

Chris Mead, *Champion: Joe Louis Black Hero in White America*. Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1985. Illus. pp.xii + 330. \$U.S.18,95.

This is a fascinating book examining the linkages between race, sport and society. The focus is Joe Louis the heavyweight boxing champion of the world from 1937 to 1949, a boxer who will probably be remembered, to borrow a term from Muhammad Ali, as 'the greatest'. Louis was the first black, after Jack Johnson, to break down the colour bar in professional sports in the United States of America. Unlike Johnson, whose reign as champion was associated with intense racism and race riots (exacerbated in Mead's view by a supreme ego, selfishness and irresponsibility), Louis's sheer brilliance and domination of boxing for over a decade opened up

professional sports for blacks. He was also both an inspiration for blacks, demonstrating that they could compete with whites on equal terms, and for whites helping them to confront the racism that had been an endemic feature of American society since the days of slavery. Mead's basic thesis is that Louis, through his superb skills as a boxer and with his dignified demeanour, was one of the first to break down segregation. His example helped usher in the civil rights movement of the 1950s.

Joe Louis Barrow was born on 13 May 1914 in Alabama. His family moved to Detroit in 1926. He took up amateur boxing in 1932 and fought under the name of Joe Louis in an attempt to conceal his boxing from his mother, though she actually approved. He was a successful amateur and was noticed by two black businessmen, with underworld connections, who decided to bankroll him. His managers cultivated a clean cut image to enhance his acceptability to white society, and as a counter to the memory of Jack Johnson. Louis was never to be photographed with a white woman, to fight and live clean, to be courteous to opponents and never gloat in victory. After a series of wins Louis's managers found it difficult to find fights for him in New York because of the stranglehold Madison Square Garden had on the fight game. The promoters there wanted Louis to take dives, something which was anathema to his own managers. Louis was given a chance eventually by promoter Mike Jacobs who was looking for an exciting fighter to take on Madison Square Garden. Louis, after some spectacular victories, quickly established himself as a contender and eventually became world champion when he defeated James Braddock in 1937.

Undoubtedly the most important fight of Louis's career was his second bout with the German Max Schmeling in 1938. Earlier in 1936 Schmeling had defeated Louis after noticing a weakness in his style. The second fight was fought with war imminent in Europe and was regarded and portrayed as a battle for racial supremacy - a negro versus a white nazi racist (interestingly, the first Louis-Schmeling fight was free of racist overtones). The hysteria and emotion associated with this fight was perhaps the greatest that has occurred in boxing history. Louis defeated Schmeling at 2:04 of the first round and became a national, if not international hero. Mead comments on the significance of this fight:

In a two-minute capsule, the second Louis-Schmeling fight epitomized the qualities that made Joe Louis a great boxer... Having lost to Schmeling before, the fight would decide whether Louis would be rated a success or an also-ran; it was the crucible of his career. Moreover, he carried all the hopes of his race into a fight against the symbol of militant racism (p.153).

After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour Louis was one of the first celebrities to enlist in the army and donated purses from championship bouts to the war effort. Louis mainly spent the war years in exhibition fights to raise morale. The army sought to use Louis to portray how black and white could work together against a common enemy. Mead clearly demonstrates the hypocrisy of this, as segregation was maintained in the armed forces throughout the war with blacks delegated to menial tasks.

Once the war ended Louis continued his boxing career. He retired initially in 1949, but was forced to make a comeback because of tax problems. His final fight occurred in 1951 when he was defeated by Rocky Marciano.

Mead successfully combines the histories of sport and boxing in America with the racist underpinnings of American society. He makes good use of newspaper sources and shows how Louis was patronised initially and admonished to behave properly; and as his career continued was admired and respected, if not loved. Mead also provides a no holds barred account of boxing and Louis - of the larger than life characters, gangsters and underworld figures, Louis's womanising, high spending, generosity, and minor scandals in his latter years. Mead's continual theme, however, is that Joe Louis helped to reduce the racism, inequalities and intolerance of American society.

Joe Louis had a great deal to do with...new white tolerance. Before the war, Louis had been the one man who consistently made whites think about blacks... White Americans found it easier to give Joe Louis a medal than to integrate the army, easier to write an editorial praising Joe Louis than hire a black reporter. But perhaps whites needed to accept a Joe Louis before they could begin to think about justice for all blacks (p.236).

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