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JOE LOUIS, SYMBOL

1933-1949

by

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CHAPTER I

HISTORY WATCHES HANDS

"History watches hands; not lips"¹
Sidney Hook

In a poverty ridden section of Alabama known as "Buckalew Mountain Country," which lies in the beautiful area that inspired Carl Carmer's "Stars Fell on Alabama,"² Joe Louis Barrow, the fifth son of a sharecropper, was born on May 13, 1914.³ Even the most optimistic hopes of his mother, as she lay watching her newborn, must have fallen short of the success he was destined to achieve.

The father, Monroe Barrow, had spent some time previously in a mental institution and returned shortly after the birth of his fifth son to spend the rest of his life.⁴ Mrs. Barrow's remarriage was responsible for the family's move to Detroit when Louis was ten years old.⁵ Had the family stayed in Alabama, a large part of

¹Sidney Hook, The Hero in History (London: Secker and Warburg, 1945), 17.

²Floyd Tillery, "Untold Chapters in the Life of Joe Louis," The Ring, Vol. XV, No. 4, (May, 1936), 12.

³Andrew S. N. Young, Negro Firsts in Sports (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1963), 105.

⁴Time, Vol. XXXII, No. 23, (December 5, 1938), 66. (From the Joe Louis Folder in the Schomberg Collection of the New York Public Library).

⁵Young, 105.

American sports history and a large, but less definable portion of "social history" would have to be rewritten.

Some quarter of a century after his somewhat less than awe-inspiring beginning, Joe Louis' picture was to hang in practically every Negro home in the United States.⁶ At age twenty-six, he was considered by some to be the "most successful Negro on earth."⁷

Early in his boxing career he dropped his surname and proceeded to make "Joe Louis" a term synonymous with the "world's best" in boxing. Across the country babies were being named after him,⁸ but for the sporting world this mattered little. Reporters re-christened him with the likes of: Brown Bomber, Dark Destroyer, African Avenger, Tan Tornado, Dark Angel, Ethiopian Explorer, Bible Belter, David from Detroit, and K.K.K. (Kruel Kolored Klouter).⁹

His popularity with the proverbial "man in the street" was constantly in evidence. A Detroit congregation could be heard one Sunday singing:

⁶Earl Brown, "Joe Louis," Life, Vol. 8, No. 25, (June 17, 1940), 50.

⁷Brown, 49.

⁸New York Post, June 17, 1936, SC, JLF.

⁹Philadelphia Tribune, June 27, 1935, SC, JLF.

He don't smoke
Amen

He don't pour red hot likker down his throat
Amen

He fights clean and he shall stand before kings
Amen to all that, Amen¹⁰

Folk songs, both spontaneous and written, were sung in many Negro neighborhoods.¹¹ Composer Claude Austin wrote an operetta about him.¹² He acted in several movies and was the subject of "The Joe Louis Story."¹³ The Baltimore Afro-American kept its readers informed for weeks ahead concerning the opening of the films in which Joe Louis appeared.

His popularity was such that even before he became heavyweight champion of the world political figures were arranging meetings with him under the watchful eyes of the press. The Negro press was anything but naive about the motivation behind such meetings; yet they continued to get good coverage. It is a fact that these meetings took place long before Louis became champion. Los Angeles Mayor Frank Shaw went out to meet him at the airport in Los Angeles in early June,

¹⁰New York World Telegram, September 30, 1935, SC, JLF.

¹¹New York Post, December 14, 1956, SC, JLF: see also P.M., December 16, 1946, SC, JLF.

¹²New York Times Magazine, June 14, 1936, SC, JLF.

¹³New York Herald Tribune, June 25, 1955, SC, JLF.

1935.¹⁴ The Mayor of Detroit, upon Louis' return after defeating Primo Carnera on June 15, 1935, demanded that the champion see him or he'd "call out the cops" to bring him in.¹⁵

Local governments were not the only ones affected by the Joe Louis appeal. In the Senate on July 8, 1939, voting on a relief appropriation bill had to be postponed for lack of a quorum because it coincided with the Louis-Galento fight.¹⁶ In this instance, no political motives were involved. It is rather unlikely that the Senate will ever again be held up because of a boxing match.

Before his second fight with Max Schmelling, Joe Louis met and talked with President Roosevelt.¹⁷ A great many stories evolved as a result of this meeting, particularly after the war broke out. Most of them were not entirely true, but it is a fact that President Roosevelt became an avid fan of Louis' and often rearranged his schedule so that he could hear the fights on the radio.¹⁸

During a tour of Great Britain, the entire body of the House of Commons came to their feet when Louis entered with his wife, Marva.¹⁹

¹⁴Chicago Defender, June 12, 1935, 17.

¹⁵The New York Times, July 2, 1935, 26:3.

¹⁶The Afro-American, July 8, 1939, 21.

¹⁷The New York Times, August 28, 1935, 23:6.

¹⁸Joe Louis Scrapbook, No. 12, SC.

¹⁹Joe Louis, "My Story," Life, November 15, 1948, 144, SC, JLF.

No single event better exhibits the respect and admiration that was his at the pinnacle of his career.

To what did Joe Louis owe this undeniable popularity? First and foremost, he was the best heavyweight boxer of his time. He held the world's heavyweight championship for eleven years, eight months, and seven days. He fought every challenger the public felt had potential and gave return bouts in ten instances when the challenger proved formidable on the first try.

He was only the second Negro to hold the heavyweight crown in modern history, although there had been twelve Negro champions in lighter weights.²⁰ Actually, there had been prominent Negro contenders for the heavyweight title throughout the twenties. Even the great Jack Dempsey had his dark shadow. Harry Wills, unquestionably the most noteworthy contender for Dempsey's title, signed to fight him on several occasions. For various reasons, the bout never came about. One source holds promoter Tex Rickard responsible. His reasoning was supposedly based on the probability of a poor gate.²¹ It has also been hinted that political pressure from Washington was the basis for the default.²² Though this was the most renowned instance of the blatant prejudice which existed, Wills was not the only Negro to be refused a bid.

²⁰Literary Digest, 123, (July 3, 1937), 34, SC, JLF.

²¹The Ring, Vol. XXVIII, No. 10, (November, 1949), 4.

²²Chicago Defender, May 4, 1935, 25.

Others who knocked on the door but never quite made it included Peter Jackson, Sam Langford, and Jim Jonson.²³

The prejudice was inexcusable. Nonetheless, for those trying to rationalize their anti-Negro feelings, there were more than a few publicized incidents which added fuel to the ever present flame. It was reported that Negro Sam Langford edged his opponent around the ring so that he could knock him into the lap of a sportswriter who had predicted the outcome would find Sam on his back.²⁴ "Reported" incidents like these did little to appease the white supremists who were largely responsible for the existing situation; but neither were they responsible for it.

Though it may or may not be true, Jack Johnson is almost solely blamed for the crown's inaccessibility to Negro contenders for the two decades between his defection and Joe Louis' reign. Johnson won the crown from Jim Jeffries in 1910. Within the hour, several bitter incidents occurred.²⁵ A Negro was lynched in Charleston, Missouri, and another was dragged from a streetcar in Harlem and beaten to death. A white man was shot in Arkansas. In another run-in, a white physician, Alexander Brown, had to hold off his neighbors at gun-point to save the life of a Negro who was hiding in his home.

²³Philadelphia Tribune, June 27, 1935, SC, JLF.

²⁴Frank Scully, "Young Black Joe," Esquire, Vol. IV, No. 4, (October, 1935), 36.

²⁵New York Post, February 19, 1941, SC, JLF.

What was it about Johnson that evoked this bitterness and revulsion? The most popular consensus is that it was due solely to the color of his skin. Add to this his haughty carriage, his refusal to train, and the utter disdain he exhibited to each beaten opponent and a picture appears which is probably close to his "public image."

Shortly after he gained the crown, pictures were published showing Johnson in the company of white women while in Paris. The clamor caused by these photos didn't have a chance to die before he had married a white woman. This "unpardonable sin" was magnified when his wife committed suicide and he was goaded into smiling for the cameras at her funeral.²⁶ He later married another white woman and continued his high living until his money ran out. This happened shortly after he lost the title in a fight he subsequently admitted throwing.²⁷ Pictures of the knockout show Johnson shielding his eyes from the sun as he is being counted out.

The public's sympathy was aroused by Joe Louis' clean slate early in his career and intensified by the unpopular Jack Johnson, then a side show attraction on Coney Island, who publicly ridiculed Louis every chance he got.²⁸

²⁶ Scully, 175.

²⁷ Edward Van Every, Joe Louis, Man and Super Fighter (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, Company, 1936), 78.

²⁸ Newsweek, July 3, 1937, 22, SC, JLF.

At any rate, Joe Louis did not start the "white hope" panic that Johnson had some twenty-two years before him.²⁹ He never aroused hate when he stood over a fallen white man because it was not his habit to gloat or discredit his opponent.³⁰

In 1936, New York sportswriter Dan Parker wrote, "Joe has one expression. He uses this expression when he wishes to register amazement, scorn, pain, anger, joy, revenge, skepticism, satisfaction, or disappointment."³¹ This stoic expression was the only face Louis showed the public. Because of his quiet carriage, critics trying to draw comparisons between the two colored heavyweight champions were left only with color and boxing ability to draw analogies.

Even the Southern newspapers, which had ignored "race" contenders from the time of Jack Johnson, did not do so with the "Brown Bomber" from Detroit. As early as April, 1935, Joe Louis' picture had appeared in at least three different newspapers in each of the following states: Texas, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, and Georgia.³² In late 1934, The Louisiana Weekly hinted that the promoters were pleased with the popularity of the new heavyweight sensation.³³

²⁹ Grantland Rice, "The Spotlight," New York Sun, March 2, 1938, SC, JLF; see also: Newsweek, 12:19, (December 26, 1938), SC, JLF.

³⁰ Literary Digest, 121:36, (June 13, 1936), SC, JLF.

³¹ Literary Digest, 121:36, (June 13, 1936), SC, JLF.

³² Chicago Defender, April 13, 1935, 17.

³³ Louisiana Weekly, December 29, 1934, SC, JLF.

His early record as a drawing card was as impressive as was his record in the won-lost column. Louis' ability to fill any arena he fought in brought heavyweight champion Jim Braddock to his door seeking a match instead of the reverse.³⁴ Later disclosures indicated that there was much more to this situation than was immediately apparent; but the "drawing" ability of Louis was extremely important.

When Louis knocked out Braddock for the title, he became the youngest heavyweight champion in history.*³⁵ This was the first of many records he was to set with his fists; and he was also on the path to great acclaim as a gentleman, sportsman, and humanitarian.

By 1942, Joe Louis had already proven himself the best in the world. He had avenged the only defeat in his professional career and beaten all logical contenders up to that time. On January 9, 1942, Louis put his title on the line in a fight with 250 pound Buddy Baer. On March 27 he defended against 254 pound Abe Simon. He knocked out each early in the fight. Actually, he had fought and beaten "Goliath" Primo Carnera early in his pro career. There is a unique factor concerning these two fights that separates them and Louis from the run-of-the mill. In both fights, Joe Louis risked his title and contributed

*Since this time, Floyd Patterson and later Cassius Clay have become heavyweight champions at younger ages.

³⁴Journal and Guide, May 23, 1936, SC, JLF.

³⁵Joe Louis Scrapbook, No. 6, 32, SC.

his entire cut to charity, the earlier purse going to Navy relief and the latter to the Army relief fund.

It should be pointed out that both of these fights took place at a time when "Jim Crow" practices in both services were commonplace. The extent to which these acts contributed to the eventual breakdown of such practices will never be documented, but few would deny their importance.

From June 12, 1942 to October 1, 1945, Joe Louis was in the Army.³⁶ He received a great deal of press coverage during this period. His fame was established and the public was kept well-informed of his exhibition tours, charitable acts, and general every day habits. In September, 1942, Esquire magazine credited Joe Louis with being the only athlete of the decade with the ability to outrank the racehorse as a seller of newspapers.³⁷ Because of the status he held, his personal appearances became matters of public record. On more than a few occasions, a slip in grammar or a unique expression would escape his lips and be immediately usurped by someone in quest of a slogan for building wartime morale. Once he was credited with naming the war when he finished a speech with the statement, "We're on God's side," instead of the reverse.³⁸ The war was later referred to, on occasion, as "God's war."

³⁶Harold Rice, Within the Ropes (New York: Stephen-Paul, 1946), 96.

³⁷Esquire, Vol. XVIII, No. 3, (September, 1942), 52, SC, JLF.

³⁸New York Daily Worker, January 26, 1942, SC, JLF.

Joe Louis, because of his uncanny boxing ability and unique "public personality," represented many things to many people. If he has a competitor for the title of "most popular boxer" of his time, it could only be Ham Fisher's Joe Palooka who has reigned indomitable since the 1930's.

CHAPTER II

THE PUBLIC IMAGE

Though Louis' public image is hardly on a plane with that of Caesar or Hitler, it can be safely said that his private and public personalities were more synergic than those of the two historical figures mentioned here to make a point. He was constantly besieged by reporters who were free to evaluate him. Occasionally bizarre descriptions appeared concerning both his public and private personalities. This type of picture appeared infrequently when compared to the more popular "conservative" view of Louis' personality, and both views must be evaluated critically.

There exists another distinction: the difference between the evaluations made by intimate friends and the evaluations made by reporters. Though these two were not identical, they were never as different as might be expected. The differences that did exist diminished as Joe Louis progressed in his career.

Sidney Hook in his book, The Hero in History, theorizes that the minimum qualifications for a leader are inversely dependent on the need for leadership.¹ Immediately evident in this case was a need in the sport itself. To continue as a popular spectacle, boxing needed a

¹Sidney Hook, The Hero in History (London: Secker and Warburg, 1945), 17.

drawing card. Perhaps more important, it needed a cleaner image. Joe Louis proved to be a godsend.

As early as 1934, Louis was cited as a possible "savior of the fight game." The headlines in The Chicago Defender read, "Detroit Looks to Joe Louis to Pull Its Fight Game Out."² When he beat Primo Carnera in 1935, the victory was heralded as a "boon to a long suffering sport."³ There were many who speculated that Louis would never have gained such stature in the boxing world if he had appeared ten years earlier. In other words, though the need for a new image was unquestionably there, earlier times had changed sufficiently to provide Joe Louis his opportunity.

New York Post columnist, Stanley Frank, explained the change. He compared the holocaust which developed after the Jack Johnson victory in 1910 with the fact that the Louis-Braddock title fight took place at Comiskey Park, which was located at the exact site of the notorious 1919 race riots in Chicago. He theorized that the "human race must be improving."⁴ The accolades Joe received early in his career did nothing to stop the speculation that he was the answer to boxing's dilemma.

The September 24, 1935 New York Times acclaimed his "willingness to fight all comers" and described him as the "best since Tunney."

²Chicago Defender, November 12, 1934, SC, JLF.

³Untitled Article, July 3, 1935, SC, JLF.

⁴New York Post, February 19, 1941, SC, JLF.

This editorial was under the sub-headline, "Boon to Boxing."⁵ A later editorial in the Boston Post credited Louis with giving his all at a time when the rest of sports was "sick from easy profits, excesses, fixes, scandals, etc."⁶

It was the intention of neither Joe Louis nor his managers to save the game of boxing. They did, however, state that they intended to provide a better place in sports for the Negro. The extent to which Joe Louis was responsible for improvement is a question which will never be answered.

Jimmy Cannon, a well-known sportswriter, credited Louis with defeating bigotry in the fight game. In 1949, he stated that because of Joe Louis, boxing offered the Negro complete equality.⁷ This is one man's opinion. Even when strengthened by a multitude of writers who make the same inference, it remains opinion. On the other hand, Louis' reign parallels the emancipation of the Negro in sports and he has to be considered instrumental in its completion.

Public opinion is a nebulous thing. In its simplest form a public image is even more nebulous. The Joe Louis image is perhaps easier to describe than that of most public figures because he was not a highly controversial figure. Particularly at the start of his career, when the public would be expected to be most suspicious, he

⁵New York Times, September 24, 1935, SC, JLF.

⁶Boston Post, October 30, 1957, SC, JLF.

⁷Sports Illustrated, Vol. I, No. 1, (February, 1949), 67.

was presented as a simple, clean-cut, well-meaning athlete with uncanny natural boxing ability. Though he may have had the innate makings of these attributes, what the public saw did not occur by accident. Much of his "public image" was designed by his managers. These men are very important in the Louis story. Actually, the incidents leading up to the very successful agreement between Louis and his managers provide a story in itself.

If any one of several men had been gifted with foresight, the Joe Louis story would have been different. Although the men involved were to rue their decision, they certainly had no way of predicting what the fighter was destined to become.

In the beginning, Louis tried to sell the managing rights to his professional contract on two different occasions. He failed to get a taker at five hundred dollars and later at two hundred fifty dollars. He finally signed for free with John Roxborough and Julian Black, both upperclass Negroes from Detroit.⁸ For reasons that seem both altruistic and practical, his managers set out to make Joe Louis the model he became.

The extent to which they were successful is legend. The precise extent of the role they played is something else. One magazine went so far as to credit John Roxborough with teaching Louis to brush his teeth, take a bath, and eat with a knife and fork.⁹ This hardly seems

⁸Journal and Guide, May 4, 1936, SC, JLF.

⁹Time, September 29, 1941, SC, JLF.

reasonable, but it is true that Roxborough outlined several rules Louis agreed to abide by before agreement was reached about the managing arrangement. Included in the list were:

1. He was never to have his picture taken alone with a white woman.
2. He was never to go into a night club alone.¹⁰
3. There would be no soft fights.
4. There would be no fixed fights.
5. He was never to gloat over a fallen opponent.
6. He was to keep a "dead pan" in front of the cameras.
7. He was to live and fight clean.¹¹

In June, 1935, Roxborough was quoted as saying, "One little slip of any kind--no matter how great a fighter he gives promise of becoming--and we would immediately wash our hands of him."¹² He claimed that the most important thing Louis could do was to be a credit to his race.

Whether or not Black and Roxborough would have washed their hands of him is a matter of conjecture. But there seems little doubt that Roxborough meant to keep Louis' image clean. Once when Louis was caught speeding at 90 m.p.h. in Chicago, Roxborough took Louis' license away and hired the boxer's brother as chauffer. This arrangement lasted for several years.¹³

¹⁰Time Magazine, September 29, 1941, 62.

¹¹Jack Sher, "Brown Bomber," Twelve Sport Immortals, Ernest Victor Heyn (ed), (New York: Bartholomew House, 1949), 270.

¹²New York Sun, June 17, 1935, SC, JLF.

¹³Time Magazine, September 29, 1941, 60.

The Roxborough-Black control went beyond the man's personal habits. The following incident occurred near ringside at the Louis-Baer fight in 1935. As the story goes, a Negro fan became overly excited and was jumping up and down yelling, "Kill him Joe." Louis' seconds stood up and squelched the exuberance with the explanation that it was the kind of thing which could do Joe harm.¹⁴ The yelling stopped. This incident reached the papers, but there probably were others like it that were not reported. It was all part of the promotional work that played such a large part in Joe Louis' success.

A 1941 Time Magazine editorial entitled, "Black Moses," listed four reasons why the Joe Louis buildup worked:

1. promotional genius of Mike Jacobs (the man who promoted most of Joe's fights);
2. astuteness of Louis' managers;
3. change in the United States' attitude toward Negroes since Jack Johnson's day;
4. Louis' naivete, natural reserve, and disinterest in liquor and tobacco.¹⁵

On the cover of this same issue of Time Magazine was a picture of Louis with the caption, "I want to be honest so that the next colored boy can get the same break I got." In the editorial this statement was followed with, "If I cut the fool, I'll let my people down."¹⁶ This loyalty to "his people" was one that was instilled at an early age.

¹⁴New York Daily News, September 26, 1935, SC, JLF.

¹⁵Time Magazine, September 29, 1941, 62.

¹⁶Time Magazine, September 29, 1941, 63.

Louis' mother, Lillie Brooks, was important as an early influence on her son. A mother's influence is to be expected, but there is another side of Lillie Brooks that must be considered. She was featured in the press so often that she actually became part of the Joe Louis image. The Daily Mirror ran a whole series on her in which they stressed her goodness as well as her devotion to the Bible.¹⁷

Louis was always being pressured by friends early in his career. They taunted him with the accusation that he was a "mama's boy, but to no avail."¹⁸ One early newspaper article told of the kind of incident he probably never heard the end of. Louis was on the way out the door when his mother asked him to eat first. He replied that he couldn't because he was in a hurry. She quickly squelched his haste by telling him to sit down or she'd knock him down and make him eat.¹⁹

The newspapers, particularly early in his climb, were full of brief biographical sketches of Louis. They appeared often enough to elicit the thought that most of his fans must have had some knowledge of his childhood. Varying personal stories accompanied these sketches; but for the most part, they agreed enough to expect that many of his fans had at least a composite picture of Joe Louis' early life. The typical fan probably knew that Louis had been born in Alabama and had moved to Detroit when he was about ten. He also knew that the family

¹⁷Daily Mirror, 1935, SC, JLF.

¹⁸New York Daily News, October 9, 1935, SC, JLF.

¹⁹Sunday Mirror, June 23, 1935, SC, JLF.

was highly religious and his mother was a strong influence on him. He was sure that Louis didn't drink or smoke and always presented a wholesome picture in public. About Joe Louis' personality away from the public eye, the fan still speculated.

In 1952, Louis wrote that he still had never smoked a cigarette nor taken a drink.²⁰ If this is true, it negates a human interest story in the March, 1945 Negro Digest.²¹ As the story goes, Louis was curious one night and stole two bottles of beer out of John Roxborough's locker. He immediately got into bed before drinking them for fear that it would affect him as it affected drunkards he had seen in the movies. It evidently didn't have the effect he feared, for right after finishing the two bottles, he fell asleep and slept for twenty hours.

In the beginning, many writers accused Louis of being a puppet. There were ample grounds for this assumption, but it is interesting to note that no one ever accused him of being misused. The more prevalent accusation was that John Roxborough was using him as an ambassador of racial good will. There is truth to the statement. But it is also true that Joe Louis ceased being a puppet and became the part. The transition came gradually, but it did come. As his career wore on, he

²⁰ Herald Tribune, May 18, 1952, Magazine Section, 11.

²¹ Negro Digest, March, 1945, SC, JLF, 15.

slowly took the responsibility of making his own decisions until his managers handled only his business affairs. His personal life, both public and private, was his own.²²

Louis was poorly educated, His public, however, was constantly informed that he deplored his lack of schooling.²³ His very evident speaking difficulties made his inevitable confrontation with the public a struggle. His unwillingness to express himself or his natural reserve (depending on who was describing the trait) seems to be the one aspect of his personality most frequently described in the first few years of his rise to fame. After beating Primo Carnera in the first big fight of his career, he purposely arrived home ahead of his announced schedule so that he could avoid a Detroit welcoming party.²⁴ The next day he went to the Detroit Tigers game, evidently not for the accolade he received, but because he loved baseball and the Tigers in particular.²⁵

He was once described as saying less than any man in sports history, including Dummy Taylor, the New York Giant pitcher who was a mate.²⁶ Not everybody felt his reticence was a virtue. Some said he

²²Sport, Vol. IV, No. 3, (March, 1948), 77.

²³Lester Bromberg, The Ring, Vol. XVII, No. 7, SC, JLF, 12.

²⁴New York Times, July 2, 1935, 26:3.

²⁵New York World Telegram, July 2, 1935, 1.

²⁶New York Times, June 14, 1936, Magazine Section, SC, JLF.

sulked easily.²⁷ His lack of "friendliness" to members of the Associated Press is said to have prevented him from getting a higher poll rating as a sports attraction in 1938.²⁸ For the most part he was credited with being modest, confident, reverent, and clean-living.²⁹ He showed concern for his mother and family, loyalty to his race, and was an "inspiration to race youth."³⁰ It was also said that he read a line or two from the Bible before each fight.³¹

His inability to express himself did nothing to abate his growing popularity with his own people, but it did pave the way for some "folksy" tales which may or may not be true. Some of these stories concerned his dietary practices. His eating prowess became legendary and he was often photographed with large platters of home-fried chicken in front of him. As an amateur, he supposedly lost one fight because he went on a watermelon eating spree shortly before he was scheduled to fight.³² The story also spread that he was once asked after a fight if he had stuck to his diet. His answer was, "Yep, cep I ate

²⁷New York Times, June 14, 1936, Magazine Section, SC, JLF.

²⁸The Afro-American, January 14, 1939, 23.

²⁹Chicago Defender, June 25, 1938, 7.

³⁰Chicago Defender, June 25, 1938, 7.

³¹Edward Van Every, Joe Louis, Man and Superfighter (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1936), 7.

