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## Joe Louis

Jess Willard's defeat of Jack Johnson for the heavyweight title forced African Americans to assume a less prominent position in sport for nearly two decades. White professional baseball and basketball forbade teams from signing African Americans to their rosters, though this was countered by black barnstorming teams and the formation of the Negro Leagues. Professional football teams, unlike baseball and basketball, welcomed a few African Americans to participate though there were never more than a total of five black players, before they, too, drew the color line in 1933. Some colleges also allowed a few black athletes on their teams, especially in football and track and field. And, in boxing black fighters such as Battling Siki (light heavyweight), Cecil Thompson (welterweight), and William 'Gorilla' Jones were championship winners. However, heavyweight boxers and promoters worked in concert to assure that there would be no black challengers to the sport's most coveted title—the heavyweight championship. Jack Dempsey, who had fought black boxers before becoming the heavyweight champion, drew the color line once he acquired the title and while he continued to meet black boxers in exhibitions, he never risked his title in an interracial bout.

When Joe Louis defeated James Braddock in 1937 to become the second black heavyweight champion he was viewed by many as a race ambassador. He was careful not to offend whites or to 'embarrass' African Americans. For his obsequious behavior, his monumental second fight with the German, Max Schmeling, and his willingness to serve in the U.S. military during the war (the first and only reigning heavyweight champion to do so), Joe Louis became, perhaps, the first African American to be accepted as an American hero.

While Louis' management team may not have foreseen the level of admiration that he would come to have in America, they were well aware that the fighter's opportunity to prosper as a heavyweight depended, in part, on his distancing himself from the image of Jack Johnson, someone whom the young Louis greatly admired. This paper examines Joe Louis' life and career as a boxer, what he symbolized for black and white Americans in the 1930s-1950s, and the impact of Johnson's career on Louis'.