

The Problem of Sport Biography

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Before one can devise a productive and satisfying method for sport biography, he must examine historically some of the basic problems faced by all biographers. Although students of the biographical craft agree that the good biography should seek to re-create the reality of an individual's life, there is substantial disagreement over what this process entails. Debate over biographical method breaks down into three basic polarities: Should the biographer treat his subject in massive, multi-volume detail or should he write brief, incisive sketches? Should he choose his subject from that small list of "great" persons in history, or is the "little" person of relatively minor impact equally worthy of biographical treatment? Finally, should the biography center almost exclusively on the subject's individuality or should it include significant background material and become a "life and times" study?

Most students of biography seek some middle ground in these polarities, but the sport biographer cannot afford such a luxury. The very nature of the sports hero requires a very definite choice from these methodological poles. Because the sports figure is of very small impact in the politics and economics of a nation's life, he must be seen primarily as a cultural symbol, a reflection of certain values of his time. The most productive sports biography, then, is one which briefly examines the sports hero (by nature a "little" person) in relation to his times.

By applying some of the methodological insights of John William Ward in his symbolic studies of Andrew Jackson and Charles Lindbergh, the sports biographer can re-create the reality of his subject's symbolic impact on his times. By examining the image of Heavyweight Champion Joe Louis in the 1930s and 1940s, we can discover some of the basic cultural values of the period. Particularly when Louis is viewed as a symbol of America's international position around the time of the second Schmeling fight and as a race hero throughout his career, his biographer can find substantial ambiguity in American values. Joe Louis, the symbol, is of more importance than Joe Louis, the man; and the sports biographer, if he is to make a lasting contribution, must write symbolic biography. Otherwise, he relegates himself to the world of in-group antiquarianism.



Six NASSH members at the Seward Staley address.