³²Literary Digest, May 4, 1935, SC, JLF. 35.

twelve bananas just fore the fight."³³ Add all this to the twenty to thirty apples³⁴ and the four packs of gum he supposedly chewed daily³⁵ and the diet resembles that of a "sumo" wrestler of Japan. These stories are at least exaggerated if not wholly fictitious, but they still play a part in building a "public image."

There were those among the intellectual Negroes who resented Louis being pictured as a "lazy, sleepy, eating, Hollywood style Negro."³⁶ There were many such accounts, particularly early in his career. It was the opinion of a writer of the Daily Worker that by 1940 these so-called "inside stories" were no longer believed. For the most part this is probably true.³⁷ Certainly, Louis' intellectual followers had grounds for their criticism. On the other hand, the stories were not completely without basis.

Several weeks of intense promotional work preceded his fight with Gus Dorazio in 1941. Louis upset his handlers when he asked Dorazio what his name was at the weigh-in.³⁸ It didn't take too many stories like this to start certain members of the press toward generalizations which were not entirely true.

³³New York Times, June 14, 1936, Magazine Section, SC, JLF.

³⁴New York Times, June 14, 1936, Magazine Section, SC, JLF.

³⁵Newsweek, Vol. VI, (July 6, 1935), 23.

³⁶Daily Worker, July 9, 1940, SC, JLF.

³⁷Daily Worker, July 9, 1940, SC, JLF.

³⁸The Afro-American, February 22, 1941, 19.

There is the possibility that his type of image might well have helped Louis overcome the obstacle of the "White Hope" era. If credence is given to the theory that many people feared another champion in the "Jack Johnson image," what could be more incongruous with the fore-described arrogance of Johnson than the picture of the lazy, apathetic, home-spun, "Hollywood style" Negro? At any rate, this type of story faded as Louis' career moved into the forties.

The Louis camp was especially careful in the beginning to keep the "dead pan" in front of the cameras. This undoubtedly helped start many of the early nicknames and descriptions used by reporters. Words like bomber, destroyer, avenger, and killer were used frequently to Louis' dismay. He publicly denied inclination in this direction on several occasions. In an early rebuttal, he said he had had many opportunities to hurt others and had not.³⁹ His by-line appeared on an article in 1940 entitled, "I Hate To Hurt Anybody."⁴⁰

According to Jack Sher, a biographer, Louis learned his fear of hurting opponents while still an amateur. In 1934, he knocked out Art Sykes in the Arcadian Gardens in Chicago. Sykes was still out cold half an hour after the fight. Louis reacted by vowing to quit boxing if Sykes didn't recover.⁴¹

³⁹New York World Telegram, September 16, 1935, SC, Joe Louis Scrapbook, No. 1, 48.

⁴⁰Look, Vol. IV, No. 10, (May 7, 1940), 50.

⁴¹Sher, 264.

The dead-pan killer look started to disappear little by little as Louis gained confidence in his position and popularity status. In August of 1935, a Newsweek article contains a picture of what is described as Louis' "first sincere smile to the cameras." It came after he had knocked out Kingfish Levinski in the first round. It seems he had made a bet with his entire camp, which demanded in payment for a first round knockout that all of them go on the "water wagon" for six months.⁴²

The September 25, 1935 New York Post headline read, "Harlem's New King Erases Dead Pan, Opens Up." The occasion for this exuberance was his marriage to Detroit socialite, Marva Trotter. He was pictured as laughing and joking with his new bride.⁴³ The reasons for this break from the straight face were light, and he was still considered to have a conservative personality. He was still careful not to be caught smiling over a fallen opponent or in any situation which might be misinterpreted. Louis started removing his mask after he had been at the top for about a year.⁴⁴ A 1938 article describing his new ability to relax in crowds accused him of once coming close to making a wisecrack.⁴⁵ The very wording of this accusation is an indication of just how conservative he was thought to be.

⁴² Newsweek, Vol. VI, (August 17, 1935), 24.

⁴³ New York Post, September 25, 1935, SC, JLF.

⁴⁴ New York Sun, June 19, 1936, SC, JLF.

⁴⁵ New York Sun, May 12, 1938, SC, JLF.

Occasional editorials warned against "fits of temper" Louis was said to display when denied some whim at training camp.⁴⁶ His doctor once expressed concern over his temper and subsequent lack of timing.⁴⁷ These glimpses into his private life give a different view of the champ's personality. In a brief autobiography which appeared in Life in 1948, Louis described his camp life as rather frivolous. He admitted a love for practical jokes, claiming he used to trip others while doing road work and often threw water on anybody he found still in bed after he completed his morning workout.⁴⁸ These accounts are probably true, but they appeared either too infrequently or too late to strongly influence the Louis image.

The Pittsburgh Courier, a Negro newspaper, described him in 1935 as being cocksure without being cocky and confident without being condescending.⁴⁹ In one interview, Louis was told that Primo Carnera had said he was great and a cinch for the title. He answered, "Primo is right."⁵⁰ Cocky retorts like this one rarely appeared in print. Perhaps, because of some of the reasons already mentioned.

The trait which his Negro following seemed to respect most was that his personality drew the respect of the whites so that they

⁴⁶The Afro-American, January 14, 1939, 22.

⁴⁷New York World Telegram, September 24, 1941, Headline.

⁴⁸Joe Louis, "My Story," Life, November 8, 1948, 151.

⁴⁹Pittsburgh Courier, April 6, 1935, SC, JLF.

⁵⁰New York Post, June 27, 1935, SC, JLF.

didn't try to make a clown of him. They appreciated the fact that there was nothing "Uncle Tomee" about him.⁵¹

From the time he made it to the top, Joe Louis was an expensive dresser. His wardrobe was described in terms as extreme as "conservative" and "flashy" depending on the view of the writer. If he did have an inclination toward conservative taste, he was able to overcome it when he married. At the time of their wedding, he gave Marva a four carat ring, a new Lincoln convertible, and a six-room apartment in Chicago.⁵² There is no question that conservatism in material goods was non-existent in his later career. In July, 1940, he owned a new Buick, a new Cadillac, and a new Mercury, "all with amazing accessories."⁵³

Louis received a great deal of publicity when he refused to endorse products he didn't use. Needless to say, tobacco and alcoholic beverages were on this list. In 1935, he turned down offers to endorse cigarettes and refused to sign stage contracts which would ultimately have led to easy money but might also have provided cannon fodder for his antagonists.⁵⁴ It seems reasonable to assume that if he did agree to endorse a product, his endorsement became all the more valuable to the advertisers once this policy was made known. The

⁵¹Pittsburgh Courier, April 6, 1935, SC, JLF.

⁵²Newsweek, Vol. VI, No. 14, (October 5, 1935), 25.

⁵³Look, Vol. VI, (July 2, 1940), 48.

⁵⁴Washington Tribune, July 6, 1935, SC, JLF.

Negro periodicals of this time were full of advertisements in which he backed such products as "Murray's Pomade"⁵⁵ and a patent medicine called Castoria for children. A reporter once asked him if he had taken Castoria as a child. He replied that he had, but "sure never cried for it."⁵⁶ His refusal to endorse a cigar made the headlines in a 1935 New York Sun.⁵⁷ Julian Black, Louis' manager, was quoted in the article as saying that above all else, Joe Louis would do nothing that would reflect negatively on his race. The headline read, "Louis Turns Down Fortune."

Compare this with the behavior of Max Baer, whose first words after being knocked out by Louis were, "Give me a cigarette somebody" and "Hey, Red! Run out and get me a bottle of beer, will you?" Consider this, on top of the fact that Baer was counted out while up on one knee.⁵⁸ This incident is precisely what Frank Scully, noted sportswriter, must have been referring to when he wrote that Louis' ability to present a wholesome picture was enhanced by the questionable behavior of his opponents.⁵⁹ Boxers like Max Baer and Tony Galento exhibited behavior which was comparable to that which Jack Johnson had been criticized for. Even after the horrendous beating he got from Max

⁵⁵Crisis, Vol. XXXV, No. 2, (February, 1938), Back Cover.

⁵⁶Van Every, 8.

⁵⁷New York Sun, June 24, 1935, SC, JLF.

⁵⁸New York Times, September 25, 1935, SC, JLF.

⁵⁹Frank Scully, "Young Black Joe," Esquire, Vol. XIV, No. 4, (October, 1935), 34.

Schmelling, Louis publicly apologized for hitting him below the belt. He explained that he didn't know what he was doing.⁶⁰ An Afro-American editorial actually went so far as to blame Louis' loss on his own low blows. Written by a physician, the article expressed the belief that when Schmelling winced in feigned agony, he succeeded in softening Joe up for the eventual slaughter.⁶¹ Most contemporary accounts don't lend credence to this story. It is included here, not as a valid excuse for the loss, but because it indicates the depth of conviction displayed by some of Louis' admirers.

Several other incidents serve as evidence confirming his "sportsmanship." With twenty seconds left in the third round of his fight with Louis, Harry Thomas stumbled toward his corner. Louis received great acclaim when he didn't follow Thomas into the corner. He explained that he didn't want to hit him in the back. He eventually knocked him out in the fifth round.⁶² This could probably be explained away by some with the explanation that "he knew he had the fight won" if it hadn't been for the first Billy Conn fight.

The Louis camp showed particular concern for the Billy Conn bout even before the fight. It was the first time Louis had argued with his trainer, "Chappie" Blackburn, about training procedures. He had gone on his own schedule and Chappie feared he would be stale by

⁶⁰Sportfolio, Vol. II, No. 1, (July, 1947), 60.

⁶¹The Afro-American, July 25, 1936, 22.

⁶²Chicago Defender, April 9, 1938, 2.

fight time.⁶³ In the fight, Louis knocked Conn out in the thirteenth round. Before he knocked him out, he was actually behind in points. Through twelve rounds, referee Eddie Joseph had Conn up seven rounds to five; judge Marty Monroe had Conn 7-4-1; and judge Bill Healy had awarded six rounds to each man.⁶⁴

Conn had been taking advantage of his speed and was pushing for a knockout in the thirteenth when he found himself knocked out instead. The thing which endeared Louis to many occurred in the tenth round. Conn slipped in the tenth, leaving himself open; but instead of taking advantage of the situation, Louis stepped back until Conn regained his balance and then resumed the fight.⁶⁵ Some descriptions of this fight say Conn taunted Louis with caustic remarks until he realized that Louis was fighting clean and had no intention of making verbal retort.⁶⁶ Once Conn realized this, he stopped his sarcasm.

Louis and Conn made several joint appearances during the war and evidently became good friends. An attempt to arrange a rematch during the war fizzled. They did fight again in 1946, but Conn had lost his speed. Louis was not as fast either, but his superior hitting ability

⁶³Atlantic World Journal, June 15, 1941, 8.

⁶⁴Harold Rice, Within the Ropes (New York: Stephen-Paul, 1946), 144.

⁶⁵Sportfolio, Vol. II, No. 1, (July, 1947), 60.

⁶⁶Sher, 262.

enabled him to control the whole fight and knock Conn out in the eighth round.⁶⁷

For the first several years of his career, Louis made nothing but complimentary remarks about his adversaries. He touted Billy Conn as his "smartest foe"⁶⁸ and Bob Pastor as a "tough boy."⁶⁹ He credited Tony Musto with being "a good, brave boy all the way."⁷⁰ Two opponents who were especially malicious toward Louis before their fights were Max Baer and Tony Galento. Baer's remark in Newsweek was typical of both. He stated, "I'll chase that black dog out of the ring in the first round."⁷¹ Even to these two, Joe Louis proved charitable in his post fight remarks. He praised Galento's "gallant stand"⁷² and Baer's ability to take punishment.⁷³

Louis "slipped" a bit later in his career. It seems reasonable to assume that he no longer felt it necessary to project the image he had built. In 1947, he broke down and started endorsing cigarettes⁷⁴ and in 1949, he let it be known he was ". . . interested in the beer

⁶⁷Rice, 144.

⁶⁸New York Post, June 19, 1941, SC, JLF.

⁶⁹New York Daily News, February 18, 1941, SC, JLF.

⁷⁰New York Times, April 9, 1941, SC, JLF.

⁷¹Newsweek, Vol. VI, (September 21, 1935), 28.

⁷²The Afro-American, July 8, 1939, SC, JLF.

⁷³New York Daily News, February 18, 1941, SC, JLF.

⁷⁴The Afro-American, May 17, 1947, 3.

business" or any other that offered the possibility of profit.⁷⁵ This was not the only evidence to indicate that he became less concerned with public thought once he felt he had established himself. He even started to belittle some of his opponents in the late forties. This was an area that had unquestionably been more influential in establishing his "public personality" than any other.

There were a few occasions when he was accused of unsportsmanlike conduct. Tony Galento's mentor, Joe Jacobs, once demanded that he be allowed to put an inspector in Louis' corner to make sure he didn't use a small "glove colored" dumbbell. He claimed that he saw Chappie Blackburn slip it from Louis' palm after his second fight with Max Schmelling.⁷⁶ The story was picked up as good press, as were many of the insulting remarks made by Galento, but the public never took them seriously. Frank Graham's article in the New York Sun entitled, "There Never Was a Fairer Fighter," seems to be much more in line with the public viewpoint.⁷⁷

Joe Louis was certainly not well-educated. The fact that he deplored his lack of education often made print. Russell Cowan, who studied one year of law at the Detroit Institute of Technology, served as his private tutor in 1935. Louis is said to have spent an hour a

⁷⁵New York Times, February 19, 1949, SC, JLF.

⁷⁶New York Sun, June 14, 1939, SC, JLF.

⁷⁷The Afro-American, June 18, 1941, 19.

day studying grammar, mathematics, history, and geography.⁷⁸ In 1937, it was released that Louis wanted to go back to school and would probably get another tutor.⁷⁹

Impressions differed. There were times when he was pictured as being completely unable to express himself and others (particularly in the Negro press) where he is depicted as being highly literate. In August, 1935, when most will agree Louis was anything but well-spoken, the following quote appeared in the Cleveland Gazette:

If I reach the goal I have set for myself . . .
I'll walk out and leave the other fellows to argue over
the spoils.⁸⁰

The quote itself is unimportant except that it gives evidence of the type of image the Negro newspapers often tried to give.

Although he was to improve markedly in his ability to speak publicly in later years, the fact that he was not well-spoken seemed to endear him to his fans. Nonetheless, it was made known that he admired those who were educated. Those who would rather have seen a much more eloquent man as the "Negro of the hour" had to settle for this.

From the rather un auspicious start he got as a public speaker, Louis eventually became able to express himself quite well. His improvement came at the expense of some earlier embarrassing situations.

⁷⁸Newsweek, Vol. VI, (September 21, 1935), 28.

⁷⁹The Afro-American, August 28, 1937, 19.

⁸⁰Cleveland Gazette, August 10, 1935, 1.

In front of three thousand Negroes at a 1936 Democratic rally in Jersey City, he started his speech, "It is the first time I have been in Newark--I mean Paterson--Jersey City, I mean." To the unquestioned glee of his audience he mumbled something and sat down, forgetting to mention the Democrats.⁸¹

In his earlier personal appearances, his lines were cut to almost "yes" and "no" because of his difficulty with reading.⁸² In late 1940, he memorized a radio script so well he started to answer before his question had been completed.⁸³ On occasion, his managers tried to persuade producers to allow Louis to revise the parts of interviews that made him seem uneducated. This didn't always sit well with the producers. Their argument was that they didn't want a puppet and they often fought to keep the tape intact.⁸⁴

As early as May, 1941, there were some writers who were already describing Louis as an "accomplished after dinner speaker," and by that time he had proven himself on radio as well.⁸⁵ It was said that he was particularly adept at answering quiz show questions on boxing, baseball, racing, and football.⁸⁶

⁸¹Newsweek, Vol. VIII, No. 15, (October 10, 1936), 22.

⁸²New York World Telegram, February 1, 1940, SC, JLF.

⁸³Look, Vol. IV, No. 24, (November 19, 1940), SC, JLF.

⁸⁴New York World Telegram, February 1, 1940, SC, JLF.

⁸⁵Saturday Evening Post, Vol. CCXIII, (May 10, 1941), 26.

⁸⁶Esquire, Vol. XVII, No. 1, (January, 1942), 93.

During the war Louis did a canned talk on physical fitness and how to be a good soldier. He was received well wherever he delivered it.⁸⁷ Later in the war he was able to discard the memorized talk and speak "off the cuff." While touring Canada and Alaska for the Army in 1945, he was even touted as a comic. His "deadpan" jokes evidently had the audiences "rolling in the aisles."⁸⁸

It would be unreal to expect that any public figure could escape criticism for the length of time that he was at the top. Louis' public record is not without blemish. It should be noted, however, that most of the negative remarks made about him are critical of traits exposed after he had established himself and in all fairness to the astuteness of his managers, after they had lost most of their control over his behavior.

Writer Jimmy Cannon claims that in his entire career Louis hated only two of his opponents: Max Schmelling and Joe Walcott.⁸⁹ Louis did receive some poor press for his criticism of Al McCoy, a fighter he defeated in late 1940. Baltimore's Afro-American panned him for spending more time "blaspheming" McCoy than he had in all his previous fights put together.⁹⁰ Louis let it be known that he felt McCoy had

⁸⁷Life, September 13, 1943, SC, JLF, 34.

⁸⁸The Afro-American, September 1, 1945, 18.

⁸⁹Esquire, Vol. XXIX, No. 5, (December, 1952), 127.

⁹⁰The Afro-American, December 21, 1940, 19.

simply run for the six rounds he had lasted. He was quoted as saying, "He ain't even a man, let alone a boxer."⁹¹

Joe must have been sensitive to the criticism he received, for he wasn't known to be critical again until his image had started to slip before his encounters with "Jersey Joe." His on again, off again retirement plans were not well received by his fans and the fact that he belittled Walcott continually after their first fight was made more unsavory when coupled with the fact that many people thought Walcott should have won the decision. He stifled some of this criticism when he knocked Walcott out in the return bout and then announced his retirement.

In what has since been termed an unfortunate decision, Louis decided to undo some of this good and come out of retirement. Upon retiring, he had publicly declared that Ezzard Charles was the best around; and then he refused Charles as an opponent when he came back on the basis that Charles was too light at one hundred seventy-eight pounds.⁹² His critics were quick to add this to their complaints concerning his refusal to "bow out gracefully." As writer Jack Sher put it, "Joe's halo was beginning to slip."⁹³

Sometimes Louis was pictured as the lazy, sleeping, eating, "Hollywood style Negro" and reversely, at times, as the smooth and

⁹¹The Afro-American, December 21, 1940, 19.

⁹²Tim Cohane, "Joe Louis Is Going to Lose His Title," Look, Vol. XIII, No. 1, (January 4, 1949), 30.

⁹³Sher, 266.

debonair man with major interests in golf, horses, trapshooting, baseball, and hunting.⁹⁴ He was also pictured at several points between these extremes. Perhaps his first wife Marva's explanation can help explain the differences. She claimed Louis had full control over his personality and could turn it on and off as he saw fit.⁹⁵

It is evident that the early Joe Louis image differed greatly from the image he portrayed later in his career. This change didn't take place overnight. Nor can it be said that either one was "phony." Jimmy Cannon's statement that of all his opponents, Louis hated only Max Schmelling and Joe Walcott might serve as an analogy. Before his second fight with Schmelling, Louis was pensive and brooding, certainly not sarcastic as he was with Walcott. Assuming that he felt an equal distaste for both men, why did he react so differently? What was the difference in the two situations?

The most important difference was self-confidence. Louis admitted after beating Schmelling that it was the first time he felt like a "real champion."⁹⁶ Between Schmelling and Walcott, Louis experienced nothing but success. He became aware that he had the ability to express himself and that when he did so, people listened. By the time he got out of the service, Louis also learned that he had

⁹⁴Daily Worker, July 9, 1940, SC, JLF.

⁹⁵Atlanta Daily World, June 23, 1941, 5.

⁹⁶New York Sun, June 23, 1938, SC, JLF.

gained stature enough to stick his neck out a little. His following no longer demanded perfection.

When he was inducted into the Army, he was asked what he was going to do while in the service. He received great acclaim when he answered, "I'll do what I'm told."⁹⁷ During the war he was stopped by an M.P. in Washington, D. C. and charged with being out of uniform. He was caught wearing an officer's shirt.⁹⁸ The importance of the incident lies not in the act, but in the fact that the press refused to take the incident seriously. It was treated as it might have been if General MacArthur had been caught in the same situation. As far as the press was concerned, Louis had evidently "arrived." He no longer had to prove himself. The day of comparing him with Jack Johnson had passed. As Richard Vidmar of the New York Herald Tribune once said, "Comparing Joe Louis to Jack Johnson is like comparing Lou Gehrig to Al Capone."⁹⁹

Considering all the implications of his critics, Louis has to be considered among the most popular of champions. When great talent brings a personality into the limelight, as was true in this case, popularity can usually be achieved by simply being unoffensive. This seems to have been Joe Louis' greatest strength.

⁹⁷ Negro Digest, January, 1947, 86.

⁹⁸ Newsweek, Vol. XXII, No. 10, (n.d.), SC, JLF.

⁹⁹ Pittsburgh Courier, July 6, 1935, SC, JLF.

CHAPTER III

ABOVE THE CROWD

Joe Louis won seventy-three of his seventy-six professional fights. Sixty-one of these wins were by knockout. It seems inevitable that when a performer reaches outstanding heights, regardless of his field, he is credited with an innate genius or natural ability. With some qualification, and in most such cases, there is a great deal of truth in this hypothesis. In Louis' case, the major qualification is that a phenomenal amount of preparation was involved before his "natural" genius came to the fore.

Louis' humble beginning is a matter of record. He was born on a sharecropper's farm and did spend most of his youth in the slums of Detroit. Unfortunately, this type of background doesn't automatically produce a "Joe Louis." Louis' aunt describes a fight in which he, at eight years old, knocked out four tormentors.¹ If the validity of this incident is accepted, the account gives an indication of an early ability for fighting.

When biographers speak of the rough road to genius in terms of the arts, they quite frequently refer to an inability of the public to recognize the genius. Louis' road to the top was certainly bumpy; but not for any reason other than an early inability in his chosen field.

¹Andrew S. N. Young, Negro Firsts in Sports (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1963), 106.

In fact, Joe Louis showed an ineptness in many areas before meeting success.

He left elementary school after fourth grade and at the time could hardly write his name.² On the advice of the family physician Louis entered a vocational school to study cabinet making.³ The Afro-American claims Joe Louis was voted "least likely to succeed" by his classmates.⁴ He spent part of his youth unsuccessfully studying the violin and worked on an ice wagon for one dollar a week.⁵

He stopped taking violin lessons after smashing his instrument over the head of a boy who called him a sissie.⁶

His "natural" ability was not too evident when, after having fought over one hundred backyard matches with a friend,⁷ he was soundly thrashed in his first official bout. The friend was Holman Williams.

² John Durant, Come Out Fighting (New York: Essential Books, 1946), 132.

³ Durant, 132.

⁴ The Afro-American, June 19, 1937, 19.

⁵ Young, 106.

⁶ Joe Louis as told to A. E. Hotchner, "You've Got to be Hungry," Herald Tribune, May 18, 1952, Magazine Section, 11.

⁷ Edward Van Every, Joe Louis, Man and Super Fighter (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, Company, 1936), 32.

The first match was for the Brewster's East Side Gymnasium⁸ and his beating came at the hands of Johnny Miler.⁹

Louis practiced "doggedly" for his first Golden Gloves match and was again soundly thrashed.¹⁰ In this loss he was knocked down nine times.¹¹

His early history should serve to credit Joe Louis' later success to a combination of many things. Certainly, there was a great deal of the quality labeled "natural ability." There was also the fact that he lived the clean life, never drinking or smoking. At least as important, however, was his strong desire to succeed and his unquestioned hard work.

Thurston McKinney is believed to have been the prime motivator in Louis' switch from the violin lessons he took at his mother's request to the sport in which he was later to achieve an immortal role. It was at Thurston's invitation that Louis first went to Brewster's East Side Gymnasium.¹²

In 1934,¹³ the same year that Max Baer knocked out Primo Carnera for the world's heavyweight championship, Louis won the American

⁸Young, 106.

⁹Young, 107.

¹⁰Durant, 132.

¹¹Durant, 132.

¹²Van Every, 32.

¹³Durant, 132.

amateur light-heavyweight championship. On his way to the amateur title, Louis knocked out forty-one of his fifty-four opponents.*¹⁴

Louis turned professional July 4, 1934 with a fight in Chicago in which he knocked out Jack Kracken in the first round.¹⁵ Louis' rise from this point was meteoric.

