

Mead, Chris. *Champion: Joe Louis Black Hero in White America*. New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1985. Pp. xii, 330. Notes, Photographs, Index. \$18.95 (cloth)

Perhaps more has been written about Joe Louis than any other black athlete in the history of American sport. In addition to his own autobiographies, there have been a countless number of books written on the life of this country's second black heavyweight champion. Anthony Edmond's *Joe Louis*, Barney Nagler's *Brown Bomber*, and Gerald Astor's . . . *And A Credit to his Race*, are just three of the works published within the last two decades that cover various aspects of Louis' career. The most recent work on Louis is Chris Mead's

Champion: Joe Louis Black Hero in White America, a book that rehashes much of the same material covered in previous Louis biographies and occasionally offers some new data on the career of the black champion.

Mead, a graduate of the Yale Law School and son of a veteran writer for United Press International, has put together a book that is generally well-written, nicely researched, and historically accurate. It is obvious that Mead cares deeply for his subject matter and writes about Louis with a great deal of compassion. Mead sets a pattern for the book, however, by devoting much of the second chapter to an incomplete and, in my opinion, inappropriate history of boxing and other sports in America. While the origins of intercollegiate athletics, professional baseball, and urban recreational programs are interesting, they contribute nothing to our understanding of Louis. In subsequent chapters Mead covers many aspects of Louis' career that are quite familiar to students of the black sport experience. He examines, for instance, Louis' close relationship with his managers Julian Black and John Roxborough and how the two boxing veterans carefully groomed the champion's positive public image. He describes in detail Louis' famous second fight with Max Schmeling and the manner in which the American press zeroed in on the international issues of the period and wrote about the bout in symbolic terms. Mead also discusses Louis' well-known financial problems with his ex-wife, the IRS, and his managers following World War II. Information is furnished, moreover, on such things as Louis' brief stint in the Army, his bouts with mental illness and drugs, and his later years as a greeter at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas.

A major weakness of the book is not that Mead merely covers previously written about aspects of Louis' career, but also his seeming unwillingness to draw his own conclusions and creatively interpret the vast source materials he had at his disposal. Other than the last chapter, Mead is content to substitute an endless number of quotations for a more thoughtful and in-depth analysis of the champion's life. There are several instances in the book where Mead fails to give a thorough explanation of some event in Louis' career and simply plugs in another quote from Shirley Povich, Paul Gallico, or some other famous chronicler of American sport. One result of all of this is that the book resembles more a public reaction study than an interpretive biography that allows the reader to grasp more fully Louis' status in the black community and the larger American society. It is no longer sufficient merely to say that Louis' impeccable behavior earned him the respect of many whites and that his symbolic defeats of white boxers engendered race pride and caused a heightening of racial consciousness in the black community. To thoroughly comprehend the champions' life it is imperative that we become more cognizant of the divergent views that different segments of both the black and white communities had towards him. Louis found himself-as Mead points out but fails to elaborate on-as isolated from certain groups in black society as he was from the majority of white Americans. Having separated himself somewhat from the black masses, Louis never completely won the confidence of some of the more forceful and politically conscious blacks.

Perhaps more disconcerting about Mead's study is the fact that he does not treat Louis as a thinking man, adequately explaining why this country's most famous black athlete acted the way he did. Mead does not fully explore Louis' character, motivation, features and mannerisms, strengths and weaknesses, and conflicts. The champion is not exposed in totality to the study and comprehension of his mind as well as his activities. There is never any sense of what it meant to Louis to be a black man in a white society or how it felt to be a hero in the black community. The lack of any psychological analysis is again partly a result of Mead's unwillingness to read into the source material and draw his own interpretations and conclusions. It is also a result, I think, of Mead's refusal to furnish much information about Louis' early life. While detailed information about Louis' childhood is not absolutely necessary in a study such as this, an almost total disregard for his earliest years does not give readers the perspective necessary to determine what made the champion tick. In essence, Mead's study would have been vastly improved if he had substituted a more thorough analysis of Louis' childhood for his rather cursory examination of the rise of American sport.

If there is one particular strength of the book it is the facts that Mead furnishes on Mike Jacobs and other well-known promoters involved in professional boxing during Louis' reign as heavyweight champion. Mead details quite nicely the contributions made to boxing by such people as Jacobs and therefore provides some much needed information about the inner workings of the sport. These insights are not enough, however, to offset the aforementioned weaknesses of the book. Although there are some worthwhile facts furnished on Louis' life, the book does not adequately explore the complexities of the man and, in some ways, ends up being a compilation of various interpretations given in prior secondary accounts of Louis' career. The study lacks the kind of creativity that separates the very good biographies from the average ones. There was much more to Louis' life than can be found in these pages.

Kansas State University

David K. Wiggins