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Jack Johnson Revisited in the 1960s: The Tricky Triad of Floyd Patterson, Sonny Liston and Muhammad Ali

Boxing has traditionally been one sport in which a large number of immigrant and ethnic minority groups have excelled and been allowed an entrance into American culture. African American boxers have found a great deal of success in the ring, but have been unable to translate their athletic successes into the rewards of American citizenship out of the ring. Jack Johnson, who dominated boxing in the first fifteen years of the twentieth century, left a legacy that came from his actions out of the ring. Other blacks paid the price of Johnson's negative image with white America. His legacy challenged black fighters who entered the ring after Johnson's 1915 defeat and resulted in the creation of the accommodating image of Joe Louis, an image that significantly impacted black athletes who entered the white sport world after World War II. Louis' success and popularity came because he molded himself into the opposite of Johnson and thus became a hero for both blacks and whites. His fight against Schmelling pitted black versus white, but also American democracy versus Nazism. In a country that refused African Americans entrance into restaurants and schools, denied them the opportunity to vote, and kept them subjugated in second-class citizenship, Joe Louis was used as a symbol of American democracy. Louis successfully escaped the wrath that Jack Johnson seemingly invited.

The decade of the 1960s saw three African Americans hold the coveted title of Heavyweight Champion of the World, with Floyd Patterson regaining the title in 1960, Sonny Liston claiming the title two years later, and Cassius Clay entering the ring as the challenger to Sonny Liston in Miami Beach in 1964 and exiting as Muhammad Ali, the new Heavyweight Champion of the World. The reign of these three champions in boxing, a sport full of masculine symbolism, and during a particularly volatile time in society, offers a unique perspective from which to view the intersection of the civil rights movement and the black athlete. Each of these athletes was forced to reckon with the lingering image of Jack Johnson. This paper examines the public images of Patterson, Liston, and Ali during the 1960s and analyses the dialogue between the three fighters as they attempted to establish themselves as symbols of the African American struggle for full citizenship rights during the Civil Rights Movement.