After he turned professional, Louis had the best early record in fighting history, winning twenty-one straight fights, seventeen by knockout.¹⁶

To give his climb to the top a real Cinderella flair, compare the following 1935 statistics: on May 3 Louis fought in Kalamazoo for \$500; on June 25 he fought Primo Carnera for \$44,000; on August 7, King Levinski for \$47,000; and on September 24 he fought Max Baer and received \$217,337.¹⁷ It was in this fight that 84,831 fans, the largest crowd ever to see a sporting event in New York City, saw Baer get knocked out for the first time in his career.¹⁸

*Biographers Heyn and Durant place the record at forty-three knockouts in fifty-four fights.

¹⁴Jack C. Dawson, All Sports Parade (New York: Hart Publications, 1952), 64.

¹⁵Young, 107.

¹⁶Louisiana Weekly, June 8, 1935, SC, JLF.

¹⁷New York Times, September 26, 1935, 27:4.

¹⁸Dan Parker, "Fighting Marvel" in Caswell Adams' Great American Sports Stories (New York: Stanford House, 1947), 247.

Up until that fight Max Baer had never even been knocked down. Many said Baer made it easy and didn't really put up a fight; but John Grombach, noted sports story author, categorically refutes this argument. He studied the films and counted Louis throwing the left hook over two hundred times in the four rounds of the fight.¹⁹

Nat Fleisher, editor of Ring Magazine, presented Louis with a gold belt for doing the most for boxing in 1935.²⁰ The Associated Press sportswriters voted him Athlete of the Year this same year.²¹ Both of these awards came before Louis was even champion. In fact, James Braddock, heavyweight champion at the time, received only seven votes to Louis' one hundred eighty-four.²²

Three times in his first six years, Louis was awarded "Boxer of the Year" by Ring Magazine.²³ Nat Fleisher, in making the award in 1939, stated: "In his public relations and in his fine influence on the sport, Louis offers a higher rating than any other man in the game."²⁴

An additional honor came in 1941 when the sportswriters voted Louis the Edward J. Neil Memorial Plaque for his contributions to boxing. This was the chief award at the New York Boxing Writers

¹⁹John V. Grombach, The Saga of Sock (New York: Barnes, 1949), 251.

²⁰New York Times, May 14, 1936, 32:3-4.

²¹New York Times, December 17, 1935, 31:5.

²²New York Times, December 17, 1935, 31:5.

²³New York Times, December 26, 1939, 24:3-4.

²⁴New York Times, December 26, 1939, 24:3-4.

Association Dinner. Perhaps the award itself was not as important as the list of men who were present. Included were: James A. Farley (former Postmaster General), J. Edgar Hoover (Head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation), and Jimmy Walker (former Mayor of New York).²⁵ At the same banquet Louis was awarded with the Ring Magazine Plaque for "Boxer of the Year."²⁶

As it turned out, the awards were not the highlight of the evening. Jimmy Walker gave a speech which has been quoted often since that night. Speaking of Louis' fight for the Navy Relief Fund, Walker, his voice filled with emotion, finished his talk:

. . . you have shown you are a great Negro. You showed, too, that you are a great American. But you've done something more. You placed a rose on Abe Lincoln's grave.²⁷

In 1948 the National Boxing Association gave Louis a trophy for "sportsmanship and exemplary conduct."²⁸

Aside from specific awards such as those just cited, other incidents occurred which point out the respect Louis had achieved. In August, 1935, Brigadier General John J. Phelan, New York State Boxing Commissioner, announced that no one would be allowed to meet Braddock for the championship unless the contender fought Louis first.²⁹

²⁵Margery Miller, Joe Louis, American (Hill and Wang, 1951), 165.

²⁶Boston Post, January 26, 1957, SC, JLF.

²⁷Boston Post, January 26, 1957, SC, JLF.

²⁸The Afro-American, September 25, 1948, 8.

²⁹New York Sun, July 26, 1935, SC, JLF.

As a professional fighter, Louis has the enviable record of never having fought in anything but main events.³⁰ John Grombach credits him with being the greatest counterpuncher of all times.³¹ Adding this evaluation to the arguments of sportsmen who claimed the superiority of Louis' punch or boxing ability per se, it would seem that there remained practically no room or need for improvement.

Joe Louis beat all of the true contenders in the late thirties and early forties and then started fighting against opponents who might be considered the "also rans." Before his first fight with Billy Conn, which was unquestionably a tough fight, Louis met and beat seven challengers in seven months.³² This has since been labeled by many as his "bum of the month" period. If these facts are weighed in light of the knowledge that no one since Gene Tunney had successfully defended the heavyweight title more than once,³³ Louis' accomplishment takes on a more outstanding aspect.

On January 15, 1937, in consecutive matches, Louis knocked out Frank Thompson in the first round, Jack Wright in the first round, and Tom Jones in the second round.³⁴ It evidently required three opponents to satisfy the fans that night in Minneapolis.

³⁰Joe Louis, "My Story," Life, November 8, 1948, 128.

³¹Grombach, 87.

³²Heyn, 278.

³³New York World Telegram, August 12, 1937, SC, JLF.

³⁴New York Sun, January 15, 1937, SC, JLF.

His outstanding fighting ability and his innumerable awards and honors were not solely responsible for the great fame of Joe Louis. The list of charities and causes to which he contributed financial aid is long.

An early Newsweek article tells of an incident which shows the impoverished condition of the Detroit neighborhood where Louis spent his boyhood. He returned home to attend a church service in October, 1935. He put one hundred dollars in the collection basket and three members of his party contributed five dollars apiece. The rest of the congregation, said to be 2,500 strong, contributed \$3.34.³⁵ The incident serves as evidence that although he became world famous, Joe Louis did not forget his roots in Detroit.

A much publicized incident in late 1935³⁶ was that Louis paid back \$269 to the Detroit Welfare Board which had given his mother that amount of money over a seven month period in 1927 and 1928.

In Louis' fight with Primo Carnera, ten percent of the gross receipts went to the "Free Milk for Babies" fund, which was headed by Mrs. William Randolph Hearst.³⁷ The same arrangement was made for his fight with Max Baer. The gross receipts for this fight were \$932,944.³⁸ Mike Jacobs, the man who promoted most of Louis' early fights, stated

³⁵Newsweek, Vol. VI, No. 15, (October 12, 1935), 25.

³⁶New York Times, October 23, 1935, 25:3.

³⁷New York Times, March 23, 1935, 19:5.

³⁸New York Times, September 25, 1935, 1:1.

in a letter to President Roosevelt in 1938 that ten percent of each Louis fight was to be donated to the newly formed Refugee Aid Committee.³⁹ Joe Louis' charitable contributions received a great deal of publicity. The fact that he became known as a philanthropist certainly aided his climb on the popularity poll.

In December, 1935, he donated \$6,800 to the Cleveland Christmas Fund.⁴⁰ In July, 1936, he gave a \$1,000 ambulance to Pompton Lakes and gave an additional \$1,000 for their Christmas Basket Drive.⁴¹ In December of the same year he fought Eddie Simms for the Cleveland News Christmas Fund. This fight was worth \$11,000.⁴²

In 1938 his charities totaled fifteen percent of his earnings.⁴³ In May, 1947 he aided the Cancer Society.⁴⁴ In November, 1949 he fought a ten round fight in Newark, New Jersey to aid the March of Dimes.⁴⁵

Louis' charity didn't end with the big benefits. His public knew him as a "soft touch" for anyone with a story. Billy Rowe, a Pittsburgh Carrier photographer, counted as twelve people "bummed

³⁹New York Times, May 13, 1938, 23:6.

⁴⁰Cleveland Gazette, December 21, 1935, 1.

⁴¹The Afro-American, July 25, 1936, 22.

⁴²New York Times, December 14, 1936, 32:1.

⁴³The Afro-American, January 14, 1939, 23.

⁴⁴The Afro-American, May 17, 1947, 14.

⁴⁵The Afro-American, November 19, 1949, 14.

money" from him in a Chicago hotel.⁴⁶ Louis' bodyguard, George Wobber, was chasing away from training camp an unsavory character who claimed that Louis had promised him a job when they met in the Army. Louis didn't give him the job but he did give him twenty dollars before sending him away.⁴⁷

A 1946 Time photograph showed Louis in a Santa Claus suit at a party for homeless children.⁴⁸ He must have liked the part, for he was pictured again in 1948 in a like manner loading gifts for the Virgin Island needy.⁴⁹

On at least two occasions Louis did some paintings which were sold at auction for the Urban League.⁵⁰ One of the paintings was a still life of two boxing gloves hanging on a nail. There is a strong possibility that the high price tag was for the signature more than for the painting itself.

When training for his bout with Primo Carnera, Louis donated all of the money from his sparring sessions to ailing Sam Langford.⁵¹ Langford, when he was better known by his many fans as "the Boston Tar Baby," had been one of Louis' idols.

⁴⁶Heyn, 261.

⁴⁷Heyn, 261.

⁴⁸Time, December 30, 1946, 48:32.

⁴⁹The Afro-American, December 25, 1948, 1.

⁵⁰Look, Vol. 12, No. 21, (October 12, 1948), 12; see also: The Afro-American, November 5, 1949, 3.

⁵¹Literary Digest, May 4, 1935, 35.

At one time Louis endorsed a company which made small coin banks with the stipulation that the company donate one hundred fifty banks to his church for distribution to the needy children of the congregation. Louis then slipped three shiny quarters into each bank before they were given to the children.⁵²

In early 1940 Louis bought a huge farm in Utica, Michigan with the intention of running a private stable. It was reported to him that an elderly couple was living on a shanty on the land and feared he might make them leave. Louis made them leave the shanty, but only to move them into the main home.⁵³ It was later discovered that this couple's ancestors had helped slaves escape during the time of the Civil War. This may well be the property described by a Look article which claimed Louis had acquired a huge farm in 1940 for the care of the poor and unfortunate.⁵⁴ In either case, the article undoubtedly convinced many of Louis' charitable nature.

The hallmark of Louis' charitable activities came about because of his two fights for the Army and Navy Relief Funds. On January 9, 1942 Louis defended his title against two hundred fifty pound Buddy Baer.⁵⁵ A number of factors made this a monumental act. Buddy Baer and Madison Square Garden gave percentages of their purses to the Navy

⁵²Van Every, 183.

⁵³Daily Worker, February 14, 1940, SC, JLF.

⁵⁴Look, Vol. 4, No. 24, (November 19, 1940).

⁵⁵Daily Worker, March 28, 1942, SC, JLF.

Relief Fund while Louis contributed his entire purse.⁵⁶ It was also leaked to the papers that Louis had Chappie Blackburn buy \$1,200 worth of tickets and pass them out to servicemen. This money came from Louis' pocket.⁵⁷ Louis won by a knockout in the first round. Both this fight and his fight with Abe Simon for the Army Relief Fund were title fights. It would have been a philanthropic gesture to fight two exhibition fights under these circumstances. Instead, Louis risked his crown, knowing full well it would draw a greater number of fans and consequently, provide more money for the charities involved.

His fight with Simon was fought on March 27, 1942.⁵⁸ This match he won in six rounds.⁵⁹ The Daily Worker credits Louis with buying \$2,500 worth of seats for this fight and dispensing them among servicemen.⁶⁰ According to Herald Tribune reporter Al Laney, the figure was \$3,000.⁶¹ Whichever it was, the act was again monumental.

Contrary to what might be expected, Louis' act was not given the support of the Negro press. Most of the leading Negro newspapers condemned his fight with Buddy Baer because of what they called the "Jim

⁵⁶Alexander Johnston, Ten and Out (New York: I. Washburn, 1947), 9.

⁵⁷P.M., January 1, 1942, SC, JLF.

⁵⁸Miller, 168.

⁵⁹Johnston, 9.

⁶⁰Daily Worker, March 28, 1942, SC, JLF.

⁶¹Miller, 168.

Crow" practices in the Navy. According to an editorial in the Atlanta Daily World, the Negroes made a "turnabout" after they heard Wendell Willkie's introduction to the fight. Willkie's speech lauded Joe Louis and everything for which he stood. Many of the original critics described it as the "best thing that ever happened" in American race relations.⁶² It may well have been. In his speech Willkie praised Louis' altruism and drew attention to the fact that Louis was performing his act with full knowledge of the contemporary shortcomings in official naval behavior towards Negroes.

In June, 1942, Louis fought a four round exhibition with George Nicholson, a sparring partner. This was one of several events which were part of an "All Sports Carnival."⁶³ It, too, was for the benefit of the Army and Navy Relief Societies and evidently went off without incident. Not so with a later proposed fight between Billy Conn and Joe Louis.

Jack Dempsey made the proposal that they fight for United States War Bonds. Abe Greene, President of the National Boxing Association, lambasted Dempsey for making the suggestion, arguing that Louis had done enough and had too much at stake.⁶⁴ This was only the beginning of a squabble which eventually went well beyond these two men.

⁶²Atlanta Daily World, January 19, 1942, 5.

⁶³The Afro-American, June 6, 1942, 23.

⁶⁴Abe J. Greene, "Let Louis Fight Conn," The Negro Digest, April, 1944, 85.

Plans were made calling for a Louis-Conn title fight at Madison Square Garden. All receipts were to go to the Army Emergency Relief.⁶⁵ A group of sportswriters calling themselves "War Boxing Incorporated" took over the promotion and voted to allow Louis and Conn to deduct from the purse money to pay off debts they had incurred. According to their plans, the two boxers would be freed of debt and the remainder of the purse would then be given to charity. At the time, Louis owed John Roxborough \$40,000, the government \$117,000, and Jacobs an undetermined sum.⁶⁶ In the words of one sportswriter, "all hell broke loose" when this information was released to the public.

Representative O'Toole threatened a Congressional investigation if the promotion continued.⁶⁷ Public pressure forced Secretary of War, Henry L. Stimson, to forbid the fight.⁶⁸ Louis didn't defend his championship again until after the war.

He did tour eight Army camps and gave exhibition bouts before his induction.⁶⁹ Although it is said that Louis refused a commission duri⁶⁵ Newsweek, Vol. XX, No. 14, (October 5, 1942), 83. an

—⁶⁶The Nation, Vol. 155, No. 14, Part 1, (October 3, 1942), 283.

⁶⁷The Nation, 283.

⁶⁸Newsweek, Vol. XX, No. 14, (October 5, 1942), 83.

⁶⁹ The Afro-American, October 18, 1941, 23.
Newsweek, Vol. XX, No. 14, (October 5, 1942), 83.

⁶⁹The Afro-American, October 18, 1941, 23.

induction film entitled, "This Is the Army."⁷⁰ Louis claimed he was more afraid of the filming than he had ever been of a fight.

During the war he traveled some thirty thousand miles making good will tours for the Army.⁷¹ At times he was close to the front lines. Once, he pulled the lanyard, shooting a 92nd Division cannon toward the German Gothic line. Shortly after this the cannon exploded, killing several artillerymen.⁷² On another occasion he arrived on the scene shortly after an airplane crash and placed a wounded G.I.'s head in his lap. The airman awoke with the statement, "Well I'll be damned--Joe Louis." The man had never seen Louis before.⁷³

Lou Krem, Louis' commanding officer, once compared him to Knute Rockne. Louis gave a talk to some soldiers in the brig, dwelling on the fact that the uniforms they had on were not the ones they had been issued. He compared the mistakes they must have made with his first fight with Max Schmelling and offered his second fight with Schmelling as proof that mistakes could be overcome.⁷⁴ Krem said the talk measured up to those given by his friend, Knute Rockne.

⁷⁰"Man of the Month," The Negro Digest, May, 1943, 44.

⁷¹Edwin Bancroft Henderson, The Negro in Sports (Washington, D. C.; Associated Publishers, 1949), 41

⁷²Henderson, 41.

⁷³The Afro-American, July 11, 1944, 18.

⁷⁴Heyn, 271-272.

Louis was deemed highly influential when he spoke to twenty thousand people at an interracial war bond rally in Detroit.⁷⁵ He was praised again in 1945 when he spoke at a rally urging all citizens to stay on their defense jobs and continue to buy war bonds until the Japanese made their surrender official.⁷⁶ The rally was made necessary by the premature relaxation of the citizenry when the Germans surrendered.

Louis received his honorary discharge at the end of the war and was awarded the Legion of Merit by Major General Clarence H. Kells "for exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding services."⁷⁷

During his stint in the service Louis was hailed by newspapers as a great Army influence.⁷⁸ He was credited with typifying Negro patriotism.⁷⁹ When he was inducted, the Negro Congress, a group of Negro leaders meeting periodically to discuss Negro problems, urged Secretary Stimson to see that Louis got the fullest opportunity to "strengthen the morale" in all branches of the service. In naming him a voice of "the entire Negro people," they wrote:

⁷⁵The Afro-American, June 13, 1942, 13.

⁷⁶The Afro-American, June 2, 1945, 22.

⁷⁷Miller, 181.

⁷⁸P.M., March 17, 1942, SC, JLF.

⁷⁹The Courier Journal (Louisville, Kentucky), January 20, 1942, Headline.

America's armed forces have in Joe Louis a champion of Democracy, whose great influence for building unity, can become a key factor in giving America the strength to administer a knockout blow to the forces of Hitlerism.⁸⁰

The many trophies which Louis was awarded were put on display at the American Negro Exposition at the Chicago Colosseum. Included in the show were two diamond belts, symbols of the American and British heavyweight championships.⁸¹ A Boston weekly asked that an award be given to Joe Louis for the "noblest achievement by an American Negro in 1941."⁸² For his "outstanding achievements, exemplary character and inspiration to the Negro youth of America," he was elected as a director of the Victory Mutual Life Insurance Company in 1936.⁸³ At the time it was the only Negro insurance company licensed in the state of New York.

His people didn't qualify their praise for him. At the American Negro Exposition in 1942, he was awarded a trophy for being the "Most Outstanding Negro Athlete of All Time."⁸⁴

⁸⁰Atlanta Daily Worker, Vol. 14, No. 129, (October 8, 1949), 5.

⁸¹New York Daily Worker, July 18, 1940, SC, JLF.

⁸²New York Daily Worker, January 26, 1942.

⁸³Time, March 23, 1936, SC, JLF.

⁸⁴The Negro Handbook, 1942, 231.

CHAPTER IV

WHO CARES

When the purpose of a search is to determine the effect a public figure has on the public, it is necessary to determine the extent of exposure in order to predict the extent of effect. Knowing how widespread the publicity was that Louis received and knowing who was exposed to this publicity help in determining the impact of the Joe Louis public image.

The Negro newspapers rank well ahead of the rest of the public media in terms of the coverage given Louis. In fact, it can probably be said that nobody has ever dominated the "race" newspapers as Louis did during his career.

On June 25, 1935 the Chicago Defender published a special issue dealing solely with the Joe Louis-Prima Carnera fight. Its stated purpose was to "scoop" the city. This was not the only fight which received such coverage. An issue on September 4, 1937 came out entitled, "The Louis-Farr Fight Special." It dealt entirely with the fifteen-round fight in which Louis successfully defended his title. The fight was not expected to be a tough one for Louis and does not rank with one of his best. Nonetheless, it was important enough to warrant this special issue of the Chicago Defender. Throughout 1935 Joe Louis continued to dominate the headlines in the sports section of the Chicago Defender even when he was not about to fight.

The Cleveland Gazette had a front page, six by eight inch picture of Louis accompanied by headlines after his fight with Carnera.¹ The week after the fight the headlines read, Joe on his way to the Championship.² Every one of his early fights ranked front page headlines in almost all of the major Negro newspapers. A cursory study of the papers during this period of his career places him second only to the Italian-Ethiopian War in terms of news worthiness. The war, which was of extreme interest to American Negroes, often played second fiddle to Louis when he was about to fight.

In Baltimore's Afro-American, which had devoted the whole front page and five pages of pictures to Louis' win over Braddock,³ his fights warranted front page headlines throughout 1937; but were relegated to the sports pages in 1938. This is rather indicative of the trend the Negro newspapers took. Evidently, his winning the title was much more important than his defending it. This was particularly true when it was discovered that his defense of the title was quite often an easy chore.

The Afro-American headlines on November 7, 1936 read, Joe Louis Under Knife. The subtitle described the operation as that "usually performed on Jewish infants at birth." Historians may find that it

¹Cleveland Gazette, June 29, 1935, 1.

²Cleveland Gazette, August 10, 1935, 1.

³The Afro-American, May 8, 1937, 1.

was the most publicized circumcision in history. It certainly indicates a lack of privacy in Louis' personal life.

Louis acted in several movies including one called, The Joe Louis Story.⁴ This can be deemed a measure of popularity in itself. The opening of each movie became a must for Negro high society. Each premier was amply advertised in the Negro press; but the publicity didn't end there. Negro newspapers kept the public informed well in advance of each opening just as a matter of course. It was handled not in terms of paid advertising but as news.

A few of the newspapers printed Louis' life story. The Pittsburgh Courier serialized his biography and the New York Daily Mirror ran it as a comic strip.⁵ This was not the only time Joe Louis was used in such a fashion. The Afro-American featured a comic strip using him as its hero.⁶

Crisis, published by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, featured Louis in many articles. His picture appeared on the cover of Crisis in June, 1935. The N.A.A.C.P., usually considered to be under the control of the well-educated "upper-class" Negro, had already realized his potential influence.

⁴New York Herald Tribune, June 25, 1955, SC, JLF.

⁵Joe Louis, My Life Story (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1947), 52.

⁶The Afro-American, June 4, 1938, 21.

Louis was on the cover of the September 29, 1941 issue of Time magazine. The caption on the cover read, "I want to fight honest so that the next colored boy can get the same kinda break I got." A 1938 Newsweek article entitled, "White Hope Pops Up," played down race as a motivating factor in the quest for new challengers because as they put it, Louis was a "respected and popular fighter."⁷

Commonweal, a popular Roman Catholic magazine, featured Louis in many articles. In one they credited Louis with being "a symbol of a lot of things that daily grow rarer in the world." It stated that he had satisfied the "common need for the clean, hard struggle and honest victory" at a time when such attributes could scarcely be found.⁸

Many babies were named after him. The New York Post printed a number of baby pictures in 1936, all of whom had Joe Louis as their first and middle names.⁹ A white man in Cordele, Georgia named his newborn Joe Louis on the night of the Max Baer fight.¹⁰ During the war a plane was christened "The Brown Bomber."¹¹ According to Louis, the nickname, Brown Bomber, was the invention of Scotty Monteith, an ex-boxer and manager. He suggested it to John Roxborough. Roxborough

⁷ Newsweek, No. 12, (December 26, 1938), 19.

⁸ Commonweal, Vol. 53, (October 13, 1950), 3.

⁹ New York Post, June 17, 1936, SC, JLF.

¹⁰ Louis, 109.

¹¹ Joe Louis, "My Life Story," Negro Digest, January, 1947, 93.

liked it and saw to it that it reached the ears of reporters.¹² The nickname may really mark the end of an era. Although almost all the great Negro athletes up to and including Joe Louis somehow acquired nicknames which identified them as Negroes, it seems to be a thing of the past. This revolution seems to have gone even further than this. When athletes are described in today's sports sections, the description often includes everything but the color of their skin.

In late 1935 the Chicago Defender offered free photos of Joe Louis to anyone who took the time to write and request one.¹³ A large "specially posed," nine by twelve inch photograph of Louis was used as a gimmick to sell Sweet Georgia Brown Hair Dressing. Crisis, a Negro monthly, advertised for agents and promised "big money for giving away pictures of Joe Louis." The gift went with every can of the hair dressing.¹⁴ In 1940 the Afro-American offered a ten cent prize for junior artists who sent in original sketches of Joe Louis' head.¹⁵ These incidents, though of only minor importance, are indicative of many such incidents which, when compiled, are of use in judging Louis' popularity.

A 1947 Gallup poll listed Louis among the country's most popular people.¹⁶ According to the "Cooperative Analysis of Broadcasting" the

¹²Joe Louis, "My Story," Life, November 8, 1948, 141.

¹³Chicago Defender, November 23, 1935, 14.

¹⁴Crisis, Vol. 44, No. 11, (November, 1937), 323.

¹⁵The Afro-American, August 24, 1940, 9.

¹⁶Look, Vol. 11, No. 13, (June 24, 1947), 58.

second fight between Louis and Max Schmelling drew an all time high percentage of fight listeners. In New York City ninety-seven percent of radio owners listened to the fight. The study revealed also that Buick paid forty-seven thousand dollars for two commercials during the 124 second fight.¹⁷ Another study revealed that outside the city 63.6 percent of all radio owners listened to the fight. This placed the fight second only to President Roosevelt's two broadcasts in terms of total listeners. Roosevelt drew 72.5 percent of the available radios.¹⁸ Considering the fact that the Pearl Harbor invasion was less than three months away and World War II was already in progress, these statistics are amazing.

