Heavyweight boxers Max Schmeling, standing on scale, and Joe Louis shake hands at the weigh-in ceremony for the 15-round bout at Yankee Stadium in New York City, June 18, 1936. The fight was postponed till the next day because of rain. Schmeling weighs 192 pounds, and the “Brown Bomber” from Detroit, Mich., weighs 198 pounds. The man with cigar is Joe Jacobs, Schmeling’s manager.
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The Brown Bomber's Dark Day: Louis-Schmeling I and America's Black Hero

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More than ten years before Jackie Robinson would integrate baseball, Joe Louis had already become a race hero, a black athlete at the pinnacle of his sport. One might wonder what would have resulted if Robinson had struck out, grounded out, and erred his way out of his first season as a Dodger. What happens when a cultural race hero fails all expectations? On a June 1936 night at Yankee Stadium, Joe Louis faced a German boxer named Max Schmeling—and lost in embarrassing fashion. Within all of the differing perspectives, ideological undertones, and discursive bickering to follow, there was one consensus—Louis was beaten soundly, no doubt.

This paper explores the social and cultural significance of Louis' early career by shifting focus onto the public discourse surrounding this first bout with Schmeling. Scholars of sport history have used Louis’ career as a tool for analyzing America’s racial climate during the late thirties and World War II. These interpretations emphasize his ability to garner immense popularity by playing off the stereotyped image of the moral, quiet, and child-like black man. Scholars also point to the series of bouts Louis fought with the Italian Primo Carnera and Schmeling—fights that took on symbolic significance in light of European Fascism and gave Louis an additional boost of patriotic support that made him one of the most popular figures of the 1940s. Dominic Capeci and Martha Wilkerson have described Louis as a “multifarious hero of a society at war,” one who could personify for many African Americans the Double V campaign of “channeling black frustrations into positive, patriotic actions.” Meanwhile, Jeffrey Sammons has argued that Louis’...
career had the unique effect of uniting many Southern white boxing fans with African Americans under a patriotic banner that only the war could offer. A similar line of analysis is offered in both Chris Mead’s and Anthony Edmonds’ excellent biographies of Louis, which focus predominately on the solidification of Louis’ image as “hero” and “champion” through the successful bouts of 1938-1940 and the popularity of his wartime public service campaigns. Louis’ significance to cultural historians cannot be denied: his popularity with some white Americans strengthened the resolve of others in search of a “white hope,” while his triumphs embodied the African-American dream of empowerment and basic civil rights. However, most histories of Louis neglect the significance of the Brown Bomber’s darkest hour.

This paper examines a crucial episode in Louis’ early career that let down many of his fans and revealed the conditions surrounding his popularity and support. Taking place before the Fascist threat reached its zenith and before Louis’ unprecedented string of victories, it is this fight—rather than the subsequent triumph by Louis over Schmeling in 1938—that should serve as the focal moment in Louis’ career, in which the acceptance of a popular African-American boxer was truly tested. Indeed, Louis emerged as hero to a broad spectrum of American society and remained a unifying figure throughout the forties and fifties. Yet it was well before the war when Louis’ image and hero status were first put to the test and solidified—most often in the murky waters of popular sports journalism, from small-town newspapers to the New York Times, and especially in the influential and popular writings of African-American sportswriters. Thus, an analysis of the discourse surrounding Louis-Schmeling I reveals several perspectives—including the veiled and overt animosity of the Southern press, the motivation and criticisms of many Northern writers, the rallying calls and mourning that appear in the African-American discourse, and even the triumphant nationalism and Social Darwinism evident in Fascist, German-American accounts. By recognizing both antifascist patriotism and physical success as factors that can influence—or trump—racial animosity, this paper seeks to complicate the role of popular black heroes in the age of segregation and illuminate the riveting story of an oft-ignored cultural spectacle: the Brown Bomber’s dark day.

The Anti-Jack Johnson

One month before the Schmeling fight, the New York Times announced that Louis had arrived in Lakewood, New Jersey, to begin intensive training for the bout. He was treated the next day to a celebration honoring his twenty-second birthday and presented with a special “gold mounted” belt, an award from Ring magazine editor Nat Fleischer for “doing the most for the sport of boxing during the past year.” Posing for photographs alongside many of the sport’s biggest names—including heavyweight champion James Braddock—Louis stood on the cusp of becoming the sport’s second black champion, the first since Jack Johnson in 1908.

White America had not been ready for a black boxing champion in 1908, and many blacks had not been ready for Jack Johnson. Johnson lived a dangerous, lavish, and violent life that directly challenged white social norms. He publicly courted white prostitutes, married two white women, and spent exorbitant amounts of money despite massive white opposition and pressure from the state. Eventually, prosecutors indicted Johnson under the Mann Act—the Progressive bill that made it a crime to transport young females across
state boundaries for “immoral” purposes. The move sent the champion into European exile in 1913, whereupon an invitational tournament of white boxers crowned a new champion.5

Twenty-two years later, Joe Louis was a young athlete with phenomenal potential, unbeaten as a professional and anxious for a shot at the title. In his first major fight under promoter Mike Jacobs, Louis stopped the Italian giant Primo Carnera in June of 1935, a victory that many mainstream political editorials linked to Italian aggression in northern Africa.6 Meanwhile, headlines in the African-American press that touted Haile Selassie’s latest calls for peace, independence, and pan-Africanism ran side by side with reports on the Louis-Carnera bout. While Louis possessed no title of his own, he was the sport’s hottest rising star and received unprecedented coverage from Northern sportswriters, especially in popular boxing cities like New York, Detroit, and Chicago as well as nationally circulated magazines. Jack Cuddy of the Los Angeles Times proclaimed Louis to be an “ambitious young American Negro,” ready to “swap punches and guile” with anyone.7 The Saturday Evening Post dubbed him “Black Gold,” claiming that “in little more than a single year, Joe Louis has come from obscurity which might well have left him a laborer in a Detroit automobile plant to be the million-dollar fighter.”8

