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# Three Black Super-Stars: Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Muhammad Ali

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The social impact of three “super-heroes,” Jack Johnson, Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali, is analyzed, each in relation to his era. In 1914, at a time when Jack Johnson was flaunting his prowess as the greatest heavyweight boxer the world has known, Joe Louis was born. In 1942, the year Joe Louis twice defended his heavyweight championships against giants Buddy Baer and Abe Simon, and donated both purses to charity, Cassius Clay, later to know as Muhammad Ah, was born. Johnson became as well known as Theodore Roosevelt. Louis was as likely to be recognized as was Harry Truman; and Ali is as incapable of anonymity as is Jimmy Carter. Although the three fighters enjoyed similar

career success, their public personalities were different from each other. Johnson and Louis received overt adulation of the Black masses, just as Ali does now. Each has been named the “best heavyweight boxer of all time.” Each has made and spent incredible amounts of money. Each has epitomized at least one method of reaching unimaginable acclaim.

This study contends that these three “kings” of the “boss” division were so important as to have changed the racial climate in the United States. It contends as well that despite all that has been written about them, they have been under-studied. It is hypothesized that public reaction to each of these “black-symbols” of physical superiority might be considered a prognosis of contemporary social change. The sources for this study are popular magazines, newspapers and books, all of which influence public opinion. After more than 10 years of analysing historical data relative to social change and black boxing heroes, I decided that now is the time to speak up or “pack it in.” Jack Johnson, Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali, each in his prime as an athlete, stood for much more than his excellence in sport. Historical study does more than verify the heroism of these three super-stars, it magnifies it. Among their own people, each was adored almost without peer. Muhammad Ali *cannot* be ignored. So it was as well with the other two. Their prominence demanded a social reaction and they got it. Concomitant and subsequent changes cannot be attributed *directly* to the careers of these three; but neither can the relationship be ignored.

Joe Louis was what he had to be, a model of quiet demeanor. Popular newspapers and journals were replete with articles describing him and by innuendo, implying that black-white relations could work. It is wrong to assume that because change cannot be traced specifically and scientifically to a single cause, exposure such as these three great athletes received did not, in effect, help move the masses. Jack Johnson so symbolized the complete emancipation of the black people that a threatened white society refused the right of black boxers to challenge for the heavyweight championship for two decades after his loss to Jess Willard in 1915. Joe Louis so symbolized what has since been referred to as the “myth of the athlete” by his “preacher-like” public behaviour, that the colour-line in sport was drawn less and less frequently, in part because of his “positive” influence. Muhammad Ali, by symbolizing the modern black athlete, free to feel, believe and speak personally and publicly on all sorts of controversial issues, has brought about an “acceptance” of the black radical. These all too strongly stated beliefs in the changes wrought by these sporting heroes need to be realistically qualified. Of course, societal change is much too complicated for simplistic explanations such as these; but sport historians have too long sat quietly because apparent answers cannot meet the staunch scientific paradigm. Heroes influence public opinion and consequent change. In particular, these three heroes influenced opinion and change relative to black-white relations.