Esquire magazine, which in 1942 had stated that Joe Louis was the only athlete alive who was responsible for selling more papers than the race horse,¹⁹ ran a poll to determine the most popular sports figure in 1946. Louis came in second to Ted Williams. Williams received the first place vote of 18.2 percent of those asked and Louis received 12.6 percent. Following Louis were Byron Nelson and Bob Feller.²⁰

A study which may or may not be indicative of the feelings of all sixth grade children was run at the Hunter College Elementary School in New York. These sixth graders ranked Louis as the world's

¹⁷Newsweek, July 11, 1938, 26.

¹⁸Time, September 9, 1941, 60.

¹⁹Esquire, Vol. XVIII, No. 3, (September, 1942), 52

²⁰Esquire, Vol. XXVI, No. 3, (September, 1946), 19.

most powerful individual. Following Louis on the list of powerful individuals were Franklin D. Roosevelt, Mayor La Guardia, Gary Cooper, and Toto Gorilla.²¹

A Philadelphia poll questioned several Negroes on their preference between Joe Louis and Jesse Owens. Louis was labeled as the more popular of the two. The poll went on to seek reasons for the results. Three reasons were considered most valid: 1) Joe Louis proved the Negro was not cowardly, 2) Joe Louis brought back clean sportsmanship, and 3) boxing is more popular than track.²²

When Louis met his Waterloo in his first fight with Max Schmelling, many felt his popularity would subside. In terms of his power to draw spectators, this was anything but true. His ability to fill the arenas he fought in continued to climb.²³ In fact, his ability to draw huge crowds is put forth as one of the major reasons heavyweight champion Jim Braddock actually sought a fight with Louis instead of the reverse.²⁴

As Harlem celebrated Louis' victories, so did they mourn his defeat to Schmelling. It was estimated that Harlem business lost five hundred thousand dollars in trade because of the result. The one business which found Schmelling's victory a financial success was Manning's Pawn Shop on 366 Lenox Avenue. Long lines appeared the day

²¹The Afro-American, April 12, 1941, 19.

²²The Afro-American, September 26, 1936, 2.

²³New York World Telegram, December 26, 1936, SC, JLF.

²⁴Journal and Guide, May 23, 1936, SC, JLF.

after the fight. The Harlemites were in need of money to pay off their bets.²⁵

Joe Louis has to be listed among the most popular G.I.'s. He took boot camp in Camp Upton, New York. The first weekend after his arrival some six hundred forty cars and several busloads of people drove there to try to get a glimpse of him. He was ordered to stay in his barracks so that no one would get hurt.²⁶ An unprinted reason may well have been to discourage such sightseeing. Crowds like that one would hardly make it possible for Louis or the camp to operate functionally. By 1944 Louis had made one hundred eleven appearances before more than one million soldiers.²⁷

As a civilian, his plight was hardly more private. On several occasions one or two members of his entourage doled out dollar bills as an enticement for his fans to leave.²⁸ In addition to the common well-wishers, there were many well-positioned people who were interested in keeping tabs on Louis' schedule. There were public officials at all levels of government who made it a point to be seen with Louis for obvious political reasons. Los Angeles Mayor Frank Shaw met him at

²⁵New York World Telegram, June 20, 1936, SC, JLF.

²⁶The Afro-American, January 24, 1942, 2.

²⁷Margery Miller, Joe Louis, American (New York: Hill and Wang, 1951, 175.

²⁸Time, Vol. XXXI, No. 16, (April 18, 1938), 72.

the airport in February, 1935.²⁹ Later the same year he was met by the mayor of Detroit upon his return after the Primo Carnera fight.³⁰

The fight between Louis and Tony Galento was said to have been the reason for the postponement of a vote on a relief appropriation bill in the Senate. Too many senators were out listening to the fight with the consequent result of no quorum.³¹ Louis met with President Roosevelt under the watchful eyes of the press.³² It was written that the President actually altered his schedule so as not to miss listening to Louis' fights.³³

The acceptance of the quantity of literary sources containing the great volume of information about Joe Louis serves as indication of his popularity among the literate. But the extent of his popularity among those who could not read cannot be measured in terms of written evidence. Only by noting the actual reactions displayed by the great masses of people who celebrated his victories or mobbed him wherever he went, can one assume his impact on all the people.

It is known that Joe Louis was the subject of many folk songs.³⁴ This fact might be another clue to one phase of his popularity. Songs

²⁹Chicago Defender, February 16, 1935, 17.

³⁰New York Times, July 2, 1935, 26.

³¹The Afro-American, July 8, 1931, 21.

³²New York Times, August 28, 1935, 23.

³³Joe Louis Scrapbook, No. 12, (n.d.), SC.

³⁴New York Post, December 14, 1956, SC, JLF.

were written too, based on things Louis said. "You Can Run but You Can't Hide" and "We're on God's Side" are two examples.³⁵ He made the first statement in retaliation to Billy Conn's pre-fight remarks in which Conn made claims of superior foot speed. The second title was Louis' way of describing the United States' involvement in World War II. Folk singer Woodie Guthrie sang constantly of Louis. Many of the songs he sang were from the pen of composer Earl Robinson.³⁶ Composer Claud Austin made Louis the subject of an operetta.³⁷

³⁵New York Post, December 14, 1956, SC, JLF.

³⁶P.M., December 16, 1946, SC, JLF.

³⁷New York Times, June 14, 1936, Magazine Section, SC, JLF.

CHAPTER V

THE LESSER KNOWN LOUIS

Louis' first love was baseball. In fact, baseball provided him with his first "play for pay." One of his elementary teachers took it upon himself to offer a quarter for each home run hit out of the schoolyard. After young Joe had collected two dollars and fifty cents for ten home runs, the offer was withdrawn.¹ Louis maintained an active interest in many sports throughout the period of his reign as boxing champion.

He reportedly danced, owned and rode horses,² played softball,³ and shot billiards.⁴ He was an ardent member of a "fish and rod club,"⁵ played tennis,⁶ and bowled.⁷ As he got older, golf became his favorite sport.

¹Philadelphia Tribune, July 25, 1935, SC, JLF.

²Edwin Bancroft Henderson, The Negro in Sports (Washington, D. C.: Associated Publishers, 1949), 37.

³The Afro-American, October 2, 1937, 7.

⁴Newsweek, Vol. VI, No. 14, (October 5, 1935), 25.

⁵New York Evening Journal, June 1, 1936, SC, Scrapbook No. II, 1.

⁶The Afro-American, January 28, 1939, 23.

⁷The Afro-American, October 19, 1940, 20.

When he was not in training, he often golfed thirty-six holes a day.⁸ He attacked the game with the same determination he showed in boxing. He was so impressed with the help he received from Clyde Martin, a Baltimore golf professional, in July of 1940, that he paid to take Martin with him on a trip he made the following month. Martin accompanied him on a trip to the western part of the United States. His only job was to join Louis whenever Louis found the time to play.⁹

The boxer's golf improved so much that he began to play in tournaments. In 1947 he won the Eastern Golf Association Amateur Division championship in Pittsburgh. He won the final round, four and three and was only four over par at the time.¹⁰

His love for horses also went beyond that of simple recreation. In 1941 he entered several of his own horses in a show. The proceeds went to charity. The list of patrons was said to have been very large because many wanted to see the champion in a different role.¹¹

Joe Louis sponsored the "Brown Bombers Football Team"¹² and a basketball team called the "Detroit Brown Bombers."¹³ In one bowling league he sponsored the "Joe Louis Spring Hill Farms" team and bowled

⁸Joe Louis, "My Story," Part II, Life, (November 15, 1948), 142.

⁹The Afro-American, August 24, 1940, 20.

¹⁰The Afro-American, August 16, 1947, 12.

¹¹Atlanta Daily World, Vol. 14, No. 60, (July 30, 1941), 5.

¹²The Afro-American, December 6, 1947, 17.

¹³The Afro-American, December 12, 1936.

for another team against the team that bore his name.¹⁴ In a short autobiographical sketch which appeared in Life magazine, he said he had maintained a 165 average and had once bowled a 276 game.¹⁵

In 1937 he sponsored a softball team which was also called the "Brown Bombers." As the season progressed, he played more and more until he was playing the whole game at first base.¹⁶ Possibly because of their skill level, or more probably because of their famous first baseman, the team became the subject of several movie shorts.¹⁷ The venture, which started out as a lark, eventually cost Louis thirty thousand dollars.¹⁸ Had he been gifted with twenty-twenty hindsight, he probably would have stuck with watching the Detroit Tigers.

At about the same time he was losing money in this venture, he was also losing forty-two thousand dollars in a Detroit restaurant called the Brown Bomber Chicken Shack. Both investments were made through the persuasion of old friends. This tremendous financial loss and, perhaps more important, the loyalty he showed to many of his old friends caused many a hardship between Louis and Marva, his wife.¹⁹

¹⁴The Afro-American, October 19, 1940, 20.

¹⁵Louis, 142.

¹⁶The Afro-American, October 2, 1937, 7.

¹⁷The Afro-American, October 9, 1937, 20.

¹⁸Time, No. 38, (September 29, 1941), 64.

¹⁹Time, No. 38, (September 29, 1941), 64.

Public accounts hold that Marva Louis played second fiddle to more than just boxing and her husband's old friends. Public opinion seemed to take Louis' marriage to socialite Marva Trotter very lightly. When she sued for divorce in July, 1941, the Atlanta Daily World theorized that Louis couldn't take time to worry about it because he was sharpening his golf game for the upcoming Joe Louis National. The tournament was to be held in Detroit and offered one thousand dollars first prize and several elaborate trophies.²⁰

It seemed to be common knowledge that Marva Trotter had arranged to meet Joe Louis in 1934 when he was just becoming a celebrity. She met him in a gym through Jerry Hughes, a mutual friend. Some went so far as to say that John Roxborough and Julian Black were strongly instrumental in the matchmaking. It was rumored that the two men feared the avalanche of fan mail which Joe was receiving would go to his head and weaken his moral character or his physical determination.²¹ Loss of either could easily have cost him his chance for the championship. Ernest Heyn, sportswriter, made a point of the fact that Louis didn't marry until just before the Max Baer fight, in other words, until he was well on his way to success.²²

²⁰Atlanta Daily World, Vol. 14, No. 41, (July 9, 1941), 5.

²¹Atlanta Daily World, Vol. 14, No. 42, (July 10, 1941), 5.

²²Ernest Victor Heyn, "Twelve Sport Immortals," Sport (New York: Bartholomew House, 1949), 274.

Marva Trotter became the "first lady of sport" when she became Marva Louis. As soon as it became known that they dated, she, too, became a celebrity and received a deluge of fan mail. One letter is worthy of note if only for its humor. The writer begged her not to marry "that brutal fighter." He promised that if she would wait six months, he'd get out of jail, get a job, and marry her himself.²³ After their marriage Marva could be found frequently on the society page. For a time she wrote a fashion column for the Chicago Defender.²⁴

The marriage did not run smoothly for very long. Shortly after Louis' first fight with Billy Conn, Marva sued for divorce. Among her charges was one which stated that her husband had struck her twice.²⁵ She also charged negligence,²⁶ which even Louis' most ardent backer could never deny. Marva was not with her husband when he was training and he was training most of the time.

The Atlanta Daily World ran a survey at the time of the divorce proceedings. The consensus of those asked was that the Louises should go through with the divorce. The few readers who were in favor of a reconciliation were so inclined only because they felt it would be

²³Edward Van Every, Joe Louis, Man and Super Fighter (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, Co., 1936), 75.

²⁴Time, Vol. XXXI, No. 7, (February 14, 1938), 45.

²⁵New York World Telegram, July 9, 1941, SC, JLF.

²⁶Atlanta Daily World, Vol. 14, No. 41, (July 9, 1941), 5.

better for Louis' image. No one in the small survey sympathized with Marva.²⁷

Louis' rebuttal of his wife's charges was vehement. He countercharged her with not being a true and virtuous wife and claimed the only time he ever used his hands where she was concerned was when he "peeled off dough" for her.²⁸ The lead to this report suggested that Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin would be more likely to kiss and make up than would Joe and Marva Louis. On August 1, 1941 Louis ran an ad in a Chicago daily declaring that he would no longer be responsible for debts incurred by Marva.²⁹

The inevitable did not occur. Immediately prior to what was to be the final divorce proceedings, the Louises had a reconciliation.³⁰ The newspapers carried a photograph of Louis carrying Marva out of the courtroom. Any damage to Louis' reputation due to the rift was averted, at least for the moment.

Marva and Joe Louis had two children while he was in the service—a daughter, Jacqueline, and a son, Joe, Jr. After the war they went through divorce, remarriage, separation, reconciliation, another separation, and several lawsuits.³¹ None of these circumstances

²⁷Atlanta Daily World, Vol. 14, No. 42, (July 10, 1941), 5.

²⁸Atlanta Daily World, Vol. 14, No. 45, (July 13, 1941), 1.

²⁹Atlanta Daily World, Vol. 14, No. 64, (August 1, 1941), 8.

³⁰Atlanta Daily World, Vol. 14, No. 80, (August 20, 1941), 1.

³¹Heyn, 279.

helped the Louis image; but by the time they occurred, it was no longer necessary that Louis' reputation be spotless. The four year period of reconciliation may have helped. According to biographer Margery Miller, the Louises parted friends, writing each other every seven or eight days.³²

Taxi driver Joe Gibbons, an ex-beau of Marva, was shot and killed in July, 1941. The policeman who shot Gibbons was Earl Wilson, a close friend of Louis.³³ There was some journalistic speculation that Gibbons was killed to avert a threatened blackmail plot.³⁴ If Louis had ever been involved or if he had been accused of collaboration, it would have meant the end of everything he stood for. No charge ever took place.

In 1948 Louis was named in a lawsuit for five hundred thousand dollars.³⁵ A Reverend Matthew Faulkner accused Louis of romancing Mrs. Faulkner while Faulkner himself was a chaplain in the army. Mrs. Faulkner was a professional model and used the name Carol Drake. According to a newspaper article, Louis settled out of court more than two years after the suit was originally filed. Upon hearing of the

³²Margery Miller, Joe Louis, American (New York: Current Books, Inc., 1945), 175.

³³The Afro-American, July 12, 1941, 12.

³⁴Atlanta Daily World, Vol. 14, No. 42, (July 10, 1941), 5.

³⁵The Afro-American, April 10, 1948, 16.

settlement, she supposedly flew to Canada to see him.³⁶ This was not the last of similar problems for Joe Louis.

A photograph of Mrs. Ruby Dallas appeared in a newspaper about this same time with the caption, "Shedding Hubby--Will Joe Be Next?"³⁷ Two months later Louis was named in another "love suit."³⁸ By this time his halo had disappeared. This may be one reason his once stated plan to enter politics never came about.³⁹

Louis dabbled in politics, as many celebrities do, but he never actually ran for office. It is doubtful that the "Joe Louis for President" signs which appeared in Harlem after the Louis victory over Max Schmelling⁴⁰ were meant to be serious, but there was some consideration given to his running for other political offices. As early as 1935 he was asked to run for the state senate by "Detroit's East Side."⁴¹ Though these early incidents vouch for his popularity, Louis was discounted by many as intellectually unable to hold office. One writer held that Louis was even incapable of building toward that end and discounted all such attempts by others to help him.⁴²

³⁶The Afro-American, July 8, 1950, 1.

³⁷The Afro-American, April 30, 1949, 1.

³⁸The Afro-American, June 18, 1949, 1.

³⁹P.M., SC, Joe Louis Scrapbook, No. 14, (n.d.), 31.

⁴⁰The Afro-American, July 2, 1938, 15.

⁴¹Newsweek, Vol. VI, No. 15, (October 12, 1935), 25.

⁴²Earl Brown, "Joe Louis," Life, Vol. 8, No. 25, (June 17, 1940),

Ignoring Julian Black's advice to the contrary, Louis did play an active part in many political campaigns. Black advanced this as evidence of Louis' independence from his influence. Black contended that this was proof positive that, contrary to public opinion, Louis followed the "dictates of his own mind."⁴³

In September, 1936, Louis turned down a request to ride with Jesse Owens in a special car and speak for Republican Alfred M. Landon.⁴⁴ Two weeks later he attempted to "stump for Franklin D. Roosevelt," but forgot to mention Roosevelt's name.⁴⁵ Four years later he campaigned for Wendell Willkie against Roosevelt because of the Negro dissatisfaction with the Roosevelt Administration's refusal to pass anti-lynch legislation during his two terms in office.⁴⁶ Here again the choice seems to have been Louis' own; inasmuch as many Negro leaders felt Willkie was no better than his opponent.⁴⁷ Louis campaigned for Willkie in Detroit, New York, Cleveland, Baltimore, Chicago, and Philadelphia.⁴⁸ In July, 1939 he made a political speech for Mal Frazier who was running against Herbert L. Bruce for Twenty-first

⁴³Herald Tribune, November 2, 1940, SC, JLF.

⁴⁴New York Post, September 14, 1936, SC, JLF.

⁴⁵New York World Telegram, September 30, 1936, SC, JLF.

⁴⁶Daily Worker, November 29, 1940, SC, JLF.

⁴⁷Daily Worker, November 29, 1940, SC, JLF.

⁴⁸The Afro-American, November 2, 1940, 31.

Assembly District in New York.⁴⁹ Both men were Negroes. In 1948 he campaigned for Thomas Dewey.⁵⁰ In the article mentioning Louis' support was a plea by Dewey advising Louis to retire while he was still undefeated.

Another side of the public view of Louis came from the films in which he acted. In addition to "This Is the Army," the military training film he made, he performed in many full length features. In late 1937 he signed to do six films.⁵¹ The single purpose of all six was to draw spectators. "Spirit of Youth" opened in Baltimore in January, 1938. The headlines in the Afro-American serve as typical of its reception. They read: "Joe Louis No Heavy Lover but Grand Guy in New Film."⁵² He and the film were praised for being atypical. Unlike most Negro movies made up to that time, Louis did not play the part of a clown and it did not have a sad ending.⁵³ The plots of most of his movies were centered around boxing. "The Square Jungle," produced later in his career, was typical of these.⁵⁴

A well publicized, rather isolated incident in Louis' public life occurred when his sister Vunies graduated from Howard University.

⁴⁹New York Herald Tribune, July 16, 1939, SC, JLF.

⁵⁰The Afro-American, October 30, 1948, 3.

⁵¹New York Times, November 6, 1937, SC, JLF.

⁵²The Afro-American, January 8, 1938, 1.

⁵³The Afro-American, January 8, 1938, 1.

⁵⁴New York Herald Tribune, June 25, 1955, SC, JLF.

In his autobiography, Louis deemed his being called to the platform at her graduation a proud moment in his life.⁵⁵

In a more charitable vein, it should be mentioned that among his many public appearances were several as a boxing referee. Louis often worked as a referee at amateur tournaments to help build attendance. A crowd of 15,760 fans once watched Louis referee amateur bouts in late 1939.⁵⁶ He usually worked such bouts without pay.

Many of Louis' business ventures became a matter of public record. He was elected Director of the Victory Mutual Life Insurance Company in 1936.⁵⁷ Many accepted this appointment as a matter of course and assumed him to be a director in name only. At this time, their speculation was well-founded. Some of his later business ventures proved more controversial.

Joe Louis retired as champion on March 1, 1949.⁵⁸ Between this retirement and his return to active fighting he became involved in some business entanglements which put a strain on his popularity. His public complained bitterly when he entered into an agreement designed to give him partial control over the disposition of his vacated title. Complaints even appeared in the foreign press.⁵⁹ Louis joined Arthur

⁵⁵Louis, 134.

⁵⁶New York Times, December 17, 1939, SC, JLF.

⁵⁷New York Amsterdam News, March 14, 1936, SC, JLF.

⁵⁸John V. Grombach, The Saga of Sock (New York: Barnes, 1949), 9.

⁵⁹Time, Vol. 58, (March 14, 1949), 82.

M. Wirtz and James D. Norris to form the International Boxing Club.⁶⁰ The purpose of the I.B.C. was to monopolize the promotion of the heavyweight title eliminations.

Both Wirtz and Norris were wealthy investors. Wirtz was co-owner of the Sonja Henie Hollywood Ice Review. Norris was the son of the owner of the Detroit Red Wings and owned a great deal of stock in the grain business.⁶¹ Both were stockholders in Madison Square Garden.⁶² There was some speculation that their intentions were to work with Louis until he was completely out of the picture for the title and then "shuck" him.⁶³

Fight promoter Mike Jacobs was furious when the I.B.C. announced their intentions.⁶⁴ He called Louis "ungrateful" and claimed the action was a "stab in the back."⁶⁵ Louis finally sold the necessary exclusive contracts to the I.B.C. Though the move met with severe criticism, the Negro press hailed Louis as the new Czar and compared his new position to the days when he had been a twenty-five dollar a week factory worker in Detroit.⁶⁶ There were other sympathetic

⁶⁰The Afro-American, May 14, 1949, 1.

⁶¹Time, 82.

⁶²Newsweek, Vol. 33, (March 14, 1949), 75.

⁶³The Afro-American, July 23, 1949, 4.

⁶⁴Time, 82.

⁶⁵Newsweek, 75.

⁶⁶The Afro-American, May 14, 1949, 1.

newspaper friends, too, whose argument was that Louis had done enough for Jacobs and the Twentieth Century Boxing Association that he headed. The reporters stressed the fact that the Association had made two million dollars on Louis' fights.⁶⁷

Regardless of public sentiment, the International Boxing Club signed the four leading heavyweights and set up a tournament in which Ezzard Charles and Joe Walcott were to fight for the championship. The winner was to be declared champion but would be under contract to meet the challenge from the winner of the Savold-Lesnevich bout.⁶⁸ Louis and the I.B.C. met with another setback when the New York State Athletic Commission refused to sanction the arrangement. The whole arrangement might well have folded had it not been for Commissioner Abe J. Greene of the National Boxing Association. He granted his approval and the Charles-Walcott fight was fought with the backing of the N.B.A.⁶⁹ To see this fight, 25,392 people paid \$246,546.⁷⁰ Charles won and went on to defend his title under the I.B.C.⁷¹

If Louis and the I.B.C. had survived and proved successful, he may have learned to live with the public animosity the group produced. In truth, the arrangement did not give Louis the lasting financial

⁶⁷Newsweek, 76.

⁶⁸Grombach, 91.

⁶⁹Newsweek, 75.

⁷⁰Grombach, 91.

⁷¹The Afro-American, July 23, 1949, 3.

security he had hoped it would. His unsuccessful try at a comeback, his well publicized tax problems, and his later attempts at such things as wrestling,⁷² and a one-shot stage appearance as a dancer at the Apollo Theatre,⁷³ made it very difficult for anyone to long begrudge Louis' attempt to monopolize the sport from the promoting standpoint.

⁷²Look, Vol. 20, (June 12, 1956), p. 62.

⁷³New York Daily News, May 10, 1953, SC, JLF.

CHAPTER VI

BLACK MAN'S CHAMPION

Joe Louis was admired and respected by most. It is true that many white people felt a warm affection for him. These emotions can't be compared to the outright adoration and love he received from the people of his own race. In 1940 writer Earl Brown described him as "the most successful Negro on earth."¹ There were many among Louis' people who would have agreed with Brown. A study of Louis through the complete period of his reign reveals that the fact that he was a Negro was much more of an issue in the late thirties than it was later in his career. Once it became evident that Louis' ability could not be denied, all sorts of theories were proposed in an attempt to explain his talent.

Floyd Tillery, in an article called the "Untold Chapters of the Life of Joe Louis," claimed that Louis was not actually Negro. He explained that all of the Barrows who made up Louis' family tree were three-quarters white and the fourth-quarter was more Indian than African.² A story like this one would probably not reach print today or at best would be attributed to a questionable source. It would

¹Earl Brown, "Joe Louis, " Life, Vol. 8, No. 25, (June 17, 1940), 49.

²Floyd Tillery, "Untold Chapters of the Life of Joe Louis," Ring, Vol. XV, No. 4, (May, 1936), 12.

not be important here except that it was one of several articles which refused to credit a contemporary American Negro with exceptional talent.

Doctor Walter H. Jacobs, after examining Louis and discovering he had perfect occlusion, theorized that he must be a direct "throwback to a primitive human species."³ Perfect occlusion is not commonplace, but it is certainly not rare enough to warrant this theory. Leroy Atkinson who wrote a brief biographical sketch of Louis in 1938 came to the same conclusion as Dr. Jacobs. His guess was that somewhere "back in the deep jungle, there must have been a fighting ancestor" to whom Joe Louis was a throwback.⁴ The articles did not appear with malicious intent and, therefore, serve as even better examples of the changes that have taken place in journalism since the late thirties.

Although Louis in his autobiography made no claim to exceptional fistic ability as a youngster, there were many who were ready to argue with him on that point. His great uncle claimed "Joe could beat up four at a time before he was ten years old." He also described incidents in which Louis' mother supposedly knocked down boys and beat them "till they were bloody."⁵ This seems to be incompatible with her nature, but that didn't stop the story from being printed.