Louis had not fought since knocking out Charley Retzlaff that January, and the mainstream press was anxious to see the phenomenal Brown Bomber in action again. A slew of reporters converged in Lakewood for his arrival: “LOUIS REACHES LAKEWOOD: DRINKS 12 GLASSES OF MILK AT ONE STOP EN ROUTE TO HIS CAMP” ran one headline. A 5,000-seat outdoor arena and indoor ring were set up at the Stanley Hotel to accommodate the daily throng of reporters, well-wishers, and fans who wanted to see Louis spar and train as well as follow his attempt to lose nearly fifteen pounds before the bout.9

Sportswriters for the mainstream press in large Northern cities served as a conduit for boxing in its effort to reach its most profitable audience, and most found many reasons to support Louis’ rise, the greatest being his marketable image as the anti-Jack Johnson. It was widely accepted that Louis was soft-spoken and well-behaved, “a credit to his race.”10 Common images of Louis in American newspapers throughout the period included pictures of him at home relaxing with family or in the kitchen with his mother wearing an apron.11 Even at his Lakewood birthday celebration, Louis was photographed humbly accepting his award, still wearing his fighter’s robe.12 While Jack Johnson had shocked the American public with outrageous behavior and flashy wardrobes, many perceived Louis as the domesticated and harmless African-American male.

While the Louis image catered to the general white public, it was constructed and designed by his small team of black managers. The mainstream press in the North recognized Louis’ managers, John Roxborough and Julian Black, as “college-trained Negro businessmen.”13 Along with black trainer Jack Blackburn, the three were dubbed “the all-Negro Louis menage” and “the Bomber’s board of strategy.”14 Louis’ team lauded their fighter’s strong morals and hard work ethic, helping enforce his self-induced ban on alcohol at the camp. Most important, however, was another Lakewood banishment—Jack Johnson. In a conscious effort to distance Louis from Johnson’s volatile public image and criticisms of the Brown Bomber, Roxborough and Blackburn would not allow Johnson to visit Lakewood and join the media circus in the days leading up to the Schmeling fight.
Disillusionment over the general state of boxing also led mainstream sportswriters to support Louis. While boxing was still the country’s second most popular sport, it encountered a decline in popularity brought on both by depression and the waning of Jack Dempsey’s popular career.\(^{15}\) Many saw Braddock as only a temporary champion, untested and lacking the talent and charisma the sport needed for sustained financial success, while Louis had proven his ability to fill both seats and pocketbooks. Even with the national availability of radio, 57,000 fans watched Louis-Carnera live, and Louis’ 1935 fight with Max Baer was the first million-dollar gate since the famous 1927 Dempsey-Tunney bout.\(^{16}\)

Above all, the mainstream press recognized Louis’ immense talent and felt resigned to the fact that the heavyweight championship would be his before the end of the next year. Louis has “dynamite in either fist,” proclaimed the *Saturday Evening Post*: “[H]is crowd appeal is based on the one thing which the fight fan . . . demands above personality, color, intelligence or anything else. That is the ability to smack ‘em.”\(^{17}\) However, even those authors who minimized race and claimed to have interests only in advancing the sport’s popularity recognized Louis’ importance to African Americans and the fight for civil rights. The *Post* went on to explain that, “[h]e is, however, serious about his conception of the responsibility which has come to him as a representative of the Negro race.”\(^{18}\) The mainstream press looked forward to the excitement that Louis could bring to the sport—increased popularity, a talented and stable champion, and the subsequent search for a Great White Hope that many assumed would follow—all of which made for great boxing matches that would help reinvigorate the sport and return the fan base that had existed throughout the Dempsey era.

**Our Joe**

For African Americans, it was hard to overstate the significance of Joe Louis’ early success. After the Carnera victory, Louis’ fights received as much attention from the African-American press as any other issue, and not just on the days following major bouts. In the many weeks preceding and following a Louis match, the Brown Bomber commanded as many headlines as hard news stories—the Scottsboro boys, Ethiopia, or the Depression. In the days before the Schmeling fight, African-American newspapers previewed the contest from multiple angles. Over a month before the bout, the *New York Amsterdam News* ran a feature on the state-of-the-art artificial lights to be used at Yankee Stadium. Later that same issue, an article in the Women/Society section exclaimed that Marva Louis, Joe’s new bride, would “Wear a Gray and Red Outfit to the Yankee Stadium Fight.”\(^{19}\) The anticipated match with Schmeling dominated nearly every section of the country’s African-American newspapers.

