutation could have been made in some form other than pugilism; but so effectively and completely have they been isolated and restricted in vocation that they rarely have had the opportunity to participate in the meaningful processes of America's national life. Jim Crowed in the army and navy, barred from many trades and professions, excluded from commerce and finance, relegated to menial positions in government, segregated residentially, denied the right of franchise for the most part; in short, forced to live a separate and impoverished life, they were glad for even the meager acceptance of their humanity implied in the championship of Joe Louis.⁵⁴

Wright went on to describe Louis's physical domination of Schmeling:

At the beginning of the fight there was a wild shriek which gradually died as the seconds flew. What was happening was so stunning that even cheering was out of place. The black puppet, contrary to all Nazi racial laws, was punching the white puppet so rapidly that the eye could not follow the blows. It was not really a fight, it was an act of revenge, of dominance, of complete mastery. The black puppet glided from his corner and simply wiped his feet on the white puppet's face. The black puppet was contemptuous, swift; his victory was complete, unquestionable, decisive; his blows must have jarred the marrow not only in the white puppet's but in Hitler's own bones.

Then Wright famously described the reaction in Harlem:

In Harlem, that area of a few square blocks in upper Manhattan where a quarter of a million Negroes are forced to live through an

elaborate connivance among landlords, merchants, and politicians, a hundred thousand black people surged out of taprooms, flats, restaurants, and filled the streets and sidewalks like the Mississippi River overflowing in flood time. With their faces to the night sky, they filled their lungs with air and let out a scream of joy that seemed would never end, and a scream that seemed to come from untold reserves of strength. They wanted to make a noise comparable to the happiness bubbling in their hearts, but they were poor and had nothing. So they went to the garbage pails and got tin cans; they went to their kitchens and got tin pots, pans, washboards, wooden boxes, and took possessions of the streets . . . ever seen in Harlem and marked the highest tide of popular political enthusiasm ever witnessed among American Negroes.

Negro voices called fraternally to Jewish-looking faces in passing autos:

"I bet all the Jews are happy tonight!"

The New York *Daily News* said more simply, "There was never a Harlem like the Harlem of last night. Take a dozen Christmases, a score of New Year's Eves, a bushel of July 4th's and maybe—yes maybe—you get a faint glimpse of the idea."⁵⁵

Wright even wrote lyrics to a blues song, "King Joe (Joe Louis Blues)," put to music by Count Basie and sung by Paul Robeson, that went:

*Old Joe wrestled Ford engines, Lord, it was a shame;
Say Old Joe wrestled Ford engines, Lord, it was a shame;
and he turned engine himself and went to the fighting game . . .
Wonder what Joe Louis thinks when he's fighting a white man
Bet he thinks what I'm thinking, cause he wears a deadpan.*⁵⁶

The Brown Bomber held the heavyweight title for twelve years, the longest reign in history. He beat all comers, the overwhelming majority of them white, successfully defending his heavyweight title a record

twenty-five times. In a society so violently racist, boxing became an outlet for people's anger—a morality play about the thwarted ability, the unrecognized talents, and the relentless fighting spirit that shaped the black experience in the United States.

Years after the fight, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in *Why We Can't Wait*,

More than twenty-five years ago, one of the southern states adopted a new method of capital punishment. Poison gas supplanted the gallows. In its earliest stages, a microphone was placed inside the sealed death chamber so that scientific observers might hear the words of the dying prisoner to judge how the victim reacted in this novel situation. The first victim was a young Negro. As the pellet dropped into the container, and gas curled upward, through the microphone came these words: 'Save me, Joe Louis. Save me, Joe Louis. Save me, Joe Louis. . . .' "57