³New York Sun, January 6, 1940, SC, JLF.

⁴Leroy Atkinson, "Joe Louis, the Brown Bomber," in Harold Kaese (ed) Famous American Athletes of Today (Boston: L. C. Page and Co., 1938),

⁵Tillery, 14.

Some people held on until there were no turns left before admitting to Louis' ability. One of the leading figures in this position was Jack Dempsey. It is true that in the end he became one of Louis' staunchest backers, but it was a slow process. As late as April, 1936 Dempsey was still reticent in complimenting Louis. His claim at this time was that Louis hadn't proven he could take a punch.⁶ Sportswriter Dan Daniel placed Dempsey with a group of whites who were of the belief that no Negro could "take it."

It is known that James Braddock sought Louis for a match. There has been speculation that there was a side to the arrangement which might be labeled by today's standards as shady. Newsweek stated in October, 1939 that Braddock was still receiving five percent of Louis' purses by agreement made at the time of their title fight.⁷ Louis himself described the arrangement in 1948. In an article written for Life magazine he claimed that Braddock received ten percent of Jacob's promotion money for ten years as payment for signing to fight Louis for the championship. The agreement was to go into effect only if Louis won; which, of course, he did.⁸ Jacobs played a large part in Louis' climb to the top; and although his motives can hardly be construed as altruistic, he must be included in the list of men responsible

⁶Daniel M. Daniel, "Slugging Louis Eager for Vacation Days," Ring, Vol. XV, No. 3, (April, 1936), 2.

⁷Newsweek, Vol. XIV, No. 14, (October 2, 1939), 8.

⁸Joe Louis, "My Story," Life, November 15, 1948, SC, JLF.

for Louis' success. The remainder of the list of credits is made up of Negro men, and Louis' ultimate success was considered a victory for the Negro people.

The victory was hailed by many people of both races. There were, however, some who had reservations about its benefitting the cause of race relations. An article in The Commentator by John B. Kennedy entitled, "Why Joe Louis Should Not Be Champ," proposed several possible drawbacks. Kennedy was worried about the backlash from whites who resented having a Negro heavyweight champion, and felt also that when Louis finally came to his end and was dethroned, it would bring depression to the Negro population. He cited as an example of near disaster, an incident which occurred the night of the Louis-Sharkey fight. For some reason the police had redirected fight traffic through a Negro neighborhood. There were many young people belligerently taunting the drivers of automobiles. Kennedy felt that if any Negro youth had been accidentally hit by a car, it would certainly have started a race riot.⁹ According to him, the gains made were not worth the possible losses which accompanied the heavyweight championship.

Louis was constantly being compared to Jack Johnson and the worry that was ever present was that Louis' rise would be met with the same animosity that Johnson's had. Over half the letters Louis received early in his career mentioned Johnson. Mainly, these letters were from southern Negroes who claimed that Johnson had disgraced his

⁹The Afro-American, January 23, 1937, 22.

race. Louis' personal feeling on the comparison was that Johnson had lived as he chose and that Johnson's reputation in no way affected his own.¹⁰ Johnson's was not the only reputation thrown in Louis' face. Editorials appeared begging Louis to stay on the path of the straight and narrow. Sportswriter Bill Corum wrote an editorial in 1935 beseeching Louis not to "go the way of Kid Chocolate." He advised Louis to stick to the ways of his "Ma."¹¹ Kid Chocolate was one of several Negro fighters thrown before Louis as examples of how he should not act.

The small segment of the white population made up only part of the group which was slow to enthusiastically accept Louis' achievement. The Negro elite, or more properly described, a large portion of the Negro elite, had some reservation about accepting Louis as the success and consequent influence he had become. Varying methods of dissention were evident. In the yearbook entitled, Who's Who in Colored America, the name Joe Louis did not appear until 1938. The omission of his name in 1936 and 1937, years when he was probably the most talked about American Negro in the country, is evidence of the reluctance with which Louis was accepted as being more than just a fighter.

Joe Rainey, Pennsylvania State Athletic Director, was quoted in the Afro-American as saying that he had never been as proud of being a Negro as he had been on the night Joe Louis beat Primo Carnera. The paper took offense at Rainey's statement. Whoever wrote the editorial

¹⁰ Joe Louis, "My Story," Life, November 8, 1948, 141.

¹¹ New York Evening Journal, June 27, 1935, SC, JLF.

felt that there were many other things about which Negroes should be more proud. He felt that perhaps the moment should have been described as the "most exciting" moment rather than "proudest."¹² On the other hand, an editorial appearing in Opportunity, a magazine representing a large segment of the literate Negro population, admitted the strength of Louis' influence as early as October, 1935. The editorial went on to state that it was fortunate Louis was the way he was because of the potential influence he had on youth and on the boxing game. It was felt that he may have been capable of restoring boxing to the level of other sports.¹³

The Chicago Defender, commenting on the controversy surrounding Louis' influence, stated that it mattered little that he was not a college professor, lawyer, or political leader. To the Defender the case was simple. His positive influence stemmed from his "belief in and respect for . . . race, supported by concrete example [setting] him apart as a teacher whose instruction in race pride and race consciousness [would prove to] be a valuable lesson."¹⁴ Later in 1935 this same paper wrote that Joe Louis and Haile Selassie, the Emperor of Ethiopia, had done more for the Negro peoples of the world than any other men in the decade.¹⁵

¹²The Afro-American, July 6, 1935, 1.

¹³Opportunity, Vol. XIII, No. 10, (October, 1935), 295.

¹⁴Chicago Defender, July 13, 1935, SC, JLF.

¹⁵Chicago Defender, October 5, 1935, 16.

The Negro Congress met shortly before Louis entered the service and announced that they felt it was absolutely essential that he enlist. They felt that his enlistment would do more to show the patriotism and anti-Hitlerism of the American Negro than any other single act.¹⁶ He was chosen man of the month in May, 1943 by the Negro Digest.¹⁷ His ultimate acceptance by the "upperclass" segment of the Negro population came in 1946 when he was asked to speak at the Thirtieth Annual Conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.¹⁸

The Negro press had no reservations about making Louis the hero of his people. One newspaper had a nine by twelve inch colored picture of him on the front page in September, 1935.¹⁹ In the same issue he was the subject of twelve columns of text. When he won the title, the only thing to be found on the front page of the Chicago Defender other than the fight story was a two column story describing a Senate 12-3 vote in favor of an "Anti-Lynching Bill."²⁰ Consider the importance of such a bill to the readers of the Chicago Defender and Louis' importance becomes more apparent.

¹⁶Atlanta Daily Worker, Vol. 14, No. 129, (October 8, 1949), 5.

¹⁷Negro Digest, May, 1943, 44.

¹⁸The Afro-American, June 29, 1946, 1.

¹⁹Chicago Defender, September 28, 1935, 1.

²⁰Chicago Defender, June 26, 1937, 1.

In 1948 the Afro-American ran a series of articles Louis wrote about himself.²¹ The first article appeared on the front page. A picture of him and Joe Louis, Jr. was used on the cover of a magazine section in the June 18, 1949 Afro-American to remind the readers not to forget Father's Day.²²

Joe Louis wrote once that he didn't think his people considered him the symbol of the Negro. As proof of this, he mentioned that some of his own people bet against him.²³ If he truly didn't consider himself a symbol of his people, there were many who evidently did. Detroit political leaders once made him a deputy sheriff to publicize seventeen other Negroes who had been named as deputies.²⁴ A leading Negro writer once guessed that a picture of Joe Louis was hanging in practically every Negro home in the United States.²⁵

Once it became evident that Louis was on his way to financial success, he decided to buy a home for his mother. When approached by him, she replied, "We don't want any great big house, away from the people we always lived with That's what I'm always going to keep you from doing, putting on airs."²⁶ He never did. The small

²¹The Afro-American, June 12, 1948, 1.

²²The Afro-American, June 18, 1949, Magazine Section, 1.

²³New York Times, June 14, 1936, Magazine Section, SC, JLF.

²⁴The Afro-American, January 9, 1937, 22.

²⁵Earl Brown, "Joe Louis," Life, Vol. 8, No. 25, (June 17, 1940), 50.

²⁶Daily Mirror, June, 1935, SC, JLF.

group of Negroes who had reservations about accepting him as a symbol of his people were almost entirely from the upperclass. The people from the Negro ghettos accepted him wholeheartedly. When he won, they won. When he lost, they lost.

When Louis reached his majority in May, 1935, Detroit celebrated. An estimated seventy-five hundred people were on hand to wish him a happy twenty-first birthday.²⁷ Throughout June, 1935 there was a virtual pilgrimage from Harlem to Pompton Lakes to watch him train.²⁸ When he fought Primo Carnera, special trains were run from the Negro sections of Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Indianapolis, Toledo, New Haven, Baltimore, and Philadelphia.²⁹

Unbelievable spontaneous celebrations broke out after his win over Primo Carnera. For promotional reasons, there was no radio broadcast of the fight. Charles Buchanan, manager of the Savoy Ballroom at 600 Lenox Avenue in Harlem, made arrangements to get the results by way of a phone call. He ran out on Lenox Avenue with news of the outcome. His announcement sparked a celebration which lasted until past sunup. The New York World Telegram estimated that twenty-five thousand could be seen doing the lindy hop and the shim-sham-shimmy in the streets of Harlem.³⁰ Subway riders learned that they could see the Yankee Stadium

²⁷Literary Digest, May 25, 1935, 37.

²⁸New York Sun, June 16, 1935, SC, JLF.

²⁹New York Sun, June 23, 1935, SC, JLF.

³⁰New York World Telegram, June 26, 1935, SC, JLF.

fight from the car. Somebody pulled the emergency cord and stopped the train. Later, officials publicly thanked Louis for making the fight short so that service wasn't disrupted.³¹

After the Louis-Max Baer fight, five hundred policemen watched helplessly as an estimated 150,000 Negroes danced, blew horns, pounded pots and pans, and shadow boxed in the streets. The Harlem residents and visitors had listened to the fight on loud speakers placed outside the stores and dance halls. Hundreds of slogans pinned to shirts were seen with the inscription "I told you so." Fifth Avenue buses had to halt. Traffic was stopped on Seventh Avenue from 130th Street to 150th Street. Harlem had bet a great deal of money on Louis and the crowd didn't even begin to thin out until about one o'clock.³²

Traffic was likewise tied up in the Negro sections of Baltimore and Chicago.³³ In Detroit the crowds beat tom-toms and paraded while fire engines and police cars hustled around with sirens blaring chasing false alarms.³⁴ In Baltimore four men were fined five to twenty-five dollars for "assault with tomatoes." A fifth man was released without fine because he said he bet on Baer.³⁵

³¹New York Sun, June 26, 1935, SC, JLF.

³²New York Times, September 25, 1935, 28.

³³New York Times, September 25, 1935, 28.

³⁴New York Times, September 26, 1935, 27.

³⁵New York Times, September 26, 1935, 27.

After the Jack Sharkey fight an estimated fifty thousand danced in Harlem. This time police closed traffic from 125th Street to 145th Street. Five Negroes were shot during the celebration, one of them fatally.³⁶

After the Louis-Braddock fight in which Louis won the heavyweight championship, New York Sun headlines read "Harlem Holds Maddest Revel."³⁷ No one bothered to estimate the numbers in Harlem that night. Chicago's South Side added new methods to their celebrating. They boarded elevated trains and taxicabs and rode around town without paying their fares. Accounts tell of crowds disconnecting trolley cars, boarding the cars, and then cheering wildly when the other crowds stopped the cars in the same manner.³⁸

Eventually the situation got to the point where anything less than a knockout by Louis was met with disdain. Crowds were described as comparably quiet after Louis' first defense of his championship against Tommy Farr.³⁹ Harlem crowds were described as "dejected."⁴⁰ The educated guess was that too many people had bet large sums of money that Louis would win by a knockout. It was difficult, both psychologically and financially, to celebrate when losses had to be absorbed

³⁶ New York World Telegram, August 19, 1936, SC, JLF.

³⁷ New York Sun, June 23, 1937, SC, JLF.

³⁸ New York Times, June 23, 1937, 30.

³⁹ The Afro-American, September 4, 1937, 17.

⁴⁰ New York Times, August 31, 1937, 15.

by people who were not in a position to do so easily. The fight was won on what turned out to be a highly disputed decision.

For every dejected soul after the Farr fight, there were many times more celebrants after Louis knocked out Max Schmelling in their return bout. That fight had everything to offer including the fact that Schmelling had given Louis the beating of his life when he knocked Louis out the first time they had fought. New York was said to be "Joe Louis Crazy." Every hotel in Harlem was booked solid. Barrooms had "Welcome Joe Louis Fans" signs out. Evidence of the masses of visitors lay in three signs seen that night. "Chicago Joe Louis Fans," "Detroit Headquarters," and "Southern Headquarters" directed transients to specific places for their revelry.⁴¹ Despite the fact that the police commissioner cut off all traffic on Seventh Avenue from 125th Street to 145th Street and policemen made little attempt to stop the celebrating, twenty policemen and ten civilians were injured.⁴²

In Chicago, firecrackers and pistol shots were heard, but miraculously, there were no serious injuries.⁴³ In Cleveland's Negro section one man was shot, two policemen had bricks hurled at them, street cars were stoned, and knives flashed. The crowds finally had to

⁴¹The Afro-American, June 25, 1938, 22.

⁴²New York Times, June 23, 1938, 14.

⁴³New York Times, June 23, 1938, 14.

be contained with tear gas. Old men and women did the "Big Apple" in the streets after the mob quieted down.⁴⁴

The celebrants with the most foresight were those of the "Paradise Valley" section of Detroit. They petitioned two weeks ahead of time to have the streets roped off. An estimated ten thousand danced on St. Antoine and Beacon Streets with no serious consequences.⁴⁵ This was the last of the really huge celebrations.

The crowds that had stormed Pompton Lakes to see Louis train for his previous fights were not in evidence when he trained for his title defense against John Henry Lewis. Some simply stated that the novelty had worn off. Some blamed it on the fact that Louis had gotten married and was no longer the object of every eligible girl in Harlem.⁴⁶ This may have been the answer to the smaller crowds at Pompton Lakes, but a more realistic reason for the relative calm in Harlem after the fight was that there was "no racial angle."⁴⁷ John Henry Lewis was a Negro. The Negroes who had been yelling "How do you like that, white man?"⁴⁸ from hotel windows after the Braddock fight had little to yell about. The first round knockout negates the

⁴⁴New York Times, June 23, 1938, 14.

⁴⁵New York Times, June 23, 1938, 14.

⁴⁶The Afro-American, January 14, 1939, 22.

⁴⁷The Afro-American, February 4, 1939, 21.

⁴⁸New York Sun, June 23, 1937, SC, JLF.

possibility that anyone betting on Louis could have lost money. The racial angle is an answer but certainly not the answer.

Afro-American headlines, "Joe's Victory Taken Calmly by Harlem Fans," after the Tony Galento fight tend to support the simplest theory: that the novelty had worn off. It would, except that the article under the above headline tells of wild celebrations, traffic jams, and mass nightclub jumping in an attempt to catch a glimpse of Louis who was rumored to be everywhere.⁴⁹

"Welcome Joe Louis Fans" signs were noticeably absent before the Arthur Godoy fight. The comparative apathy was again blamed on the absence of a white adversary. Godoy was Chilean and announced publicly that he considered himself a colored man.⁵⁰

On the other hand, the Joe Louis-Billy Conn title fight reproduced much of the carnival atmosphere that had been present in earlier Louis bouts. An estimated ten thousand fans cheered as Louis stood on a Harlem balcony and thanked the people for their support.⁵¹ The fight, which saw Louis come from behind and score a knockout, was refought verbally throughout the war. The return bout, which took five long years to become reality, had all the makings of a similar reaction. Call it a different era. Call it an entirely different set of circumstances. Call it what you will. Harlem tried hard to

⁴⁹The Afro-American, July 8, 1939, 21.

⁵⁰The Afro-American, February 10, 1940, 19.

⁵¹New York Times, September 30, 1941, SC, JLF.

duplicate the pre-war celebrations but somehow fell short. There was a victory parade through the streets⁵² and some hooting and hollering, but it was not the same as it had once been. Noticeably absent was the anti-white sentiment. An Afro-American reporter remarked that he did not see one Negro stop and taunt white drivers, an act which had been commonplace in pre-war celebrations.⁵³

An editorial remarked on the quiet conditions in Harlem after the first round knockout over Tami Mauriello in September, 1946. It blamed the "post war depression." The combination of tough financial conditions and the popular belief that Mauriello was not a worthy adversary held betting to a minimum.⁵⁴ As he continued his remarkable win streak, it became increasingly more difficult for Louis backers to find anybody willing to bet against him. The gamblers who had supported so many Harlem post-fight celebrations in the past were either running out of money or becoming believers.

When he knocked out Jersey Joe Walcott in their second fight and consequently removed the shadow that had hung over the decision of their first meeting, Louis announced his retirement. Harlem turned out to pay a final tribute to their hero. Seventh Avenue was completely filled with people from 124th Street to 125th Street.⁵⁵ Thousands of

⁵²P.M., June 6, 1946, SC, JLF.

⁵³The Afro-American, June 29, 1946, 18.

⁵⁴The Afro-American, September 28, 1946, 1.

⁵⁵The Afro-American, July 3, 1948, 8.

fans literally tore his car apart in front of the Theresa Hotel. Louis was forced to give a speech from the balcony in order to disperse the crowd.⁵⁶ It was a fitting tribute to "their" man. Had it ended there, the Joe Louis story might have replaced the Horatio Algiers episodes as the epitome in rags to riches tales. It is unfortunate that the story did not end there.

There was no secret that the Negro people considered Louis their champion. It is a tribute to him and him alone that his success never led to the bitterness and "white hope era" that accompanied the Jack Johnson era. Louis dignified the Negro.⁵⁷ The writer who had beseeched him to follow the teachings of his mother had little to complain about. His mother once said, "I want him to win . . . and I want to behave himself after he does win."⁵⁸ He did both.

If Louis was ever involved in shady dealings, it certainly wasn't publicized. Occasionally, boxing critics expressed the possibility that Louis could make a fortune by "selling out." Writer Sid Feder made the point that Louis had "plenty of money" and, consequently, couldn't be bought. He added that Louis had always been a "credit to his race" and always stood "for that which is clean and fair."⁵⁹

⁵⁶Time, Vol. 52, (July 5, 1948), 40.

⁵⁷Pittsburgh Courier, July 6, 1935, SC, JLF.

⁵⁸Daily Mirror, June 23, 1935, SC, JLF.

⁵⁹Atlanta Daily World, June 17, 1941, 5.

The hopes of many of his people were expressed in a letter Louis received before he won the title. A minister of a little southern church wrote:

. . . someday I feel you will be the champion . . . try always to be the champion of your people, so that when you are no longer the champion, the world will say of you--he was a black man outside, but a white man inside, most of all in his heart.⁶⁰

This, too, seems to have been a wish fulfilled.

⁶⁰Edward Van Every, Joe Louis, Man and Superfighter (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, Co., 1936), 74.

CHAPTER VII

INFLUENCE AND INFLUENCED

There's little question that the most influential men in Joe Louis' career were Julian Black, John Roxborough, and Jack Blackburn. None of the three had "lily-white" reputations; but somehow, they managed to stand "between Louis and the con men, shysters, crooks, and self-seekers."¹ Black and Roxborough both were college graduates. The two of them and Louis' personal secretary, Freddy Guinyard, who had attended college for two years, constantly corrected Louis' speech and worked to improve his general mannerisms. It was said that the three of them made it a point to monopolize his time for the first two years of his professional career.² They explained that their reason for limiting his public appearances was that too many appearances would "wear out his box office prestige."³ The arrangement turned out to be an extremely profitable one for everyone concerned. Some felt that in relation to the influence they had on Louis' early career, "too little was written about them."⁴

¹New York Amsterdam News, March 14, 1936, Schomberg Collection, Joe Louis Folder.

²Saturday Evening Post, Vol. 213, (May 10, 1941), 26.

³The Afro-American, January 14, 1939, 23.

⁴New York Amsterdam News, March 14, 1936, SC, JLF.

Blackburn died during the war. Up until that time he received ten percent of Louis' purses and Black and Roxborough received twenty percent each.⁵ From the standpoint of the pragmatist, this made the arrangement a mutually agreeable one. It was, however, much more than a mutually satisfying business arrangement.

John Roxborough had been a friend of the family for some time before he agreed to manage Louis.⁶ He had been an excellent athlete at Eastern High School in Detroit where he had teamed up with his brother to be a very successful one-two punch on their basketball team.⁷ If nothing else, this gave him a feeling for sport. He went on to graduate from the Detroit University Law School⁸ and became both a successful lawyer and an insurance executive.⁹ His true business sense and shrewd character came to light in the early years of Louis' climb. He once commented on why he felt Louis couldn't be managed by a white man by saying that Louis always demanded that his managers be friends with him. "A white man wouldn't have time for him," he said.¹⁰ His

⁵The Afro-American, January 14, 1939, 23.

⁶John Durant, Come Out Fighting (New York: Essential Books, 1946), 133.

⁷Joe Louis, My Life Story (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1947), 29.

⁸Ernest Victor Heyn, Twelve Sport Immortals (New York: Bartholomew House, 1949), 270.

⁹Neil Scott, Joe Louis (New York: Greenberg Publisher, 1947).

¹⁰The Afro-American, January 14, 1939, 23.

reasoning may have been poor in this instance, but he did not exaggerate the personal bond that existed between them. Louis always spoke of Roxborough with reverence and stuck with him when he was most in need of a friend.

If John Roxborough had a rival for the title of man most loved and respected by Louis, it could have been only Jack Blackburn. Blackburn managed Louis from the beginning with only a handshake sealing the agreement. Until the day he died, Blackburn and Louis referred to each other by the affectionate nickname "Chappie." Louis thought of his "Chappie" as a father¹¹ and Blackburn never tired of singing praises for Louis. He often lauded Louis' loyalty as well as his ability in the ring. He made particular reference to Louis' sticking with the same managers throughout his career.¹²

Blackburn had trouble with his health. There is a story that claims he was too sick to attend the second Louis-Schmelling fight. He asked to be excused because he was afraid he wasn't going to be able to make it up and down the stairs between rounds. He agreed to go only after Louis promised he would have to make the trip only once. The first round knockout made Louis a man of his word.¹³

Louis was in the Army only a short time when "Chappie" Blackburn died. He was given a special furlough and told by his commanding

¹¹Joe Louis, "My Story," Life, November 8, 1948, 127.

¹²The Afro-American, May 17, 1941, 20.

¹³New York World Telegram, June 14, 1939, SC, JLF.

officer to get away before the press had time to arrive. Louis spent the day by himself in a New York apartment.¹⁴ He recalls this as the saddest day of his life.¹⁵

The Reverend J. C. Austin said at the funeral:

Think not that Jack Blackburn has left the ring. Think not that he has deserted the man who was the best work of his genius, his mind, and his soul. He has not! He will be at the next fight, in the corner, leaning over his man's shoulder as usual and whispering in his ear. He has not gone and left his Chappie to carry on alone.¹⁶

Blackburn's success was marked in this eulogy. The real tribute lay in the fact that twenty-five thousand people were there to hear it given.¹⁷

On February 8, 1943 a daughter was born to Joe and Marva Louis.¹⁸ They named her Jacqueline after Jack Blackburn.¹⁹

The third member of the boxing triumverate was Julian Black. Personally, he never got quite as close to Louis as did Roxborough and Blackburn. He was described as suave, two-fisted, and keen on sports.²⁰

¹⁴Louis, 159.

¹⁵Joe Louis, "My Life Story," Negro Digest, January, 1947, 90.

¹⁶Louis, 161.

¹⁷Louis, 161.

¹⁸Louis, 166.

¹⁹Louis, Negro Digest, 93.

²⁰Neil Scott, Joe Louis (New York: Greenberg Publisher, 1947),

Though he may have had the least personal influence on Louis, he was an important part of the team which succeeded where many before them had failed. The plan of this team proved to be strong-willed and full of insight.

Their road, however, was not a smooth one. John Roxborough had to go to court to prove he had the legal right to manage Louis. Atler (Kid) Ellis, who had trained Louis as an amateur, claimed a right to a portion of his contract. Roxborough won the suit in April, 1935.²¹ Chicago promoters "cheated" Joe Louis out of a cut of fifteen hundred dollars paid for broadcasting privileges for his fight with Patsy Perroni. Esquire magazine claimed the Chicago stadium had been in the red ever since the Louis-Perroni fight because Louis' managers never allowed him to fight there again.²² The article was written in October, 1939. If the Louis managers proved to be ruthless, they had come by it honestly.