According to these papers, Joe Louis was marching inevitably towards victory and a shot at Braddock. Some writers were looking past Schmeling altogether, as most editors published menacing photos of the German with captions like “Max Schmeling: Expected Victim.”\(^{20}\) In Harlem, a drop in ticket sales for the fight was even attributed to the lack of competition: “[T]he belief that the German hasn’t a chance to stem Louis’s march has caused the ticket sale to hit a snag. This is the general belief in Harlem.”\(^{21}\) Some African-American sports columnists also went further than the mainstream press in emphasizing Schmeling’s German background, often with extreme rhetoric. E.B. Rea of the Norfolk, Virginia, *Journal and Guide* referred to Schmeling as “Adolph Hitler’s protector of German
Kulture,” exclaiming that the fight would settle “whether Louis can defend himself against the Schmelnazi type of fighter; it will give the League of Nations grounds to hoodwink any of Haile Selassie’s proposals as being detrimental to the peace of the world.”

With the symbolic political implications of the Carnera fight still fresh in their minds, African-American writers once again found it easy to link a Louis fight to European Fascist aggression, something the mainstream press would not embrace fully until the German response to Schmeling’s victory and the 1938 rematch. The two years separating the Louis-Schmeling fights saw immense changes in global perceptions of the Nazi regime and the strengthening of ties between Italian and German Fascism. It is remarkable that in 1936 many African-American sportswriters were taking the lead in making some of the strongest assertions yet seen along these lines. While popular nicknames for Louis emphasized his power and aggression—“Brown Bomber,” “Dark Angel of Death”—neither his public persona nor pan-African politics meshed well with the aggressive motif. Instead, it was Carnera—and now Schmeling—who appeared as instigators, making the trip to U.S. soil as representatives of European Fascism and actively initiating the fight contracts.

Previous histories quickly glance over the political rhetoric of the first Louis-Schmeling fight, choosing instead to focus on the German Olympic debacle that would take place soon after the bout. This is a mistake for many reasons, especially because it glosses over the significance of an event so important to many Americans, most notably the African-American community. While the African-American press did anticipate Berlin’s reception of Jewish and black athletes throughout the summer of 1936, the fact remains that the buildup to Louis-Schmeling overwhelmingly dominated these publications for months before the fight and well into early July. As Louis hit the canvas that night, few in Yankee Stadium were thinking about Jesse Owens.

In addition to making quick and direct links between Fascist aggression and Louis’ opponents, African-American writers also saw clear parallels between German notions of Aryan supremacy and boxing’s notorious Great White Hope ideal. Most in the mainstream media would not dare to make such a connection, even for Louis-Schmeling II in 1938. In the African-American pre-fight coverage, however, there appeared numerous insinuations that Schmeling was collaborating with white boxers and the sport’s white establishment. Like most champions, Braddock took the middle ground and refused to predict a winner, although Louis was the clear favorite. The response in the African-American press was to link Braddock with the Great White Hope camp. Barely a month after he attended Louis’ birthday celebration in Lakewood, the New York Amsterdam News ran a photo of Braddock whispering secretly in Schmeling’s ear. The disparaging caption explained that “the whispering campaign is on. . . . Jim is probably telling him [Schmeling] to go back to Germany before the conflict, but judging from Maxie’s look he must be thinking of the shekels he will gather up to take back to his fatherland.” While Braddock would be forced to fight Louis regardless of the outcome of the Schmeling bout, many of the sport’s white elite stood to make considerably larger fortunes with each Louis victory—notably Mike Jacobs and the numerous other white promoters, writers, and owners who would benefit from an increase in the sport’s popularity.

However, the Great White Hope ideal was still the active, popular, and powerful component within the sport’s power structure that it had been ever since the Jack Johnson days. In 1936, its most publicly vocal proponent was none other than Jack Dempsey.
While Louis continued to conquer, Dempsey led a Northern attempt to derail him even before his title shot. Through a series of highly publicized all-white tournaments, Dempsey threw his support behind the search, a move that Jeffrey Sammons believes led to resentment and cynicism towards both Dempsey and the movement. According to Sammons, the tournaments had “an air of silliness” and “traveling spectacle” about them, including Dempsey’s “laughable” attempts at including certain African-American fighters in the brackets, forging the ridiculous notion of a black “white hope.”

Here Sammons may be too quick to brush Jack Dempsey off the stage, perhaps anticipating the time when Louis’ popularity indeed made the search for a “white hope” moot and laughable to many white boxing fans. Yet what Dempsey symbolized—boxing as white, working-class emotion—was a notion not yet dead by any means in 1936.

On the night of Louis-Schmeling I, the aging Dempsey sauntered down the Yankee Stadium aisles and was promptly “besieged by stadium fans.” According to the New York Times, “[His] popularity seems to ripen with age. . . . [T]he man is simply a marvel for making and keeping friends.” For many fight fans, Dempsey personified boxing’s social “roots”—working-class rage in the industrial era. While Dempsey’s connection with the search for a “white hope” in lieu of Louis’ early popularity drew criticism from many—mainstream sportswriters, African-American writers, and most of the sport’s white elite—the same fans who would cheer the Schmeling victory later that night provided a similar ovation for the arrival of the Manassa Mauler. Regardless of Louis’ acceptable image and popularity, the Great White Hope ideal was still alive in both the North and South.

African-American sportswriters had grown accustomed to supporting their man in the wake of these threats, and Louis-Schmeling was no different. Some writers even criticized Jack Johnson more than Schmeling. Johnson wrote a Ring magazine article that attacked Louis’ boxing style and work ethic, claiming that he was overrated and destined for defeat at the hands of the German. The Chicago Defender reprinted the article in full, exclaiming “JACK JOHNSON RIPS JOE LOUIS APART” and critically referring to Johnson as “Jack (I’m a writer) Johnson.”

