

Ken Leyton-Brown
University of Regina

A Discourse on Race: **Jack Johnson in Saskatchewan's Newspapers**

Recent scholarship has made it clear that ideas of race and ethnicity are constructed through discourse. This paper-based largely on coverage in Saskatchewan newspapers of Jack Johnson's career-follows such work, and examines a specific episode which illustrates how in early twentieth century Saskatchewan sport could become involved in such discourse. Newspapers are especially useful in such a study because in the early twentieth century they played an important role in both reflecting social attitudes and determining them, and because other now-ubiquitous media did not exist at that time.

Such newspapers could be expected to address directly the major issues of the day, and though sport was not usually seen as one of these, Jack Johnson's becoming heavyweight boxing champion of the world in 1908 changed things. The reason, of course, was the colour of his skin -or, in the language of the time, his race. The result, of course, was that what might have been presented as an admirable achievement by a superb athlete, became instead the genesis for years of discourse in Saskatchewan's newspapers, as an overwhelmingly White society tried to come to grips with the uncomfortable, and for some an unacceptable fact. The first response was to predict — and eventually almost pathetically to plea for — Johnson's defeat at the hands of a White man. The first Great White Hope touted as the man to restore honour to the white race was Jim Jeffries, and his preparation for the 1910 fight against Johnson was followed in unprecedented detail. The fight also was the focus of great attention, evidence of which is the fact that round by round synopsis was presented on the front page of the province's largest daily. And when Jeffries lost, when Johnson's victory of Tommy Bums was shown not to have been simply an anomaly, a second layer of response began to develop almost immediately, though the search for a Great White Hope of course continued. This new layer included denial, but also a much more harmful development. Many finally accepted that a Black could beat a White, but they denied what this had at first seemed to mean. A Black man, they said, could still not beat a White man, because he wasn't really a man at all. This required, of course, the systematic destruction of Jack Johnson's humanity, and that is exactly what happened. Johnson was ridiculed in ever more offensive ways until eventually he was thoroughly dehumanized. He was presented as an animal, not a man. It was unfair to see a Black face a White man in the ring. There were simply no grounds for comparing the two.

Of course this discourse, aimed primarily at Jack Johnson, had a larger effect. It served to reinforce existing racist attitudes and to worsen the stereotype of all Blacks, which was the base on which that racism was constructed. This was important even in a province like Saskatchewan, which had a Black population negligible in size at the time, because it helped to imbed anti-Black attitudes, but also because some of those attitudes came to inform racist discourse directed against other visible minorities who were present

at the time. Success in sport, at least on this occasion, did not afford a means of entering more fully into society. Rather, it served to increase the barriers which created separation.