Life magazine once wrote that Louis' managers were not the type men one normally "associates with racial uplift."²³ All three men had impressive police records. Jack Blackburn had spent fourteen years behind bars for killing the man who had run off with his wife.²⁴ He was charged with murder again in 1935, found not guilty, and then retried

²¹Chicago Defender, April 20, 1935, 16.

²²Esquire, October, 1939, 104.

²³Life, Vol. 8, No. 25, (June 17, 1940), 50.

²⁴Frank Scully, "Young Black Joe," Esquire, Vol. IV, No. 4, (October, 1935), 34.

for manslaughter.²⁵ The crime involved an incident in which a man was shot and a child wounded.²⁶ He was again freed.

Two days before Louis fought Buddy Baer for the Navy Relief Fund, John Roxborough was convicted of dealing in policy slips. He was sent to the Michigan State Penitentiary²⁷ where he served time until after the war.²⁸ Black faced charges for dealing in the numbers rackets, too.²⁹ With records like these it is most remarkable that neither they nor Louis was ever accused of anything questionable concerning the fight game.

When their contract agreement ran out after the first Billy Conn fight in 1941, Louis fired Black. His statement to the press accused Black of being too busy to look after Louis' interests.³⁰ It hardly seems reasonable to assume that John Roxborough was of much use while he was serving his time in prison, but he was kept on. When Louis signed to fight Conn for the second time, he had no working managers.³¹ It was rumored that the real reason for the rift between Black and Louis was Black's refusal to make a \$25,000 loan to Louis

²⁵Chicago Defender, November 9, 1935, 1.

²⁶New York Sun, March 3, 1936, SC, JLF.

²⁷Margery Miller, Joe Louis, American (New York: Hill and Wang, 1951), 45.

²⁸The Afro-American, September 14, 1946, 23.

²⁹The Afro-American, January 24, 1942, 21.

³⁰The Afro-American, February 16, 1946, 23.

³¹The Afro-American, November 10, 1945, 18.

when Marva sued for divorce.³² When Roxborough got out on parole in 1946, he went back to work immediately.³³ Louis sold the rights for the position once held by Black to Marshall Myers for \$40,000.³⁴ His new trainer was Mannie Seamon.³⁵

Others to influence Louis both personally and professionally were Mike Jacobs, Billy Bottoms, Fred Guinyard, and Radford Morris. Louis credits Jacobs with playing a large part in his climb to the top. Louis wrote that Jacobs once turned down an offer from a promoter who insisted that because Louis was colored he would have to settle for a smaller cut of the purse and throw a few fights.³⁶ He also wrote that Jacobs, on his own, once hired policemen to keep pickpockets from working while Louis was fighting. Jacobs became aware of the lifters' plan when they made offers to him for the rights to be the sole pickpockets at the fight.³⁷ Louis referred to Jacobs as Uncle Mike. In December, 1946 Jacobs had a heart attack and assumed a less active part in the promotion of Louis' fights.³⁸

³²Durant, 4.

³³The Afro-American, September 14, 1946, 23.

³⁴Tim Cohane, "Joe Louis Is Going to Lose His Title," Look, Vol. 13, No. 1, (January 4, 1949), 30.

³⁵Sportfolio, Vol. 2, No. 1, (July, 1947), 64.

³⁶Louis, Life, 142.

³⁷Louis, 146.

³⁸Barney Nagler, James Morris and the Decline of Boxing (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1964), 4.

Fred Guinyard, personal secretary to Louis, and Radford Morris, secretary to Black and Roxborough, spent some time tutoring Louis.³⁹ His chef and dietitian, Billy Bottoms, was a close friend. He made statements like, "Joe gets strength from celery."⁴⁰ Louis' diet was based at least partially on superstition. According to Bottoms, his one meal on the day of a fight consisted of blackeyed peas cooked with ham hocks because it brought him good luck.⁴¹ It would seem that Louis was successful despite his diet rather than because of it.

The effect Louis had on others connected with boxing tells a story in itself. Sometimes the effect was obvious. Joe Bostic, Negro sports columnist for the New York Amsterdam News, wrote, " . . . of all the people of my own race that I know, he's the one man I'd want my own son to emulate."⁴²

Joe Gould, Jim Braddock's manager, commented after his fighter had lost the championship to Louis, "Joe has done more to bring boxing back than anyone in the game today. He deserves to be champion."⁴³

The following letter is only one example of many. It was sent to Louis before his fight with Primo Carnera.

³⁹Current History, Vol. 51, (March, 1940), 49.

⁴⁰Chicago Defender, January 4, 1936, 13.

⁴¹Atlanta Daily Worker, October 6, 1941, 5.

⁴²Jack Medford, "Joe Louis," Sportfolio, Vol. 2, No. 1, (July, 1947), 72.

⁴³Heyn, 276.

Dear Joe,

I presume that like all young fellows you will cast this letter aside without giving it a moment's thought. However, that isn't going to keep me from writing it.

Let me introduce myself. My name is Jack Weske and for five years I was manager of that grand little fighter, Johnny Coulon, bantamweight champion of the world. In all, I was connected with boxing for seventeen years but finally severed my connection with the game because of the sickening crooked tactics of the outstanding managers in the business.

Today, through your gentlemanly conduct, you are as highly regarded by the whites as you are by members of your own race, possibly more so. That in itself is remarkable. You can by your fine boxing, your ability, and your good behavior continue to be the good will ambassador of the Negro race to the rest of the world. This will do more to help your race and make it respected than anything I know of.

Someday you may be champion of the world. There have been Negro champions whose conduct reflected nothing but discredit on their race. What a wonderful opportunity you have!

Be true to your own people and to yourself.

Yours truly,

Jack Weske⁴⁴

Paul Gallico, in an article entitled, "Citizen Barrow," wrote something that might serve to evaluate how well Louis took advantage of the opportunity Weske described. "Years ago I wrote that Joe Louis was 'mean'. . . . Somewhere on his long, hard climb Joe found his soul."⁴⁵

⁴⁴Quinton Reynolds, "Dark Dynamite," Colliers, Vol. 95, (June 22, 1935), 16.

⁴⁵Paul Gallico, "Citizen Barrow," Readers Digest, Vol. 40, (June, 1942), 21.

Reporters are not known for their manners. For some unexplained reason, Louis had a tranquilizing effect on them. One source said that he held them in awe. They asked questions almost "apologetically."⁴⁶

When he was a child, Louis' ring idols were Sam Langford, Joe Gans, and Jack Johnson.⁴⁷ Ironically enough, Johnson criticized Louis more than any other man in the fighting profession. Part of his bitterness may have been because Louis was stealing some of the attention Johnson had been receiving from the Negro community. He had long been considered the most successful Negro boxer in history and he was not ready to admit to a secondary position. He carried his arrogance to extremes. After Louis won the title, Johnson claimed that with a three month training he could "whip him." At the time he made the challenge Johnson was working as a sideshow attraction at Coney Island.⁴⁸

Actually, Johnson's resentment had deeper roots than were immediately visible. He may have hated Jack Blackburn's success more than Louis'. Jack Blackburn was a highly successful boxer in one of the lighter weight classes when Johnson was in his prime. "Little Jack" supposedly bloodied "Big Jack's" nose in a sparring match.⁴⁹ Their feud was given more fuel when Blackburn was chosen over Johnson to manage Louis. Johnson had made his bid early but was turned down

⁴⁶W. C. Heintz, "I Remember Joe," The Ring, Vol. XXIV, No. 11, (December, 1950), 24.

⁴⁷Literary Digest, May 4, 1935, 35.

⁴⁸Newsweek, July 3, 1937, 22, SC, JLF.

⁴⁹Chicago Defender, January 11, 1936, 13.

"in no uncertain terms" by Roxborough and Elack.⁵⁰ Blackburn took advantage of every opportunity to assure interested reporters that there was absolutely no doubt that Louis could have beaten Johnson when Johnson was in his prime.⁵¹

Jack Johnson took great pleasure in predicting that Louis would lose. He made the prediction before the Primo Carnera fight.⁵² The following post-fight excerpt appeared in the San Antonio Evening News. " . . . among the 60,000 who witnessed the carnage, was a man whose very words were being stuffed down his throat by Louis."⁵³ The reference, of course, was to Johnson. This was, in essence, the way the press usually reacted to Johnson's predictions. They were once referred to as "Sepia Sour Grapes."⁵⁴ Johnson once said that he had no intention of knocking Louis but rather, just point out his weaknesses.⁵⁵ He broadened his helpful hints to say "Louis stinks" after he was defeated by Schmelling in their first fight.⁵⁶

Joining Johnson in his predictions was Harry Wills, the man many people still believe could have taken the heavyweight title from

⁵⁰New York Daily News, May 22, 1936, SC, JLF.

⁵¹Washington Tribune, May 11, 1935, SC, JLF.

⁵²Daily Mirror, June 27, 1935, SC, JLF.

⁵³San Antonio Evening News, July, 1935, SC, JLF.

⁵⁴New York Daily News, May 22, 1936, SC, JLF.

⁵⁵Washington Tribune, May 11, 1935, SC, JLF.

⁵⁶New York Daily News, May 29, 1936, SC, JLF.

Dempsey if he had been given the chance. In an interview in which he stated that "Jack Johnson was the best 'at ever lived," Wills joined Johnson in offering his services as a trainer.⁵⁷ He predicted that under his tutelage Louis would beat Schmelling in two rounds. Under Blackburn he won in one.

Two other boxers who played important roles in Louis' early life were Thurston McKinney and Holman Williams. McKinney, one time amateur lightweight champion of Michigan, was the man who talked Louis into trading his violin for a pair of boxing gloves.⁵⁸ Williams, sometimes referred to as "Joe's best friend," sparred with Louis hundreds of times in his backyard. Louis often refereed fights after he became successful. He was scheduled to officiate a bout in which Williams was one of the combatants. He refused on the grounds that Williams' mother's cookies had been so good they might influence his decisions.⁵⁹ Williams, when interviewed, always said that Louis was the greatest. When Louis was practicing in Brewster's Gymnasium, there was a youngster who would carry his bags. He eventually turned from bag carrying to bag punching. His name was Sugar Ray Robinson.⁶⁰

⁵⁷Chicago Defender, August 1, 1936, SC, JLF.

⁵⁸Heyn, 268.

⁵⁹Heyn, 267.

⁶⁰Louis, 26.

Westbrook Pegler, sportswriter for the New York World Telegram, wrote that Joe Louis was "the most admirable athlete."⁶¹ Pegler has to be classified as a convert inasmuch as he was one of the writers outwardly against the Louis-Carnera fight on the grounds that it would cause a race riot. In the same article he claimed that Louis "never withheld honor from an opponent." Relating to this statement, it can be noted that Louis' victims gained prestige after fighting him regardless of the onesidedness of the bout.⁶² They achieved international publicity simply because all of Louis' fights warranted extensive press coverage.

Before several of his fights stories would reach the papers concerning personal differences between the champion and his adversaries. With rare exception the fighters usually spoke of mutual respect for one another after the bout. One of his earliest fights as a professional was with Max Baer. Baer and he traded words before the fight concerning some disparaging remarks Baer supposedly made about Marva Trotter.⁶³ Baer was interviewed at the airport after the fight and wished Louis good luck.⁶⁴ Perhaps even more complimentary to Louis' ability was Baer's answer to a reporter's question concerning his

⁶¹New York World Telegram, n.d., SC, JLF.

⁶²Daily Mirror, January 7, 1942, SC, JLF.

⁶³Heyn, 273.

⁶⁴New York Times, September 27, 1935, 27.

ability to get up after the last knock down. He answered, "Sure I could have gotten up the last time. Twenty bucks entitles these people to see a fight. It don't entitle them to see a murder."⁶⁵

One of the few fighters to refuse to return Louis' post-fight compliments was Tony Galento. Galento's personality spoke for itself. Louis would probably have made more money if he had been paid a dollar for each time Galento called him a bum rather than accept the purse. He once told a Charlotte, North Carolina newspaper man, "I'll knock that N----R [sic] out."⁶⁶ It also reported that Louis planned to carry Galento for ten rounds in order to punish him;⁶⁷ but even if this had been his intention, it doesn't seem likely that he would have made such a statement to the press. After the fight, Galento reaffirmed his statement that the champ was "overrated" and demanded a rematch.⁶⁸

Buddy Baer made the same type of tactless pre-fight remarks his brother Max had made and was equally willing to eat his words after his fight with Louis. The decision of the fight was disputed on the grounds that Louis had hit Baer after the bell. While the dispute was still being argued, Baer was quoted as saying that Louis was the

⁶⁵Heyn, 273.

⁶⁶The Afro-American, March 18, 1939, 23.

⁶⁷The Afro-American, July 8, 1939, 21.

⁶⁸New York Times, June 29, 1939, SC, JLF.

greatest he had ever seen and that even if he had not been hit after the bell, he could not have lasted more than one or two rounds more.⁶⁹

Exactly how much of the pre-fight nonsense is serious and how much is promotional cannot be determined. Billy Conn called Louis "dumb"⁷⁰ and once said Louis could not hit him "in the britches with a bull fiddle."⁷¹ Louis in turn became angry at Conn for calling him dumb, and predicted a first round knockout.⁷² At the weigh-in Conn snubbed him by turning his back and leaving as soon as Louis entered the room.⁷³ They did, however, become fast friends while in the service. One war time conversation which was reprinted several times went like this: Conn said, "Joe, I wish I could have that title for a couple years." Louis replied, "Billy, I reckon you had it for twelve rounds and you didn't exactly know what to do with it."⁷⁴ Immediately after the fight, Conn stated that Louis was a man first and a champ second.⁷⁵ World War II intervened between the first and second fights between Louis and Conn. Neither man could be coerced into making

⁶⁹New York World Telegram, May 27, 1941, SC, JLF.

⁷⁰Atlanta Daily World, June 17, 1941, 5.

⁷¹Atlanta Daily World, June 16, 1941, 5.

⁷²Atlanta Daily World, 5.

⁷³Atlanta Daily World, June 19, 1941, 5.

⁷⁴Jack Sher, "Brown Bomber," Sport, Vol. 1, No. 1, (1949), 60.

⁷⁵Arthur Daley, Sports of the Times (New York: Dalton Publishers, 1959), 130.

derogatory statements about his opponent. Reporters tired of hearing Conn praise Louis.⁷⁶ Years later, Conn took offense at a Look article which said he had cursed Louis during one of their fights. He said he had "cursed many a foe but never Louis."⁷⁷ Sportswriter Jimmy Cannon wrote an article entitled, "What the Army Did to Louis and Conn." He commented on the changes that were just mentioned; but more importantly, he categorically stated that Louis was the "only true sportsman" he had ever "met in the professional boxing trade."⁷⁸

As Louis' career progressed, Jack Johnson became a name rarely mentioned. The man to whom Louis was and still is compared to more than any other is Jack Dempsey. A number of fighters were polled in 1939 by Look magazine to see who they felt was the best ever. Dempsey and Louis received their fair share of the votes; but more important, was the fact that Louis picked Dempsey. The one fighter who chose himself was, of course, Tony Galento.⁷⁹ When the two were compared as sportsmen, Louis was usually chosen. Dempsey used to hit his opponent as soon as the man would rise. In his famous fight with Gene Tunney, Tunney was given a long count because Dempsey refused to go to a neutral

⁷⁶Sportfolio, Vol. 1, No. 1, (June, 1946), 39.

⁷⁷Jimmy Cannon, "Joe, Nice Guy," New York Post, December 26, 1957, SC, JLF.

⁷⁸Jimmy Cannon, "What the Army Did to Louis and Conn," Negro Digest, June, 1946, 53.

⁷⁹Look, Vol. 3, No. 25, (December 5, 1939), 27.

corner. Another comparison that Dempsey countered during World War II was that he had been a draft dodger during the First World War.⁸⁰

Dempsey's own thoughts on Louis were sometimes difficult to decipher. In September, 1935 he told a New York Times reporter that Louis was both a great boxer and a credit to his race.⁸¹ Later in the same year, however, he publicly stated that he was seeking a white hope to stop Louis.⁸² Eventually his two faces became one and he joined the number of ex-boxers in complimenting Louis. In 1936 he said, "Louis is a rare person. He talks little, brags less, and attends to his own affairs." To this he added, " . . . he would be a credit to the profession as a champion."⁸³ By 1941 he made claims to being the "number one Joe Louis fan."⁸⁴

In 1942 Gene Tunney said that Louis was "the greatest ever."⁸⁵ By 1950 he had watered it down a little by saying, "If Dempsey wasn't the greatest, Louis was."⁸⁶ Either way, Louis fared quite well.

When Detroit honored Louis at their City Hall, Rocky Marciano let his feelings be known. He said that beating Louis had been the

⁸⁰The Afro-American, February 4, 1950, 17.

⁸¹New York Times, September 25, 1935, 28.

⁸²Literary Digest, December 21, 1935, SC, JLF.

⁸³Chicago Defender, February 1, 1936, SC, JLF.

⁸⁴The Afro-American, March 15, 1941, 19.

⁸⁵The Afro-American, January 31, 1942, 22.

⁸⁶Colliers, January 14, 1950, 54.

saddest honor of his life because Louis had always been his hero.⁸⁷

In an open letter to Marciano after Marciano had won the championship, Louis advised him to keep the championship clean and retire undefeated.⁸⁸ Marciano did just that.

Louis' love for baseball brought about friendships with several professional players. He loved to talk baseball and did well on quiz shows when questioned on the subject. One of his lasting friendships was with Joe Di Maggio. Di Maggio once complained after a visit to Louis' training camp in Pompton Lakes that he was never given the opportunity to discuss boxing. It seems Louis dominated every conversation they had with baseball talk.⁸⁹ Di Maggio got his wish some twelve years later in 1949 when Louis was a guest on his CBS radio show. When queried on his thoughts about boxing, Louis was quick to point out that fighting can be a good sport, but only "if you're in the ring."⁹⁰ Another newspaper story told of an incident which supposedly occurred when Babe Ruth was visiting the Louis camp. Ruth was watching Louis spar with Tiger Hauston. Louis turned to the Babe and promised to "hit one" for him. Hauston hit the canvas a few minutes later.⁹¹

⁸⁷New York Times, November 6, 1957, SC, JLF.

⁸⁸Pageant, October, 1953, SC, JLF.

⁸⁹New York Times, August 17, 1937, 13.

⁹⁰The Afro-American, September 24, 1949, 15.

⁹¹New York Times, August 25, 1937, 15.

When he fought Jack Roper in Los Angeles, the audience included: Tyrone Power, Cary Grant, Virginia Bruce, Gracie Allen, Douglas Fairbanks, George Raft, Clarence Mace, and Herb Jeffries.⁹² Before his second fight with Billy Conn, his camp visitors included Billy Eckstein, Mariann Anderson, and Paul Robeson.⁹³ Gracie Allen asked him before the fight to hold off until she got there. It seems she had a nine o'clock show and was afraid she'd be late.⁹⁴ Tallulah Bankhead once placed him second only to President Roosevelt on her list of the "greatest men in the United States."⁹⁵ She spoke of several incidents wherein he had shown sportsmanship.

In Neil Scott's book, Joe Louis, Frank Sinatra wrote in the Forward: "It is difficult to find a name which better epitomizes sportsmanship. . . . the case history of Joe Louis should be used to show the world our national character and the ideals that motivate us."⁹⁶ He finished the Forward by paraphrasing Jimmy Cannon's statement, "Joe Louis is a living tribute to the democratic ideal."

⁹²Louis, 116-117.

⁹³Louis, 176.

⁹⁴Louis, 176.

⁹⁵The Afro-American, February 28, 1942, 21.

⁹⁶Neil Scott, Joe Louis (New York: Greenberg Publisher, 1947), Forward.

Louis' golfing brought him into contact with other celebrities. He once played and beat Bob Hope but found Bing Crosby capable of shooting "too many birdies."⁹⁷

At the annual convention of the National Education Association, Dr. Frank Cody, superintendent of the Detroit Public Schools, praised Louis' modesty and described him as clean-cut.⁹⁸

No less than six governors were present when Louis fought Max Baer in 1935.⁹⁹ Governor Murphy of Michigan was the first one allowed into the dressing room after the second Louis-Schmelling fight. The Governor described to Louis his emotion during the fight, stating that his heart never thumped so hard. Louis replied that he was glad to have made the fight so short.¹⁰⁰

In addition to the patronage Louis received from politicians, there were many occasions during which, for one reason or another, he was the subject of a laudatory speech. James J. Walker, Mayor of New York City, once declared that he would like to see his son emulate Louis.¹⁰¹ Michigan Senator Prentiss M. Brown, on the floor of the Senate, spoke of Louis' magnanimous effort in his fight for the Navy Relief Fund. He declared, "Joe Louis is a citizen of whom Michigan

⁹⁷Louis, 110.

⁹⁸New York World Telegram, June 28, 1938, SC, JLF.

⁹⁹New York Times, September 25, 1935, 1.

¹⁰⁰New York Times, July 23, 1938, 14.

¹⁰¹The Afro-American, May 30, 1942, 23.

and the nation are proud."¹⁰² The Attorney General of New York, John J. Bennett, speaking at a testimonial dinner said, "Joe Louis represents everything that is clean, decent, fine, courageous, and brave in American manhood."¹⁰³ Wendall Willkie never tired of praising Louis. At a Freedom House Dinner he lauded Louis' effort on behalf of the Navy charity pointing out that Louis did so despite the fact that Negroes were given only menial jobs in the Navy.¹⁰⁴

When he flew in for the Primo Carnera fight, Louis acted as an envoy, carrying a letter from Mayor Kelly of Chicago to New York's Mayor La Guardia.¹⁰⁵ Its purpose was evidently only for public relations. In addition to carrying letters, Louis received many from prominent political figures. Early in Louis' career Governor Frank D. Fitzgerald of Michigan wrote him a letter in which he wrote of times in the past when the Negro people had been misrepresented. He continued, " . . . you may soon have on your strong hands the job of representative-at-large of your people. Do that job well, Joe. Michigan will be proud of you."¹⁰⁶

His most important fan from the political standpoint was President Roosevelt. Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt also admired him. She

¹⁰²The Afro-American, January 17, 1942, 23.

¹⁰³The Afro-American, May 30, 1942, 23.

¹⁰⁴Margery Miller, Joe Louis, American (Hill and Wang, 1951), 164.

¹⁰⁵Louis, 54.

¹⁰⁶Daily Mirror, n.d., SC, JLF.

bought tickets for the Primo Carnera fight but explained that they were for someone else. She said she never went to fights.¹⁰⁷ Louis met President Roosevelt in 1935 after requesting an autographed picture of him.¹⁰⁸ This meeting received some publicity, but it could not compare with the stories that made print after their second meeting. They met for the second time shortly before the second Schmelling fight. An obvious discrepancy serves to indicate that maybe the actual conversation will never be known. In the book version of My Life Story, printed by Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, Inc., the President told Louis, "Joe, you know America is never supposed to lose." To this Louis answered, " . . . I'll take care of that this time."¹⁰⁹ In the 1948 Life magazine article, "My Story," Louis wrote that the President said only, "Joe, we need muscles like yours to beat Germany."¹¹⁰ Louis admitted that much was made of the meeting but that this was all that was really said. The latter version seems more reasonable, but both are important to this study.

The reasons for the relationships Louis had with all of these people are not as important to this study as the fact that the relationships existed. The motives, especially of those in politics and

¹⁰⁷New York Times, June 24, 1935, 22.

¹⁰⁸New York Times, August 28, 1935, 23.

¹⁰⁹The Afro-American, March 29, 1947, 12.

¹¹⁰Joe Louis, "My Story," Life, November 15, 1948, 133.

show business, for seeking his friendship could have been interpreted in many ways. The fact is, both parties invariably gained from the relationships.

CHAPTER VIII

AWAY FROM HOME

It is an accomplishment to be popular on a local scale. If confined to such an area, at least limits can be set on the degree to which one can influence those to whom he is known. Joe Louis became known well beyond the borders of his home town. If his stepfather had had even the remotest concept of the success Joe Louis was going to achieve, he would never have tried to talk Louis out of boxing.¹ It turned out to be an argument he was ever grateful for losing.

Up until his fight with Primo Carnera, Louis was scarcely mentioned outside of Chicago and Detroit, the only two cities he had fought in as a professional. Six months before the Carnera fight he was the subject of a feature article in a New York newspaper. It was the first such article to appear in the New York area.² It was three months later before he was promoted as a national contender.³

Harry Balough, Yankee Stadium announcer, gave a moving introduction. It served as an indication of things to come. He bellowed out:

¹Joe Louis, My Life Story (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1947), 12.

²Edward Van Every, Joe Louis, Man and Superfighter (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1936), 10.