Thus, as Louis set himself to face Schmeling and continue his climb towards the pinnacle of the sport, virtually the only criticism in the black press came from the one other man who had been there before, a man who was promptly sacrificed as a traitor. For African Americans, Johnson had failed twenty years earlier to construct the necessary image required for a pugilistic champion of civil rights, and now he was unable to recognize the significance of the man who could.

“Africa These Are Good Colored Folk”

Pre-fight discourse was much more limited in the Southern press, yet still reveals interesting insights on the public perception of Louis in the South. Most historians—including Sammons—have argued that Southern newspapers largely stuck with mainstream wire stories coming from the Associated Press or United Press in New York, because of either a lack of interest in Louis or in resignation to the fact that a Louis victory and a
shot at Braddock seemed assured. Sammons goes further, contending that “[o]nce the southern press was convinced that Louis was no Jack Johnson and did not threaten the region’s racial order, it joined the Northern media in hailing him as a savior of a dying sport, a credit to his race, a true native son, and, reluctantly, the embodiment of the long-sought American hero.”

Yet even in laying out the fight previews and choosing mainstream wire stories, Southern sports pages took a markedly different tone than both the mainstream press and African-American newspapers. The *Jackson Clarion-Ledger* barely covered the run-up to the fight; its sports editorials were all devoted to local college football and baseball teams. On the day before the fight, however, the paper chose to run an AP story that focused on the alleged declining interest in the bout and drop in ticket sales, as well as complaints that ticket prices were too high. A *Raleigh News and Observer* headline proclaimed that “800 OF 800 NEWSPAPERMEN AT SCENE PICK LOUIS” then promptly ran a story by Henry McLemore of the United Press entitled “Henry Picks Max to Defeat Negro.” Evidently, McLemore was not at the scene. The *Clarion-Ledger* declined to even run a picture of Louis, choosing instead to display an extremely flattering pose of Schmeling, the caption of which announced where local fans could gather to follow Max take on “Joe Louis in a grueling test of science and speed.”

The emphasis on local issues, feigned non-interest, and general silence surrounding Louis in the Southern press mimicked the feeling of many white Southerners and complicates Sammons’ thesis. True, what happened with Joe Louis in the North was of little consequence to the immediate stability of the South, but many Southern writers posited a wait-and-see approach to Louis’ career. The *Charlotte Observer*, for example, sent columnist Jack Wade to cover the fight. Resigned to a Louis victory, Wade submitted one article that featured an interview with Jack Blackburn and the entire Louis entourage, opening with “These are good colored folks.” Other Southern authors took a much more vitriolic approach. Bill Keefe of the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* rode the train to New York with Wade and was among the throng of journalists. According to Sammons, Keefe was the “notable exception” to the dominant strategy in the Southern press, “Louis’s faithful and persistent critic.”

Like other histories, however, Sammons’ analysis of Louis in 1936 is wrapped in the teleology of the Brown Bomber’s stellar career and notions of “the hero.” What Keefe was willing to write for New Orleans—scathing racial denunciations of the “black terror”—many other Southern writers almost certainly thought, including benign figures like Jack Wade. For example, in addition to his “good colored folks” column, Wade also wrote an article that appeared to be a thinly-veiled endorsement of the Great White Hope project, proclaiming, “Our constituency . . . will be hopeful that Braddock is able to retain his title when he collides with the Brown Bomber.” On the day before the fight, Wade and other Southern sportswriters even paid a visit to Jack Dempsey’s restaurant in New York. Wade reported that Dempsey “got around and shook the hands of his guests and autographed programs for them.” Emphasizing a scheduled Dempsey visit to Charlotte the next week, Wade quoted the Manassa Mauler: “I always like it down there, they are good folks in your State. I will enjoy going to Charlotte.”
While not necessarily as explicit as Keefe, the tone of most Southern sports pages betrayed a sense of animosity and frustration towards Louis. The focus on Dempsey and the sport’s working-class roots juxtaposed with complaints of high ticket prices brought on by Louis’ popularity, the eerie silence surrounding Louis himself, the insinuation that Dempsey would be welcomed back home in the South (as if another champion might not receive so nice a reception), choosing the rare mainstream wire story that picked Schmeling to win—all of these tactics were employed by the Southern press in the run-up to the fight, complicating Sammons’ notion that Louis was everyone’s “hero” in 1936. It was after Louis’ shocking defeat, however, that the Southern press would expand and intensify its rhetoric.

Herr Schmeling

In America, the mainstream press outside the South largely ignored the presence of Americans in support of Schmeling or his links to the Nazi regime. In fact, many Germans also distanced themselves from the former champion, a man who was now past his prime fighting age and in serious danger of embarrassing himself. In Germany, focus remained fixed on preparations for the upcoming Olympic games, and Schmeling was criticized for scheduling such a lopsided fight. Nevertheless, once convinced that the fight would go on, some German officials began to denigrate Louis on racial grounds. The German newspaper Die Burger, according to Louis biographer Anthony Edmonds, found it “a bitter pill to swallow” that a Negro was being idolized, exclaiming: “Is he [Louis] really such a good fighter or is he simply lucky to live at a time when there is a dearth of good heavyweights?”. In addition, Schmeling’s presumed connections to the Nazi regime were enough to spur the NAACP and American Anti-Nazi League to “ask their backers not to attend the fight because Schmeling was a practicing Nazi.”

