

Joe Louis by A. O. Edmonds. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973.

This is an interesting book—a comparatively new genre in sport history. The thin 112 page paperback, a volume in the Great Men of Michigan series, is decidedly not traditional biography. The author states forthrightly that his study is something more than a factual account of a brilliant sports figure. The book focuses on the image of Joe Louis and attempts to determine the significance of these image patterns. Dr. Edmonds looks his audience right in the eye and serves notice that “Joe Louis is much more crucial in terms of what people thought of him than of what he in fact accomplished.”

The prologue, titled “June 22, 1938,” is straight sport history and dramatically portrays the two-minute destruction of Max Schmeling by Joe Barrow Louis. Chapter 1 is titled “Boxing in its historical cultural context” and gives a necessarily cursory overview of the heavyweight champions from ex-slave Tom Molineaux (1810) to Joe Louis’ sixround knockout of Primo Carnera in 1935. A Michiganiaan only by adoption, Joe

Louis was born in a sharecropper's cabin on May 13, 1914. The author's second chapter, "The Young Louis: 1914-1935" is an account of dire poverty in Lafayette, Alabama, a relatively happy childhood, a strong Christian and moral home training, a move to Detroit in 1924, and the almost inexorable association with boxing figures John Roxborough, Jack Blackburn, and Mike Jacobs. Chapter 3, "The Carnera Fight" begins the championship history of Joe Louis; it also ushers in the far more important (as viewed by Edmonds) legend of the Brown Bomber as "image," and "symbol."

A middle chapter called "Louis' image as fighter" is the longest section of the book (19 pages) and carefully orchestrates the multifaceted Joe Louis-especially the contrasting cool, near zombie-like, efficient fighting machine as contrasted with a powerful African jungle killer. Author Edmonds skillfully outlines his thesis that the real Joe Louis is less important than the dichotomous black man (men?) of the previous sentence—a very great fighter who defended his crown twenty-five times. Louis was praised and damned, and each to an extreme, notes Professor Edmonds. The image makers "lavished such praise on the Brown Bomber that he appeared invincible. When he failed to box a perfect fight each time out, the public, and perhaps the writers themselves felt let down ... In essence, he was damned when he won convincingly and equally damned when he did not." Through it all, Joe Louis' image as a boxer was essentially positive. The unflamboyant Louis, carefully manipulated throughout his career, became the supreme antithesis of the much-hated Jack Johnson—the culmination of a plan that began even earlier than his first championship fight in 1935.

Chapter 5, "Louis' image as person" deals not so much with a factual account of the man Joe Louis but with the far-more important (in Edmond's view) "myth". The myth of average American and that of Horatio Alger coalesced, says Edmonds, and Louis became an authentic national hero. "Because he was *portrayed* (underlining mine) as God-fearing, clean living, and decent, because in him the myths of average American and Horatio Alger were conjoined, his public personality transcended racial consideration." The next two chapters, "Louis as international symbol" and "Louis as race hero," are nearly self-explanatory. Tenacious research is subsumed by the all-importance, in Edmonds' eyes, of the symbol of Joe Louis as internationally idolized or feared Negro, and as black hero among blacks. Louis' image in that community was threefold: (1) he aided the cause of racial harmony as no black man had done in the twentieth century, (2) he heightened black pride as few had done before him, and (3) he epitomized the revenge motive of the Negro against white people. The author's "Epilogue" ends with an assessment of Joe Louis "as a symbol during the turbulent 1930's and '40's ... (incorporating) the aspirations of millions of Negroes, as well as the sentiments of many white Americans."

Will the real Joe Louis please stand up! A careful reading and a second long look at *Joe Louis* finds him a shadowy figure at best. The author's preoccupation with public opinion (a legitimate historical inquiry)

precipitates the use of the words “image,” “myth,” “symbol,” and “symbolism” over one hundred times in this little book. *Joe Louis* is an arresting book and I recommend it as informative and thought-provoking sport biography. But Mr. Edmonds too easily surrenders his fundamental role of scrupulously and selectively searching the past for the unvarnished truth—as best it can be uncovered—and “let the facts speak for themselves.” Symbolic biography—in which secondary sources become primary ones—too often deals the reader an uneven, hermaphroditic view. The study focuses on the image of Joe Louis rather than on Joe Louis himself. Honesty is an Edmonds virtue and he tells us this right away. It can get a little frustrating. For example, the book spends a great deal of time on the myth or image of Joe Louis as a religious and clean-living man. When the author finishes a protracted deal with symbolisms, we still don’t know for sure if Joe was religious and clean-living. We have a right to expect some disentangling of fact from fiction. Dr. Edmonds is a talented writer, a good scholar, and has chalked up some very good points, as well as absorbed a few body blows in round one. I predict he’ll score a real (not symbolic) knockout in round two of his career.

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