³Van Every, 10.

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Ladies and Gentlemen, . . . we are Americans. That means we have come from many different faiths and from homes of many different nationalities. In America, we admire the athlete who can win by virtue of his skill. Let me then ask you to join me in the sincere wish that regardless of race, color, or creed, the better man may emerge victorious. Thank you.⁴

In retrospect, Balough's speech serves to highlight the positive side of the changing times. The very fact that such a speech would seem unnecessary today indicates that further changes have come to pass.

Once he had made the grade in New York, Louis' name seemed to appear everywhere. Southern Negroes started debate over which state he had come from.⁵ His kin were joined by both colored and white in Lafayette, Alabama to praise him.⁶ The night he won the title they traveled four miles to Powder Town, Alabama to celebrate the victory.⁷

He fought Buddy Baer in Washington, D. C. It was the closest to the South he had fought up to that time. Louis was cognizant of the fact and promised he would try especially hard because he didn't want to disappoint "his people."⁸ As it turned out, eighty percent of the spectators were Negro.⁹ They were not disappointed.

⁴Louis, 188.

⁵Daily Mirror, July 2, 1935, Schomberg Collection, Joe Louis Folder.

⁶The Afro-American, April 25, 1936, SC, JLF.

⁷New York Sun, June 23, 1937, SC, JLF.

⁸New York Post, May 23, 1941, SC, JLF.

⁹Daily Worker, May 24, 1941, SC, JLF.

The Louisiana Weekly wrote in July, 1935 of an impending "new era." The article stated that the Negro people had long persevered because of Jack Johnson. The "new era" was possible because Louis was a good man and was worthy of their pride.¹⁰ Louis stopped in New Orleans on a boxing tour he made the following year.¹¹

By April, 1935 his name had appeared in at least three different papers in Texas, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, and Georgia.¹² He became increasingly better known in the South as he did elsewhere during the course of his career. In 1946 seven hundred fans paid tribute to him at a testimonial sponsored by the Southern Conference for Human Welfare.¹³

In June, 1949 he dedicated the "Joe Louis Gymnasium" at Morris Brown College in Atlanta, Georgia. At the dedication, the Reverend Bishop R. R. Wright of the African Methodist Episcopal Church presented Louis with a plaque for promoting harmonious race relations. The inscription read, " . . . for his outstanding work as an American."¹⁴

In 1950 he "made history" twice by fighting a white policeman in Griffin, Georgia and fighting in the Gator Bowl in Jacksonville,

¹⁰Louisiana Weekly, July 6, 1935, SC, JLF.

¹¹The Afro-American, November 14, 1936, 1.

¹²Earl Brown, "Joe Louis," Life, Vol. 8, No. 25, (June 17, 1940), 49.

¹³P.M., December 16, 1946, SC, JLF.

¹⁴The Afro-American, June 18, 1949, 5.

Florida. Three thousand fans of both races saw the fight in Georgia. On the same tour he fought Sid Peaks in Louisville, Kentucky.¹⁵ It was not the first time he had made an exhibition tour of the South. In 1948 he fought in Atlanta, Memphis, and New Orleans.¹⁶ In 1937 he had made a quick tour through Texas and Oklahoma.¹⁷

After his fight with Max Baer, the celebration lasted until dawn in Memphis, Tennessee. The New York Post claimed Louis had "driven the blues from Beale Street."¹⁸ Perhaps it should have said, "he has driven the blues from the South," at least momentarily.

The Louis image was carried into other countries by the G.I.'s stationed overseas. He made several international tours during the war. Jackie Wilson, George Nicholson, Jimmie Eagan, and Sugar Ray Robinson were part of one such exhibition tour which covered 100,000 miles. It covered camps in Italy, Canada, Alaska, England, and the Aleutians.¹⁹ The exhibitions usually consisted of some boxing and some repartee between Louis and one of the other members of the tour. He

¹⁵The Afro-American, March 18, 1950, 17.

¹⁶The Afro-American, November 6, 1948, 1.

¹⁷Chicago Defender, March 6, 1937, 15.

¹⁸New York Post, September 25, 1935, SC, JLF.

¹⁹Neil Scott, Joe Louis (New York: Greenberg Publisher, 1947), pages not numbered.

and Ray Robinson usually needled each other about Louis' first fight with Schmelling and Robinson's fight with Jake La Motta.²⁰

Three of his pre-war fights drew international attention of a different nature. Although he fought several fighters from other countries, for many reasons the two Schmelling fights and his fight with Primo Carnera were the only three which had political and ethnic overtones.

There was some concern in the Negro community before the Carnera fight because of the reporting practices of many of the leading newspapers. At the time, Carnera had a strong Italian accent in his speech. The Negro complaint was based on the press' practice of correcting Carnera's English when he was quoted, and yet, printing all comments by Louis with a Negro dialect.²¹ They asked for an "either-or" change. This, of course, was not a basis for international concern.

The Carnera-Louis fight took place during the Ethiopian-Italian trouble. The Chicago Defender actually printed a cartoon comparing Louis and Carnera to Ethiopia and Italy.²² The same paper then turned around and blamed any would-be race riot on Westbrook Pegler, a reporter who had written a forewarning of the possibility.²³ The New York Amsterdam News joined the Defender in attacking the Hearst papers.

²⁰Louis, 167.

²¹New York Age, June 29, 1935, SC, JLF.

²²Chicago Defender, n.d., 16, SC, JLF.

²³Chicago Defender, May 25, 1935, SC, JLF.

They were particularly irate about the Hearst writers, Pegler and Arthur Brisbane, claiming that the two should "both shut up before they start something."²⁴ The Pegler article to which the complaints referred appeared in the New York World Telegram.²⁵ Pegler wrote, "staging an Italian-Negro prize fight at the very door of Embittered Harlem is called the new High in Stupid Judgment." He claimed that whether Louis liked it or not, he was the idol of a "band of Negro racketeers in New York, Detroit, and Chicago." He wrote that each of these areas had already arranged expeditions and the ulterior motive of these groups was to get even for Ethiopia.

Jack Johnson's name was brought up in Arthur Brisbane's column. The Negro press categorically accused Brisbane of bringing Johnson up only to cause trouble and only because he, Brisbane, was anti-Negro. The Negro press compared Brisbane with Dan Parker, Murray Lewin, Hype Igoe, and Bill Corum, who they claimed were all fair writers.²⁶

Walter White, secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, wrote an article in rebuff of Pegler's a week later.²⁷ He called Pegler's article "nonsense." Dan Parker of the Daily Mirror joined White in his evaluation of Pegler's article calling it "preposterous." Parker stated that racial trouble because

²⁴New York Amsterdam News, June 15, 1935, SC, JLF.

²⁵New York World Telegram, May 17, 1935, SC, JLF.

²⁶New York Age, July 6, 1935, SC, JLF.

²⁷New York World Telegram, May 24, 1935, SC, JLF.

of the Abyssinian Affair was out of the question because (1) the colored fans were always peaceful, and (2) many of the Italians he knew were betting on Louis.²⁸

As it turned out, there were between 15,000 and 20,000 Negro fans at the fight and there was no trouble. The New York Age was quick to point out that there had never been a riot between Negroes and foreign born.²⁹ The Amsterdam News made its retort a little more personal. One of its headlines read, "Tch! Tch! Mr. Pegler." Louis Sabol of the New York Evening Journal summed up the whole affair in one paragraph.

The dead-panned dusky David from Detroit dealt the gawky Goliath four deadly wallops to his kolossal Kisser in the 6th of a series of sulky stanzas, and 1,500 gendarmes immediately rushed to the center of the ring and looked foolish because all the widely-ballyhooed anticipated trouble just wasn't³⁰

Some people refused to let it go at that. The Defender underscored a photograph of Carnera with the title, "Italy Goes Down."³¹ Professor Rayford W. Logan of Atlanta University wrote remorsefully that he felt Mussolini would use Louis' victory over Carnera to further move on Ethiopia and annihilate Abyssinnia.³² It is doubtful

²⁸Daily Mirror, June 23, 1935, SC, JLF.

²⁹New York Age, July 6, 1935, SC, JLF.

³⁰New York Evening Journal, June 27, 1935, SC, JLF.

³¹Chicago Defender, July 6, 1935, 13.

³²New York Times, June 27, 1935, 8.

that the fight had much to do with Mussolini's decision, but it is evidence of just how much some intellectuals felt the international situation was affected by the outcome.

The Max Schmelling-Joe Louis boxing matches probably received more international publicity than any other fight in history. Louis was known in Germany long before he ever fought Schmelling. In April, 1935 John Roxborough received a request for a picture of Louis from a German newspaper.³³ They later received the same request from a Nazi boys' club who said they wanted to hang his picture in their clubhouse.³⁴

The first fight between the two men received some early notoriety when several diversified special interest groups proclaimed a boycott of the fight. The Reich Sports Journal asked that its readers boycott the fight because Louis was colored. They also espoused the belief that the whole professional sports program was faulty because it was not under political auspices in the United States.³⁵ The Anti-Nazi League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People asked their backers not to attend because Schmelling was a practicing Nazi.³⁶ If Louis had won, as he was expected to, the whole situation would probably not have gotten out of hand; but Louis

³³Chicago Defender, April 13, 1935, 17.

³⁴Louis, 17.

³⁵New York Times, April 8, 1936, 18.

³⁶The Afro-American, February 27, 1937, 22.

didn't win. In fact, he received the worst beating of his life. Schmelling hurt Louis early and continued to control the fight until he knocked him out in the twelfth. After the fight he gave the photographers a "Heil Hitler."³⁷ He received congratulatory cables from Hitler, Goering, and Goebbels.³⁸ A translation soon appeared in several sources expressing the belief that the fight resulted in "a cultural victory." The article, from a magazine called Der Weltkampf, claimed that Louis had fought dirty and still lost. They described it as a victory for Schmelling, the white race, Europeans, and white America.³⁹

For Louis' part, it was simple. He told his mother, "The man just whupped me." When he was asked if he wanted to see the movies, he replied, "No, I saw the fight."⁴⁰ His followers didn't take it quite so stoically. The New York World Telegram estimated that Harlem businessmen lost \$500,000 in business because Louis lost. Long lines appeared outside Manning's Pawn Shop at 366 Lenox Avenue.⁴¹ Harlem had to go deep in debt to pay off bets they had made.

³⁷Scott, 3.

³⁸Scott, 3.

³⁹The Crisis, October, 1936, 301; see also: Chicago Defender, October 3, 1936, SC, JLF.

⁴⁰John Durant, The Heavyweight Champions (New York: Hastings House, 1960), 137.

⁴¹New York World Telegram, June 20, 1936, SC, JLF.

Buses from Yankee Stadium were stoned. Windows were broken. One man was shot.⁴² Thirty Negroes reportedly kicked a fifty year old white man into unconsciousness, hospitalizing him.⁴³ The ill feelings were not allowed to die.

Rumors started that Louis had been doped before the fight.⁴⁴ Louis, Black, and Roxborough filed suit for \$100,000 apiece, claiming damages against Sheridan A. Bruseaux for making the claim publicly.⁴⁵ Louis also filed a \$1,500,000 suit against Schmelling and Paul Gallico, a writer, for claiming that Louis fouled Schmelling on orders from his corner.⁴⁶ It was guessed that the ulterior motive behind the suit was to keep Schmelling out of the country so that Louis could gain a fight for the championship.⁴⁷

As things worked out, Louis did fight and win the championship from Jim Braddock before fighting Schmelling again. The International Boxing Union, which governed European boxing, immediately named Schmelling Heavyweight Champion of the World.⁴⁸ According to a

⁴²New York Times, June 21, 1936, SC, JLF.

⁴³New York Times, June 20, 1936, 34.

⁴⁴New York World Telegram, July 17, 1936, SC, JLF.

⁴⁵Chicago Defender, June 5, 1937, 1.

⁴⁶New York World Telegram, September 17, 1936, SC, JLF.

⁴⁷New York World Telegram, SC, JLF.

⁴⁸Newsweek, July 3, 1937, 23.

Kingston, Jamaica newspaper, the National Boxing Association served Louis an ultimatum shortly after he became champion. They demanded that he agree to fight Schmelling or doff his crown in thirty days.⁴⁹ The fight was arranged.

In one interview Louis is quoted as saying, "I'm backing up America against Germany so you know I'm going to town."⁵⁰ Writers wrote freely of the fight being staged between the American and Nazi way of life. By the time the date arrived, the press had people in a frenzy. Twelve hundred people attended the weigh-in.⁵¹ Again, small political groups made their preferences known. The American Communist party gave out handbills requesting fans to "please cheer for Joe."⁵²

Two years and three days after their first fight they met again. This time the crowd was noticeably one-sided. There was a thunderous ovation when Louis was introduced and booing when Schmelling was introduced.⁵³ Louis ran out of the corner at the bell. He hit Schmelling with a vicious combination of right and left hand punches. Schmelling screamed and went down. The first punch landed four seconds

⁴⁹Daily Gleaner, September 20, 1937, SC, JLF.

⁵⁰The Afro-American, May 28, 1938, 22.

⁵¹Scott

⁵²Joe Louis Scrapbook, No. 3, 45, SC, JLF.

⁵³Scott, 3.

after the bell.⁵⁴ Someone threw a towel into the ring after a second knockdown, but referee Art Donovan threw it back out. Louis knocked Schmelling down for the fourth and last time after two minutes and four seconds. He had hit Schmelling forty-one times.⁵⁵ Schmelling was rushed to the hospital with a broken rib.⁵⁶ According to the New York Times, the fight was heard in Berlin at three o'clock in the morning. One of the listeners was Adolf Hitler.⁵⁷ He heard Louis say, "Now I feel like the Champion. . . . I was a little bit sore at some of the things Max said. Maybe he didn't say them, maybe they put the words in his mouth, but he didn't deny them, and that's what made me mad." Among other things, Max had been quoted as making disparaging remarks about the fact that Louis was a Negro.⁵⁸

German newspaper Zwoelf Uhr Blatt claimed that American businessmen had "hindered the fight to a point where only a miracle would enable Schmelling to win." It charged that the United States was responsible for making it a race and political issue. They said,

⁵⁴Ernest Victor Heyn, Twelve Sport Immortals (New York: Bartholomew House, 1949), 227.

⁵⁵Heyn, 227.

⁵⁶Alexander Johnston, Ten and Out (New York: I. Washburn, 1947), 248.

⁵⁷New York Times, June 23, 1938, 14.

⁵⁸New York Times, June 23, 1938, 14.

"Germany never did and won't."⁵⁹ The Nazi's pushed the idea that Louis was only a puppet, mentioning that Negroes were not yet in American baseball.⁶⁰

Schmelling publicly claimed that Louis had fouled him by hitting him in the kidneys.⁶¹ There are still arguments over this issue. Films show Schmelling twisting to avoid a punch and thereby receiving it in the back instead. It was a matter to be settled by the referee's discretion. Referee Donovan ruled it a fair punch and Schmelling dropped the charge.⁶²

Again, there was a reluctance on either side to let the issue drop. A week after the fight, Roxborough publicly protested the films shown in Germany. He charged that they had spliced part of the first fight with part of the second fight to show Schmelling in a much better light.⁶³ A denial came back from overseas and Roxborough relented.⁶⁴

The Negro community heralded the win as a victory over Nazi Germany. One source wrote that even the tiniest hint that Naziism was

⁵⁹New York Times, June 24, 1938, 22.

⁶⁰Esquire, Vol. XVIII, No. 6, (December, 1942), 117.

⁶¹Heyn, 278.

⁶²New York Times, June 24, 1938, 22.

⁶³New York Times, July 27, 1938, 22.

⁶⁴New York Times, July 31, 1938, 28.

weak was important.⁶⁵ Throughout the war, Louis received introductions such as the one made by Viscount Leverhulme at a tea given in Louis' honor. He was introduced as "the first man to K.O. a Nazi."⁶⁶

Schmelling was pictured as the villain. A photograph of the pose he struck after their first fight appeared in a September issue of Baltimore's Afro-American. It proved to be only an eye-catcher and lead into a half page spread on Hitler and Naziism.⁶⁷ Schmelling's name was hardly mentioned. The inference was obvious. The German Boxing Association named Schmelling "Sport Soldier Number One" shortly before the second fight.⁶⁸ The Afro-American claimed Schmelling tried to get a match outside of Germany in early 1939 so that he could get out of the country but was refused because all athletes had been placed under the Nazi party and were no longer free to leave.⁶⁹ Schmelling eventually became an officer in the Nazi army and was placed in charge of Oscicim Prison Camp in Poland. He ran the camp, reportedly one of the most brutal in Europe, for over a year. He later became a paratrooper and was wounded in Crete.⁷⁰

⁶⁵Joe Louis Scrapbook, No. 3, (n.d.), 50, SC, JLF.

⁶⁶The Afro-American, July 29, 1944, 18.

⁶⁷The Afro-American, September 24, 1938, 4.

⁶⁸New York Times, June 19, 1938, 10.

⁶⁹The Afro-American, January 14, 1939, 22.

⁷⁰Willis M. (Jersey) Jones, "Two Fighters," Negro Digest, Vol. 1, No. 6, (April, 1943), 3.

If the Nazis tried to squelch the publicity received by Jesse Owens and Louis, they evidently were not too successful. Colored soldiers in occupied Germany after the war wrote of numerous incidents which serve as evidence that Hitler's efforts to put a damper on the publicity must have been unsuccessful. It seems the youngsters were under the impression that every Negro could fight like Joe Louis. They consequently besieged the Negro G.I.'s with requests for demonstrations and instructions.⁷¹

In 1953 a question arose about how Schmelling would accept the way he was portrayed in the movie, "The Joe Louis Story." He was granted a percentage of the proceeds from the European showing of the film and evidently settled for this.⁷² He and Louis have appeared together on several occasions since the war and the meetings have been friendly.⁷³

The Joe Louis image in other parts of the world was not so controversial. He was quite popular in Great Britain. In 1938 he received an average of twenty letters a day from England alone.⁷⁴ He had been known for some time. His fight with Max Baer in 1935 shared

⁷¹The Afro-American, November 11, 1946, 5.

⁷²New York Daily News, April 12, 1953, SC, JLF.

⁷³New York World Telegram and Sun, May 17, 1954, SC, JLF.

⁷⁴Van Every, 75.

British headlines with the Ethiopian crisis.⁷⁵ The first defense of his title was against Tommy Farr, the Welsh heavyweight title holder.

There was evidently a lot more to the making of this fight than the average fan knew about. According to Gilbert Odd, author of Ring Battles of the Century, the story went like this: Mike Jacobs received a telegram from England informing him that arrangements had been made for a fight between Farr and Schmelling. The winner of the fight was to be declared World Heavyweight Champion by those in power in Europe. Jacobs sent his lawyer to England with an offer to Farr. The lawyer came back to the United States with Farr and the plans were finalized.⁷⁶ The fight turned out to be a tough one for Louis, but he won a fifteen round decision and forced Schmelling to come to him for their second fight.

Louis was proclaimed by the British sportswriters as the world's champion. Trevor Wignall, sportswriter for a London daily paper, wrote in 1939 that Louis was the best in the world.⁷⁷ When Joe and Marva Louis visited London in 1948, they were given a "Royal Welcome." The report from London was that his "successes and clean sportsmanship . . . have won the unqualified admiration of the English people."

⁷⁵New York Times, September 24, 1935, 29.

⁷⁶Gilbert E. Odd, Ring Battles of the Century (London: Nicholson and Watson, Publishers, 1949), 12.

⁷⁷New York World Telegram, June 16, 1939, SC, JLF.

The press referred to him as "Gentleman Joe."⁷⁸ The greatest compliment paid him on the trip occurred when he and his wife entered the House of Commons and found the whole assemblage standing in their honor.⁷⁹ Louis received a compliment of a more personal nature when Barbara Ann Scott's mother stated that it had always been Ann's ambition "to be a worthy champion--you know, like Joe Louis."⁸⁰ Miss Scott was an Olympic skating champion from Canada, another part of the British Commonwealth.

According to a January, 1936 Chicago Defender, Louis' picture had already appeared in newspapers in China, Portugal, Spain, Russia, Germany, England, India, Africa, France, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia.⁸¹

Louis had to call off a planned fight with Isadoro Gastanaga in Cuba because of political unrest there in 1935. There was some protest from Cuban businessmen because they claimed his refusal to come hurt their tourist season.⁸² In 1936 the Barbados Herald proclaimed Louis "the greatest."⁸³ In the same article they praised the Ring magazine for not being prejudiced.

⁷⁸The Afro-American, March 6, 1948, 1.

⁷⁹Joe Louis, "My Story," Life, November 15, 1948, 144, SC, JLF.

⁸⁰"The Louis Legend," Negro Digest, July, 1948, 16.

⁸¹Chicago Defender, January 4, 1936, 1.

⁸²New York Times, December 24, 1935, 19.

⁸³Barbados Herald, January 11, 1936, 24, SC, JLF.

After the Louis-Sharkey fight, Louis was touted as the "talk of Jamaica."⁸⁴ Thousands of Parisians shouted, "Viva Joe Louis," at sidewalk cafes after the second Conn-Louis fight.⁸⁵

In 1947 Louis made an exhibition tour of Central and South America.⁸⁶ The promoter lost \$100,000 on the fight staged in Mexico,⁸⁷ but he fought before twenty thousand fans in Peru⁸⁸ and was well received in Chile and Trinidad.⁸⁹ In 1950 he fought exhibitions in Haiti, Trujillo,⁹⁰ and Rio De Janeiro.⁹¹ He went to Rio after making a tour of Canada.⁹²

A Communist writer wrote that Louis had gone to Rio not to box, but rather, to spread American wa. propaganda.⁹³ This was not Louis' first confrontation with communism. In 1950 he appeared on the "Voice of America" broadcast and actually debated Joseph Stalin on the value of boxing. Louis accused the communists of falsely claiming all the

⁸⁴Jamaica Daily Gleaner, September 20, 1936, SC, JLF.

⁸⁵The Afro-American, July 6, 1946, 17.

⁸⁶The Afro-American, February 8, 1947, 16.

⁸⁷The Afro-American, February 15, 1947, 15.

⁸⁸The Afro-American, February 22, 1947, 17.

⁸⁹The Afro-American, March 8, 1947, 16.

⁹⁰The Afro-American, February 11, 1950, 17.

⁹¹The Afro-American, June 3, 1950, 17.

⁹²The Afro-American, April 1, 1950, 18.

⁹³The Afro-American, December 2, 1950, 17.

world's records in sports. Stalin didn't answer the accusation, but he did reply that boxing was a "gangster sport."⁹⁴

In 1951 thousands of Japanese swarmed over Louis' car when he landed in Tokyo for a three week exhibition tour of Japan.⁹⁵

Each such incident serves to strengthen the thought that Louis' popularity extended far beyond Detroit. It's quite possible that he was more popular and thereby affected more people than any other boxer in history.

⁹⁴The Afro-American, December 2, 1950, 17.

⁹⁵New York Times, November 15, 1951, SC, JLF.

CHAPTER IX

NEGROES FARE BETTER

Ironically, Louis wrote that he never was aware of race in Alabama. He played with both white and colored children alike without friction based on race hate. He was rudely awakened, however, when he moved to Detroit as a ten year old.¹ Here the problems of the Negro ghetto became rooted in his mind. It was this beginning that urged Louis time and time again to speak of his fight against Jim Crow practices as his "toughest fight." He became the symbol of the Negro people. With the awareness that he had become such an image came the gnawing realization that he had also assumed responsibility for bettering the plight of his people. He wrote, "fighting prejudice, disease, and second class citizenship is my business, too."² He meant it!

A Philadelphia Tribune editorial once stated, " . . . racial lines yield more easily in sports than in any other element of American life."³ This same point has been made often by many different people.

¹ Joe Louis, "My Story," Life, November 8, 1948, 128.

² Joe Louis, "My Toughest Fight," Salute, Vol. 2, No. 12, (December, 1947), 13.

³ Philadelphia Tribune, June 27, 1935, Schomberg Collection, Joe Louis Folder.

No one has said it more comprehensively than Reuel Denney in The Astonished Muse. He wrote:

The integrity of the symbol system derived from sports is largely a function of two things. First, sports recruitment draws on habits built up in the imaginative generosity of childhood and youth; draws, that is, on a pre-class, pre-caste system of social interaction. Second, sports recruitment is a big business with a market to satisfy, a business that trains its own critics and virtually pays to have them trained. These two characteristics of the sports world must surely go far to explain why sports, like entertainment, are usually ahead of churches and schools, for example, in responding sensitively to the moral pressure for freedom and equality in our society. Thus, in the segregation issue, for instance, sports and some kinds of popular entertainment have established community between the races before other social institutions would or could.⁴

Denny is probably right. That is, positive changes in the racial problem were evident in sports before they were evident in many other social institutions such as schools, churches, and the Y.M.C.A. and Y.W.C.A. youth organizations. Few people in today's younger generation realize how recently these changes have taken place. Joe Louis' career parallels the time when the greatest strides were being made in this area of positive change.