However, choosing instead to play up the fight as a contest between the two countries, the New York Times ran a headline from Berlin on the day before the fight reading “GERMAN FANS ON EDGE.” Reported the Times, “[Germany’s Economic Minister] Dr. [Hjalmar] Schacht needs dollars, but the men who direct the Nationalist Socialist cultural and racial policies obviously have considerations of another sort at heart.” Some German Americans undoubtedly saw as much significance in Schmeling’s success as the African-American press did in Louis’ career. After all, Schmeling placed fifth in a 1994 German poll to determine the “German Sports Personality of the Century,” conducted some sixty years after his most prized victory. Nevertheless, most German-American newspapers devoted their coverage to the upcoming Olympic games, following the general strategy employed by Hitler, Goebbels, and the propaganda machine—to withhold comments on the Schmeling fight and focus on the anticipated success of the Olympics. There was no use in reminding the world that a German was about to be brutally beaten by an American Negro. In Chicago, the German-American Sonntagpost offered little prefight coverage, yet did feature a picture of Louis shaking hands with Braddock at the Lakewood camp. Similar to the photographs that were printed in African-American newspapers featuring Schmeling and Braddock “whispering” to one another, it appears as if the German-American press also tried to associate Louis with the established champion and the sport’s power structure.
Despite Hitler’s attempts to downplay the fight, the buzz surrounding Schmeling’s camp was almost as notable as the Lakewood circus. Schmeling had no birthday celebrations or 5,000-seat outdoor sparring arenas, but “unusually large” crowds gathered in Napanach, New York, to watch the German prepare. On multiple occasions there appeared reports of “large crowds,” consisting of “predominately Germans,” analyzing their fighter and absorbed in his preparations for battle. These were most likely German Americans from the city, as Schmeling himself arrived with a relatively small entourage. Before the fight, the interests of many Fascists and German Americans defied the better judgment of Nazi propaganda, which saw Schmeling as an aged former champion assured of embarrassing defeat and not worth the attention of the world, especially leading up to the Berlin games.

Soon after the fight, the reaction of the German state and German Americans would change completely. In fact, for every one of the differing viewpoints, perspectives, and emphases highlighted in the pre-fight discourse, the sight of Joe Louis crumpled on the ring floor immediately changed minds, invoked turmoil for some while emboldening others and, in an instant, turned the notion of America’s Black Hero on its head.

World heavyweight boxing champion Max Schmeling raises his hands in victory after referee Arthur Donovan counts out Joe Louis in a 12th round knockout in New York City, June 19, 1936. COURTESY OF AP PHOTO.
The Shock

On June 21, 1936, the Associated Press reported that twelve people in North America had died of excitement while listening to the Louis-Schmeling fight. In Halifax, Nova Scotia, sixty-three-year-old Margaret Mara collapsed during the tenth round. In Harlem, Harry Sow, aged sixty-one, “fell dead at the radio.” An Indiana woman suffered a heart attack at the moment Louis was knocked out in the twelfth round. A Memphis telegrapher suffered a similar fate, as did a Chicago customs inspector, a thirty-six-year-old mother in Canada, and a sixty-one-year-old black man standing around a crowded radio in Columbia, South Carolina. White, black, young, and old—the spectacle of the invincible Louis carried from the ring, unable to stand under his own power, was shocking from almost every conceivable perspective.

In the North, the mainstream press celebrated the surprising and exciting outcome, primarily attributing the shock to the fact that Schmeling was an overwhelming underdog. Many mainstream writers penned dramatic and gloomy articles announcing the end of the “myth of Joe Louis.” Jack Cuddy of the Los Angeles Times immediately launched a search for the next “Black Menace.” While these authors looked at Louis with deep sympathy and pity, their unconscious effect was to replace one racial stereotype with another. Louis had been the “Dark Angel of Death,” quiet and deadly, a cold-blooded killer who many in the North and South had likened to an animal. After the fight, James T. Farrell, chronicler of working-class Chicago, wrote for the Nation that “Louis was no longer the graceful, panther-like animal prancing around in sure expectation of a kill.” Time magazine reported that Louis “ceased to be an animal . . . and became a superman” after his success against Carnera and Baer, but now the mainstream press sympathized with the man who was “impassive as a baby and equally susceptible.”

Nearly all letters printed by the New York Times echoed the sportswriters and were from fans that were upset at the lack of “sanity” exhibited by the “so-called experts.” One letter read, “It strikes me that the sportswriters who are supposed to be experts on pugilism made themselves ridiculous in their prognostications.” The mainstream press catered to the average betting fan, and with odds for a Louis victory greater than 10-1, the fight’s outcome made many people upset and a few very happy. Most mainstream criticism of Louis was thus transferred to the “experts,” as evident in one support letter printed by the Times: “I don’t recall any boy at the age of 21 who made the progress that Joe did. He merely had a bad night against Schmeling. So what?” Paul Mickelson of the Los Angeles Times even argued that the experts should have been “softened up” by a series of recent “long-shot winners.”