In May, 1934 Louis was arrested at ringside to keep him from entering the ring in a boxing tournament. He was held just long enough to cause a forfeit. The actual suspect for the crime with which he was charged was found to be a man fifteen years older than Louis

⁴Reuel Denney, The Astonished Muse (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 98.

was at the time.⁵ When he entered the Illinois Athletic Club later that same year to fight in the final match of the National A.A.U. Light Heavyweight Championship, he was told he had to go up the back stairs because he was a Negro.⁶

The white community was openly fearful that Negroes would take over boxing unless they were kept out of it somehow. The New York Post in April, 1935, blatantly headlined an editorial "Black Threat in Amateurs."⁷ The article issued warning, pointing out that Negroes were dominating the heavier classes in the St. Louis Championships. The obstacles Louis had to overcome were very real. Some were personal.

Max Baer once admitted that when he fought Louis, he broke a promise. He had once made a promise to his mother that he would never fight a colored boy.⁸ The prejudice was deeply rooted and not geographically bound.

In 1937, long after Louis had established himself as both a boxer and a gentleman, the white community in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin forced him to move his training camp to Kenosha, Wisconsin.⁹ Their claim was that they were against professional sports, not Negroes.¹⁰

⁵"Joe Louis, Soldier," U.S. Biography, n.d., 17, SC, JLF.

⁶"Joe Louis, Soldier," 17.

⁷New York Post, April 12, 1935, SC, JLF.

⁸Chicago Defender, March 23, 1935, SC, JLF.

⁹Sunday Worker, May 16, 1937, SC, JLF.

¹⁰The Afro-American, May 8, 1937, 1.

Neither Louis nor boxing was alone with the problems. Other big name athletes in other sport areas fared no better. In 1935 Jesse Owens was barred from competing when Ohio State University traveled to Southern California for a track meet.¹¹ Syracuse football star, Wilmeth Sidat Singh, was kept out of his team's game with the University of Maryland.¹² The era was full of such incidents. Bill Bell, Ohio State football player, was not allowed to play at Annapolis or Duke.¹³ A football end named Robinson was actually sent to Washington, D. C. on an all expenses paid trip by the University of Oregon when that team played Florida.¹⁴ This type of action on the part of athletic departments across the country was strong evidence that they knew they were on morally shaky ground.

The most indefensible part of the whole problem was that if a Negro was light enough to pass himself off as a Cuban or as an Indian, he could play. In fact, a New York Cuban played in the very game that Ohio State's Bill Bell was refused.¹⁵ It seems this unusual attitude can be traced back to the nineteenth century. A. C. Anson, owner of

¹¹Cleveland Gazette, July 6, 1935, 3.

¹²The Afro-American, October 30, 1937, 1.

¹³Edward Bancroft Henderson, "The Negro Athlete and Race Prejudice," Opportunity, Vol. XIV, No. 3, (March, 1936), 77.

¹⁴Henderson, 77.

¹⁵Henderson, 77.

the Chicago Cubs, in 1887 instigated a ban on games with Negro teams.¹⁶ A team of Negroes got around the ban by calling themselves Cuban and speaking a made up language on the field.¹⁷ The fact that their guise proved successful helps put the outmoded attitude in its proper perspective.

Not everyone sat back quietly and did nothing. In early 1938 the Long Island University Student Government sent a letter to Clair Bee, their famous basketball coach.¹⁸ They asked him to refuse to play any team which was governed by a Jim Crow philosophy. Harvard officials made their stand official in 1941 by withdrawing their athletes from any matches with teams which refused to allow Negroes.¹⁹

The magazine Opportunity in 1941 stated in an editorial that in Albemarle, North Carolina, even the American Legion leagues were segregated.²⁰ The article went on to condemn the athletic directors in the North for bending to the wishes of their southern rivals. They blamed the prevalence of the problem on "the swivel chair boys, . . . not the athletes."²¹

¹⁶Esquire, Vol. XVI, No. 3, (September, 1941), 171.

¹⁷Esquire, 171.

¹⁸The Afro-American, February 26, 1938, 17.

¹⁹Esquire, 56.

²⁰Opportunity, Vol. XIX, No. 9, (1941), 260.

²¹Opportunity, 263.

New York World Telegram reporter, Hugh S. Johnson, wrote in 1938 that Louis had proven "Aryan Supremacy" was nonsense. He stated that Negroes would win many more titles if more sports were opened to them. This, he said, was "nothing to weep about--the blacks are Americans; they are our people."²²

Eventually, changes took place. A prime example is Kenny Washington, Negro halfback for the University of California in the late thirties. He made the National Broadcasting Company's All-American Team,²³ but he was skipped by most selections. His name did not appear on most of the lists compiled that year, despite the fact that every single one of the 103 backfield players he played against voted him their most outstanding opponent.²⁴ This same year he was excluded from the Shrine East-West All-Star Game.²⁵ Washington came back after the war to become the first Negro in modern times to play in the National Football League. He played with the Los Angeles Rams.²⁶

In 1941 there was an inter-racial football game between the New York Yanks and a colored all-star team.²⁷ This was a first. Jackie Robinson broke the color line in baseball. The Negro National League

²²New York World Telegram, June 24, 1938, SC, JLF.

²³The Afro-American, November 25, 1939, 21.

²⁴The Afro-American, January 6, 1940, 19.

²⁵The Afro-American, January 6, 1940, 19.

²⁶The Afro-American, March 30, 1946, 18.

²⁷The Afro-American, November 29, 1941, 21.

proved it was a two-way street when they hired pitcher Eddie Klep from Pennsylvania. Klep, a white man, pitched for the Cleveland Buckeyes.²⁸

The Olympics, which had never been completely closed to American Negroes, made its real sprint into the open in 1936. John B. Taylor, a Negro, ran in the 1906 games. Howard P. Drew ran in 1912. There were two Negroes in both the 1920 and 1924 Olympics. In 1932 there were seven Negroes.²⁹ The 1936 trials, however, were hailed as the first "completely democratic" tryouts.³⁰ Despite the fact that Hitler edited them out of the Olympic films shown in Germany, there were eleven Negroes representing the United States that year,³¹ not the least well-known was Jesse Owens.

How important were these breakthroughs? Baltimore's Afro-American must have thought them valuable. In 1947 they printed a cartoon of several major league Negro athletes straightarming a Jim Crow figure.³²

In terms of this study, two more questions must be answered.

- 1) How much did boxing affect the overall breakdown in the color line?
- 2) How much of an affect did Louis have?

Boxing, like the Olympics, had never been completely closed to Negroes. The history of the heavyweight championship has already been

²⁸The Afro-American, April 6, 1946, 17.

²⁹Negro Handbook, 1942, 244.

³⁰Opportunity, Vol. XIV, No. 8, (August, 1936), 228.

³¹The Afro-American, August 29, 1936, 23.

³²The Afro-American, October 18, 1947, 4.

told. With Louis leading the list, the 1938 boxing champions were all Negroes except for middle, bantam, feather, and flyweight.³³ The September 11, 1937 Afro-American ran a full page on what was called the "Renaissance in Sports over Forty-five Years." In it was stated, "Boxing has led the way," and "Joe Louis is the Kingpin."³⁴

Jack Sher wrote, "Louis has done more to help the cause of the Negro people than any athlete in the long and bitter history of the race."³⁵

Jimmy Cannon wrote, "He is a promise that the equality promised all men in the basic documents of our freedoms may be achieved by all of us."³⁶

Senator Warren K. Barbour in 1940 credited Louis with a nationwide change in attitude. He said that Louis was the first Negro heavyweight who was so respected across the country that boxing films could be sent interstate.³⁷ He mentioned the true interest in the Louis fight films as opposed to the negative reception given those of the Jack Johnson era.

³³ Edwin Bancroft Henderson, The Negro in Sports (Washington: Associated Publishers, 1949), 15.

³⁴ The Afro-American, September 11, 1937, 20.

³⁵ Jack Sher, "Brown Bomber," in Ernest Victor Heyn (ed), Twelve Sport Immortals (New York: Bartholomew House, 1949), 260.

³⁶ Jimmy Cannon, "The Prize Fight Racket," Esquire, Vol. XXIV, No. 5, (n.d.), 52.

³⁷ Margery Miller, Joe Louis, American (Hill and Wang, 1951), 136.

Another newspaper article wrote, "Joe has pulled the race up with him." He "K.O.ed the white supremacy notion and has given the race its greatest boost in morale."³⁸

The Negro newspaper, The Chicago Defender, in an article in which it praised the Chicago Tribune for its fine coverage and promotion of Louis in 1935, theorized that it was fortunate that Louis had chosen to model himself after Peter Jackson. Jackson was a boxer of clean character and clean habits from the days of John L. Sullivan.³⁹ Sullivan may or may not have been an early key to the pattern of clean living.

United Press sportswriter, Henry McLeMore, wrote, "Fighting is a dirty business as a whole, but the colored boy from 'Bama has done a lot to lift it from the gutter."⁴⁰ Jack Cuddy, also a writer for United Press, wrote that Louis was a "brown Galahad--an honest puncher--about whom none of the blackmailers or backbiters even ventured to concoct a story of dishonest performance, and we ask you to name one heavyweight champion during the past thirty years of whom you can say the same."⁴¹

The change is more humanly told in a Malvern, Pennsylvania celebration after the second Schmelling fight. Crowds of both races

³⁸The Afro-American, April 29, 1944, 14.

³⁹Chicago Defender, June 29, 1935, SC, JLF.

⁴⁰Miller, 136.

⁴¹Miller, 136.

joined forces that night in celebrating Louis' victory. The integrated crowd joined together to stop motorists and pull other childish pranks in their celebration.⁴²

Proof that Louis could reach even the coldest of hearts lies in the request by Tony Galento that Louis be given a commission because he was such a good, clean fighter.⁴³

For a long time the Negro athlete was an enigma. The Chicago Defender wrote in 1935 that Louis was the first "race athlete" who was able to draw "race fans" in proportion to whites.⁴⁴ This appeal undoubtedly was anchored onto the purity of Louis' image. Fans felt free to go without fear of embarrassment, or worse, finding themselves in the middle of some sort of trouble. At the Max Baer fight, about one-fifth of the crowd were Negroes. They appeared "more carefully dressed and more mannerly than the whites."⁴⁵ Two thousand policemen were on hand to handle any trouble; but again, there was none. Perhaps some of the credit should go the announcer who blared over the microphone, "American sportsmanship, without regard to race, creed, or color, is the talk of the world. Behave like gentlemen whoever wins."⁴⁶

⁴²The Afro-American, July 2, 1938, 15.

⁴³The Afro-American, June 2, 1945, 23.

⁴⁴Chicago Defender, May 4, 1935, 9.

⁴⁵Jonathan Mitchell, "Joe Louis Never Smiles," New Republic, Vol. 84, (October 9, 1935), 239.

⁴⁶Mitchell, 239.

The colored press was careful to keep reins on their constituents. Frequent ads appeared asking the readers to "Let Joe Louis do the fighting." One article stated, "Louis will be the last colored man to get a crack at the title if you guys start painting the town."⁴⁷ The Boston Post heaped praise on the "Colored Press" for the job they did in covering the Braddock fight. It described them as "clean victors."⁴⁸

As Louis gained more and more prestige, the Negro press became less defensive and more amenable to slight setbacks. James S. Johnston, Madison Square Garden matchmaker, tried an all colored card which turned out to be a financial failure. The New York Sunday News was quick to point out that it failed because the boxers were lousy, not because they were colored.⁴⁹ The Afro-American showed great maturity when they commented on the fact that Louis, by 1940, was not getting the same backing from sportswriters that he had received previously. They reasoned that it was because he was the perennial favorite and not because he was colored. "Such is life."⁵⁰

It became the habit of the announcer before Louis' early fights to give a short "sermon" on sportsmanship. These were usually heard on radio and cannot have helped but be at least a little instrumental

⁴⁷The Afro-American, June 19, 1937, 19.

⁴⁸Boston Post, July 5, 1937, 1.

⁴⁹New York Sunday News, n.d., SC, JLF.

⁵⁰The Afro-American, March 9, 1940, 20.

in bringing about better race relations. Several of these "sermons," including the one delivered before the Max Baer fight and Harry Balough's remarks before the Carnera fight, have been described in detail. Wendell Willkie's speech before the Buddy Baer fight for charity was the most profound. In speaking of Louis' altruistic act, he concluded his speech by saying, "How, in view of such a magnificent example of generosity, can there be any discrimination . . . ?"⁵¹

Louis often stated his belief that sports could help tremendously in the fight for equal rights.⁵² The Negro Handbook of 1942 hailed prize fighting as "Open Sesame." The publication stated, "After Joe Louis, . . . colored youngsters have poured into amateur prize fighting."⁵³ The Philadelphia Inquirer stated in 1941 that Louis alone had taken race prejudice out of the fight game.⁵⁴

Jimmy Cannon, who never tired of praising Louis, once said that Louis was the only athlete he had ever met who actually lived up to the "myth of athletics." He wrote in 1954 that the color line still existed, but Louis had done more to break it down than any man of his time.⁵⁵

⁵¹The Afro-American, January 17, 1942, 22.

⁵²Joe Louis, "My Toughest Fight," Negro Digest, June, 1948, 9.

⁵³Negro Handbook, 1942, 232.

⁵⁴Philadelphia Inquirer, October 3, 1941, SC, JLF.

⁵⁵New York Post, May 13, 1954, SC, JLF.

If the writers quoted here are to be believed, one would assume that the greatest changes in the color line drawn in the world of sports took place at approximately the same time Louis was prominent. These same writers indicated the belief that Louis, himself, played a very important part in the changes wrought. From this premise one can examine more clearly the specific ways in which Louis fought this battle he called his hardest.

Though it was true that Louis was the most quoted Negro American of the late thirties and early forties, he was usually quick to dodge questions concerning "vital Negro questions" concerning such issues as the Scottsboro Case.⁵⁶ The Scottsboro Case involved several Negroes convicted of raping a white girl. They were eventually cleared. He did not, however, refuse to voice his opinions on social revolution and the needs of his people. In 1941 he was featured on a radio program called "Freedom's People."⁵⁷ The program dramatized Negro contributions to American life. During the war he was quoted as saying, "The world is not meant to be ruled by one color . . . that is why they [the U.S.] are beating Hitler. Southerners," he said, "will go home with different attitudes" after the war.⁵⁸

Louis always attacked the problems of race relations from a positive standpoint. He once spoke to a parochial school assembly in

⁵⁶The Nation, February 6, 1937, SC, JLF.

⁵⁷Atlanta Daily World, November 22, 1941, 1.

⁵⁸The Afro-American, September 9, 1944, 18.

Harlem. He told the children in the audience that they should go into adult life arm against arm, white and black, just as they were sitting that day.⁵⁹ He worked cooperatively with white people in many benefits⁶⁰ and yet, he was never accused by the militant Negroes as being an "Uncle Tom." The Cleveland Gazette, a Negro newspaper, wrote many articles classifying such big name athletes as Jesse Owens as "Uncle Toms," but never Louis.⁶¹

The acts he performed for benefit of both white and black are almost legendary. In 1941 he publicly solicited funds for the "Department of Race Relations."⁶² In 1946 he helped the "Lend a Hand to Dixie" drive to help fight prejudice in the South.⁶³ He once handed over a \$248 purse to the N.A.A.C.P. education fund when he discovered that the audience had been segregated in a St. Petersburg, Florida gymnasium.⁶⁴

His ultimate goal was to establish a big business institution so that he could hire colored youth.⁶⁵ Unsuccessful business ventures, such as the tremendous losses he absorbed backing the "Brown Bomber

⁵⁹"The Louis Legend," Negro Digest, September, 1948, 16.

⁶⁰P.M., August 16, 1946, SC, JLF.

⁶¹Cleveland Gazette, January 9, 1937, 1.

⁶²New York Sun, October 1, 1941, SC, JLF.

⁶³The Afro-American, September 28, 1946, 6.

⁶⁴New York Post, April 9, 1956, 1.

⁶⁵The Afro-American, March 8, 1941, 21.

Chicken Shack" and the "Brown Bomber Softball Team" indicate one reason he never achieved this end.

The following incidents eventually built on each other to make more significant contributions to the cause of human relations. In 1948 the Associated Press made a public apology for having referred to his mother as "mammy" in an article.⁶⁶ This sort of apology would have been unheard of ten years earlier. Chappie Blackburn won a suit for seventy-five dollars in 1937 for having been refused service in an Illinois restaurant.⁶⁷ The publicity he received was worth much more than the money.

Louis co-chaired a committee with soprano Carol Brice and organized a benefit under the honorary chairmanship of New York Mayor O'Dwyer. The benefit was for Isaac Woodward, Jr., a Negro veteran whose eyes had been gouged out by a South Carolina policeman on the day Woodward was discharged from the Army.⁶⁸ Louis addressed the twenty-three thousand people who attended Lewisohn Stadium. Among other things, Louis was heard to say, "the vets didn't fight to preserve fascism at home."⁶⁹

⁶⁶Daily Worker, January 15, 1948, SC, JLF.

⁶⁷Chicago Defender, June 12, 1937, 1.

⁶⁸P.M., August 18, 1946, SC, JLF.

⁶⁹Neil Scott, Joe Louis (New York: Greenberg Publishers, 1947).

Louis was asked to referee the 1946 Golden Gloves bouts in Washington, D. C. He promised to do it if he could be guaranteed that there would be no Jim Crow practices. The promise was made and he did it.⁷⁰

Louis concerned himself with the color line drawn in sports other than his own. In 1948 he was on a committee to stop prejudice in the American Bowling Congress. The committee was chaired by Hubert H. Humphrey, who was then Mayor of Minneapolis.⁷¹

For years, college⁷² and professional golf tournaments were closed to Negro golfers.⁷³ Louis fought for years against these rules. In 1952, Negro golf professional Bill Spiller was refused entrance to the San Diego Open. Louis was permitted to play. The situation brought the entire question to a head and the Professional Golfers Association tournament committee met and approved Negro participation. Louis was the first Negro ever to play in a P.G.A. sponsored tournament. He played the first round with P.G.A. president Horton Smith and scored a seventy-six. On the second day his putting went sour and he rocketed to an eighty-two which dropped him from the tournament for reasons he was much more willing to accept.⁷⁴

⁷⁰The Afro-American, August 24, 1946, 17.

⁷¹The Afro-American, May 1, 1948, 9.

⁷²The Afro-American, July 8, 1939, 23.

⁷³The Afro-American, June 25, 1938, 23.

⁷⁴Time, Vol. 59, (January 28, 1952), 65.

In 1941 Louis became a sportswriter for the New York Post, covering boxing three days a week.⁷⁵ For the time the position was a novel one for a Negro to hold.

Louis didn't confine himself to the sports world. He once said that the real key to the problems his race faced lay in labor. He has become a union organizer in recent years.⁷⁶

He was instrumental in placing other Negroes in top positions in various fields. In 1943 he wrote a letter to Governor Dewey of New York asking that he appoint Frank Forbes to the New York State Athletic Commission. He wrote the letter, "as a boxer and a colored person who is interested in the progress of his race."⁷⁷ Forbes went on to become the first Negro to judge a heavyweight fight.⁷⁸

Joe Gould, Jim Braddock's manager, stated quite frankly that his reason for not drawing the color line was because a fight with Louis offered the possibility of a million dollar gate.⁷⁹ His reason was pragmatic. So was Louis' for reestablishing the color line in the beginning of his career. He drew criticism from the press for not meeting any colored challengers. Writer Hugh Bradley described the Negro

⁷⁵New York Post, September 27, 1941, SC, JLF.

⁷⁶Worker, January 31, 1960, SC, JLF.

⁷⁷The Afro-American, January 16, 1943, 18.

⁷⁸Joe Louis, My Life Story (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1947), 178.

⁷⁹New York Sun, June 28, 1935, SC, JLF.

boxer's refusal to meet other Negro boxers as the strangest thing in sports.⁸⁰ The Washington Tribune stated that Louis' refusal to fight other Negroes was probably because he preferred "white meat."⁸¹

In 1937 Boston promoters offered Louis fifteen thousand dollars to fight an unknown Negro named Winston. Promoter Mike Jacobs refused the offer and was quoted as saying that Louis was going to draw the color line from then on.⁸² The issue died when Louis agreed to fight John Henry Lewis in 1938.⁸³ It was the first time two Negroes had fought for the heavyweight championship.

Just as he was the best known Negro civilian in America, so he became the best known Negro soldier. When he went into the service, Louis refused a commission because he wanted to be close to the G.I.'s.⁸⁴ Opportunity, a magazine printed by the National Urban League, wrote that it was this humble attitude while in the service that enabled Louis to do "more for the Negro race than any man since Booker T. Washington."⁸⁵

He was criticized strongly when he fought for Navy relief because of the prejudiced policies of the Navy at that time. The Afro-

⁸⁰New York Post, December 23, 1935, SC, JLF.

⁸¹Washington Tribune, November 17, 1934, SC, JLF.

⁸²New York Times, February 8, 1937, SC, JLF.

⁸³New York Sun, November 3, 1938, 1.

⁸⁴Alexander Johnston, Ten and Out (New York: I. Washburn, 1947), 255.

⁸⁵Opportunity, Vol. XX, No. 2, (February, 1942), 48.

American and the Atlanta Daily World both questioned his motives in light of the fact that at that time the Navy enlisted Negroes only as mess attendants.⁸⁶ The answer may have come a few months later when the Navy eased their restrictions and began enlisting Negroes as non-commissioned officers.⁸⁷ Louis was asked late in the war why the Negro G.I.'s were fighting when they weren't getting their basic freedoms at home. His answer was simple. "There ain't nothing wrong with us that Mr. Hitler can fix."⁸⁸

By his attitude and through the respect he had gained, Louis was able to accomplish quite a bit while in the service. After listening to Louis' complaint, Brigadier General Donald A. Robinson issued an order to send eighteen Fort Riley Negroes to Officer's Candidate School. The men, all college graduates, came out lieutenants. One of them was Jackie Robinson.⁸⁹ General Robinson also issued an order allowing Negroes to play on all camp teams.

When Louis was asked to move to the back of the bus in Camp Silbert, Alabama, his complaint resulted in an order disallowing all such practices in Army camps.⁹⁰ In March of 1944, Louis was instrumental

⁸⁶The Afro-American, January 10, 1942, 1; see also, Atlanta Daily World, November 17, 1941, SC, JLF.

⁸⁷The Afro-American, April 11, 1942, 1.

⁸⁸Negro Digest, September, 1945, SC, JLF.

⁸⁹Joe Louis, "My Story," Life, November 15, 1948, 131.

⁹⁰Louis, 131.

in having an officer returned to the United States because he had declared certain areas in Shrewsbury, England off limits to Negro soldiers.⁹¹ How successful would he have been in these ventures if he had used different means of achieving them? Indeed, how successful would he have been in his career? These are questions which will never be answered. The success he achieved using the methods he did use are another matter.

Joe Louis' main claim to success was, is, and will continue to be his boxing. As an amateur, Louis won forty-three of fifty-four fights.⁹² At the time he left the ring he had appeared in more than one-third of all the heavyweight championship fights fought since 1889, the year during which records were kept for the first time. John L. Sullivan held the title three years; Corbett, five; Jeffries, six; Johnson, seven; and Dempsey, seven. Louis held it for ten years. The individual honors he received are a matter of record. The combination of his talent, personality, disposition, and altruistic nature were responsible for:

1. restoration of pride and honesty to the sport of boxing;
2. restoration of the million dollar gate;
3. the establishment of the precedent that the heavyweight champion should give all qualified challengers a chance.

⁹¹Joe Louis, "My Life Story," Negro Digest, January, 1947, 94.

⁹²John Durant, Come Out Fighting (New York: Essential Books, 1946), 64.

He was at least partly responsible for:

1. the breakdown of the color line in American sports;
2. the breakdown of the color line in many other phases of American life;
3. the bettering of race relations the world over.

The Negro Digest put it one way with the following anecdote.

Two Negroes were talking. One said, "If we had more Negroes like Joe Louis, things would be better for us." "Sure nuff," said the other, "but if we had more white folks like Joe, things would be better still."⁹³ Perhaps a few more people like Joe Louis in every race would brighten things up. Jimmie Cannon provided an apposite finish when he wrote, "Years ago, I said Louis was a credit to his race--naturally, I meant the human race."⁹⁴

⁹³Roi Ottley, "New World A-Coming," Negro Digest, October, 1943, 48.

⁹⁴New York Post, May 13, 1954, SC, JLF.

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