Thus, as the mainstream press sought to cope with the outcome and support Louis, many writers replaced the racial stereotype of the animal-like, aggressive black man with the notion of the confused and childlike Negro. The Los Angeles Times reported that Louis was “broken-hearted” and “in a fog” after the knockdown. According to the New York Times, “as Louis sat on his dressing table he put his face in his hands and cried like a child.” Julian Black and Jack Blackburn finally “soothed” Louis and, with that, the invincible animal had been replaced by the harmless babe. Inevitably, the focus began to shift back to Louis as the quiet family man, and sympathetic reports surfaced that Louis’ aging step-
father was not immediately told of the result for fear of medical complications: “It might break his heart,” the family physician told the Times.61

However, in its sympathetic post-fight treatment of Louis, the mainstream press neglected entirely the monumental importance of Louis to the African-American community. Throughout the country there were reports of rioting and looting within black communities. When a black Detroit girl attempted to poison herself at a local drug store after hearing the fight, her story was stuck at the bottom of a different article in the Times, not to be included with the reports of deaths and injuries due to excitement. A girl who “took the defeat so to heart” was an image too uncomfortable for the mainstream press.62 However, as blacks took to the streets of Harlem to mourn and riot, they were criticized as “hoodlums . . . large crowds of men and youths” who were assaulting white men on the streets in public displays of “disorder.”63 A report on rioting in Detroit, however, noted “numerous fist-fights” as “automobiles filled with exuberant celebrants swarmed through the streets,” yet neglected to list the race of either the celebrants or victims.64 Instead, the rhetoric of “the executioner” employed by African-American sportswriters was reversed in dramatic and graphic fashion. The Los Angeles Times headlined the photos of Louis on the canvas “WHEN CONDEMNED MAN TURNED EXECUTIONER AND SLAUGHTERED JOE LOUIS.”65

The mainstream press relished the deadly excitement of the underdog winning yet distanced itself from the uncomfortable thought that boxing could mean more than just sports to some African Americans. However, mainstream authors immediately realized the significance of Schmeling’s victory for Germans and the Nazi cause. Farrell wrote that “the Nazis will make political capital of the fight and claim that Max Schmeling’s victory is a triumph for Hitler and Wotan.”66 Meanwhile, the Los Angeles Times proclaimed that the German government would be adding money to Schmeling’s fight purse because heavy tax rates had minimized his earnings from the bout.67 Quickly reporting on the congratulatory telegrams sent by Hitler and Goebbels, the Times immediately caught on to the fact that boxing could mean much more to the German cause, announcing “GERMANY ACCLAIMS SCHMELING AS NATIONAL HERO FOR HIS VICTORY OVER LOUIS.”68 However, while the mainstream press could immediately recognize the political mobilization coalescing a world away, it failed to understand how such a simple and meaningless cultural spectacle could mobilize local “hoodlums,” choosing instead to turn a deaf ear to the people who lived just down the block, those who “took the defeat so to heart.”69

“My Race Groaned”

In the African-American press, the response to Schmeling’s victory was a mixture of shock, anger, sadness, pessimism, and some optimism. While Jack Johnson celebrated into the night at the Guild Restaurant, the New York Amsterdam News reported “several thwarted suicide attempts” in addition to the girl in Detroit.70 Langston Hughes wrote that he saw “grown men weeping like children and women sitting on the curbs with their heads in their hands.”71 Lena Horne and her band had gathered around a radio to listen to the end of the fight: “I was near hysteria toward the end . . . and some of the men were crying.”72 According to Maya Angelou—who listened to every Louis fight in her family’s rural Arkansas general store—“My race groaned. It was our people falling. It was another lynching, yet another Black man hanging on a tree.”73
In the weeks following the fight, the African-American press engaged in a heated discourse surrounding Louis’ significance to the community and reaction to the loss. A virtual parade of conspiracy theories marched across the headlines. “I think the fight was a set up for Joe Louis to lose,” responded one bystander to the Amsterdam News. Another claimed that “[t]hey let Schmeling win because if Louis had won it would not look good to see a colored man knock out a white champion.” Reports of Louis being doped before the fight captivated the press for over a month, with the Chicago Defender even charging that the Chicago Tribune had assigned a high-profile private detective to investigate the allegations. Other theorists posited that promoter Mike Jacobs could make more money “out of Joe as a dark threat to the crown than as champion.” Still another explanation put the blame on a late night “love rift” between Louis and Marva over letters from an ex-boyfriend.

Some of the harshest criticisms of Louis himself came from the black press, including charges of overconfidence, laziness, and greed. “I think he should have stayed single,” commented one Harlem woman. From London, a bitter Marcus Garvey wrote that “Joe . . . thought only of himself and how much money he could make out of the fight. . . . [W]e think that Joe got married too early before securing his world championship. . . . [W]e hope that he has learnt a lesson from the fight, that when a white man enters the ring in a premier bout with a black man, he realizes that he has in his hands the destiny of the white race.”

Once again, many African-American sportswriters led the way in defending the Brown Bomber by shifting the focus away from critical theories of Louis and onto the “white hope” enemy. “Despite the fact that this was merely a fight,” wrote Roi Ottley, “it certainly had political implications. . . . [T]he South frankly rejoiced and applauded the German’s victory. . . . [T]he “Nordic Supremacy” flag was again flaunted by prejudicial southerners.” One reporter admonished fans that “clutched to all kinds of silly stories in order to retain their illusion that Louis was invincible.” Wrote E.B. Rea, “[T]he usual round of rumors which follow fallen heroes, trail Louis . . . but it was just too much Schmeling.” Rea then shifted the brunt of his anger towards the sport’s white establishment by attacking Dempsey. He noted that Dempsey gave Louis a “quick, weak shake on his way out of the ring” after encouraging Schmeling in his corner. Commenting on the Manassa Mauler’s trip to Charlotte, Rea explained that Dempsey “showed his gratitude by telling southerners that the prize ring has no place for Negroes.”

Thus, while African-American sportswriters had always led the way in creating the Louis myth and romanticizing the sport, they were among the first to cope with the defeat, remind readers that boxing was “just a game,” and direct black hysteria away from Louis and towards the Great White Hope ideal. In similar terms, the NAACP’s Crisis lamented the “nauseating gossip and rumor touching the young fighter and his family which no daily paper, supposed ‘enemy’ of the race, would have touched.” Within months of the fight, the success of Jesse Owens and the Olympic team, the resurgence of Louis’ old form against Jack Sharkey, and the escalating global tensions played out in the cultural realm would soon overshadow the embarrassment of Louis-Schmeling I. However, for a brief moment the African-American press struggled to deal with the temporary death of a race “hero,” channeling anger towards sources both within and outside the black community.
and coming to grips with the risky nature of hero construction—that tenuous process by which the hopes, aspirations, and dreams of the entire community are embodied in one man. “We all feel that the race has somehow lost prestige in this upsetting defeat,” wrote Arthur P. Davis, “A foolish reaction? Of course; but it is one that American living inevitably forces upon us.”

“Hah! Hah!”

True to his word, three days after the fight Jack Dempsey was in Charlotte for a promotional “raslin’ show,” promptly grossing the second largest gate in Charlotte’s boxing and wrestling history. Jack Wade was almost certainly there, having just printed his triumphant take on the bout: “The German did it artistically,” “It was a beautiful knock-out,” “He knew his mutilated foe was ready for the kill.” According to one Raleigh News and Observer headline, “HAH! HAH! BOOMS MAX—JOE CAN’T TALK.” And in New Orleans, William Keefe continued with his vitriolic rhetoric towards Louis: “[The] reign of terror in heavyweight boxing was ended by Schmeling. The big bad wolf had been chased from the door. It took the Black Uhlan to prove that the black terror is just another fragile human being.”

In reaction to Louis’ defeat, most Southern newspapers abandoned the wait-and-see or silent approach and replaced it with a sense of celebration and jubilee. The Jackson Clarion-Ledger—which had barely even acknowledged the fight before—now breathed an obvious sigh of relief. The paper that did not care about boxing two days before trumpeted Schmeling’s victory on its front page with the headline “GERMAN STAGES WILD UPSET BY WHIPPING NEGRO.” A shining caricature of Schmeling’s face was the only graphic; no image of Louis appeared at all in the paper’s entire coverage of the fight. While—as Sammons suggests—Southern newspapers still continued to draw stories off the national wire, they now fashioned them with exhuberant headlines that praised Schmeling. Instead of minimizing the fight with references to low attendance and high prices, Jack Wade grossly overestimated the crowd at 60,000 “amazed spectators,” despite nearly every other figure that placed the number closer to 40,000.

The celebration of Dempsey along with the outcome of the fight and the great divergence in the volume of pre-fight versus post-fight coverage illuminates much about the Southern press and its perspective of Louis. While every Louis fight on his way to the top meant the world to many Americans, Louis-Schmeling I became significant for the Southern press only after the Brown Bomber suffered defeat. As opposed to Sammons’ contention that Southern writers embraced Louis once convinced that he “did not threaten the region’s racial order,” it appears instead that many Southern sports pages embraced the Louis story once the Schmeling victory appeared to strengthen the very bonds of Jim Crow.

“Arm in Arm with Mike Jacobs”

Having just pulled off the most improbable victory of his long career—and one of the greatest upsets in sport history—the aged Schmeling continued to press his luck. Three days after the fight he boarded the airship Hindenburg and lazily sailed into Frankfurt fifty hours later. According to the New York Times, the man who had left quietly, “ignored
and in disgrace for signing to fight a Negro,” now returned to find himself a national hero, greeted by a large crowd at the airport and treated to a ceremony of German Air Force planes flying in formation.\textsuperscript{93} Immediately, the German Ministry of Propaganda capitalized on Schmeling’s victory, with congratulatory telegrams wired from Hitler, Goebbels, and Prince Wilhelm, as well as German wires calling for an immediate title bout between Schmeling and Braddock in Germany. Once at home, Schmeling was reported to have dined with Hitler, appeared in parades, and graciously accepted a free pass to the upcoming Olympics. The \textit{California Staats-Zeitung} reported to its German-American readership that Schmeling had been received graciously in Berlin, receiving a special Olympic plaque from the city in honor of his victory.\textsuperscript{94} The German propaganda machine would laud Schmeling almost continuously for the next two years before abandoning him again in 1938. Siegfried Gehrmann has described Louis-Schmeling II as taking place under “the most difficult psychological conditions” for Schmeling and German boxing fans, all of whom were in the thrust of Hitler’s expansionist phase throughout the winter and spring of that year.\textsuperscript{95} In 1936, however, Germany heaped tremendous praise on Schmeling, launching a wave of civic pride that would continue even after the Olympic games. Nazi writer George Spandau made headlines around the world—including the \textit{Chicago Defender}—when he wrote that, “Max Schmeling’s victory over Louis was a ‘cultural achievement’ for the white race.”\textsuperscript{96}

For some German Americans, the feelings of excitement and the significance of the fight paralleled the emotions evident in the African-American community. In Pittsburgh, seventy-five-year-old Catherine Weinbrenner, a native of Germany, collapsed and died while listening to the fight—her death also attributed to “fight excitement.”\textsuperscript{97} The New York \textit{Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter} proclaimed that “Today we are proud of Max Schmeling . . . [a] surprise victory, an outcome against all forecasts and expectations. Is that a reason for special pride? Yes; Because it is the victory of an iron will, the success of self-discipline, and the triumph of self assurance and courage in the face of all underestimations of ability and negative evaluations.”\textsuperscript{98} Yet while German Americans celebrated the improbable victory, they also lamented Schmeling’s treatment in the American press and criticized the fight’s Jewish promoter, Mike Jacobs, as well as Joe Jacobs, Schmeling’s Jewish trainer.

With the freedom to gloat over victory, some German-American writers instead looked back and criticized how the mainstream press had covered the fight. One \textit{Beobachter} editorial lamented the fact that sportswriters had been “hate-filled” against Schmeling and his country. The article even referred specifically to a \textit{New York Evening Journal} cartoon, which had proclaimed that Schmeling’s upcoming “execution” would be “safer, cleaner, and more easily witnessed” than Bruno Hauptman’s. According to the \textit{Beobachter}, the cartoon epitomized both “the hate of these sport enthusiasts against all German [athletes]” and “the hate against all Germans which prevails in the editor’s offices of the American press.”\textsuperscript{99} In addition, the article criticized promotional posters for the fight that had featured the American and German flags facing each other, questioning the decision to display Schmeling with the “flag of the Jew republic from November 1918” instead of the Nazi flag.\textsuperscript{100}

Many fans—including non-Germans—also tried to assess the significance of a small Jewish boycott that had threatened the bout. While the Jewish community would not
stage a large boycott until the 1938 rematch, Schmeling played down his German background and minimized the political implications of the fight, possibly in response to such uneasiness. According to the New York Sun, Schmeling asked, “What has Hitler to do with me? He is a politician. I am a Sportsman.” The German also lauded America's Olympic athletes, wishing them luck at the upcoming Berlin games. Most fans assumed, however, that the lower turnout for the bout was due instead to the alleged lack of competition and a one-day rain delay.

More important for many in the American-Fascist press was that the successful promotion and scheduling of big fights and the road to the heavyweight championship appeared to run through promoter Mike Jacobs, a Jew. The New York Neue Volks-Zeitung lamented Jacobs’ role in the recent resurgence of boxing, cynically claiming that Schmeling had to walk “hand in hand with Mike Jacobs” if he wished to have a chance at Braddock. When criticizing the “Jewish flag” displayed on promotional materials, the Beobachter asked, “Did one have fear to show the swastika flag? Or is the answer to this question to be looked for with Schmeling’s Jewish manager?” Even more troubling was that Schmeling’s own trainer and handler of his American affairs, Joe Jacobs, was also a Jew: an observation that led to further conspiracy theories and left a bitter taste to the jubilation surrounding the German’s victory. Unfortunately, Jacobs would appease German animosity throughout the decade by saluting the führer, laughing off boycott threats, and proclaiming that “most of the trouble with the Jews over there [Germany] is caused by the Jews in this country [America].”

Nevertheless, what had been the “Louis question” for the Southern press was now the “Jewish question” for German-American boxing fans, and in the two years following Schmeling’s upset, the German-American press would continue to rally against the threat of “Boykatteure” and in support of “our Max.” Interestingly, upon Schmeling’s loss to Louis in 1938, the German-American press would engage in a moment of anxiety and finger pointing similar to the black press and its reaction to Louis’ defeat. The Beobachter, a pro-regime paper “for a United Germandom in America and the Homeland,” criticized the “dirty sportsmanship” of the second fight and claimed that “Max Schmeling was never to be allowed to lift the heavyweight boxing championship and take it to Germany.”

Conclusion

Only two years earlier, many African Americans were asking a question: would a black boxer be allowed to take the championship from a white man and bring it home to the South? An examination of the discourse surrounding the events at Yankee Stadium on June 19, 1936, reveals that the answer was much more complex than many histories of Joe Louis would have us believe. Between 1936 and 1938, circumstances shifted dramatically along the political and social spectrum, the effects of which played out in the realm of popular culture and presented themselves in the stark reception to Louis and Schmeling in 1938. Louis was now a black champion for a white people, and Schmeling was told to go home.

Overall, we are left with the triumph of Louis’ career—his success in the ring and market, his importance to the war effort, and his ability to transcend social structures and move from “race hero” to “national hero.” Yet in every cultural formation of a hero, a
difficult and tedious constructing process strengthens the persona and endears the character to his or her support base. Histories of Joe Louis must not neglect to address that process and thereby minimize both his importance as a cultural hero to the formation of American patriotic sentiment and his significance as a spokesman for the aspirations of the African-American community. What happened to Joe Louis in 1938 is what we would all love to remember. What happened in 1936 is what we must never forget.


6A June 25, 1935, Washington Post editorial cartoon depicts Louis as “a defensive, little Ethiopia” and Carnera as “an aggressive, behemoth Italy.” Reproduced in Mead, Champion, 111.


12Van Ness, “Louis Celebrates 22nd Birthday.”

13Hannagan, “Black Gold,” 76.


15Mead, Champion, 34.


17Ibid., 14, 78.
Ibid., 7.
21Ibid.
23Young, “Joe Louis,” 123.
24Ibid.
26Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*, 104-105. See also Young, “Joe Louis,” 112.
28Ibid.
31Rea, “Press Box.”
32Young, “Joe Louis,” 105-106.
33Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*, 107.
34“Max is ‘Sacrifice’ to Dynamite-Laden Fists of Joe Louis,” *Jackson* (Miss.) *Clarion-Ledger*, 18 June 1936.
42*Die Burger*, cited in Edmonds, *Joe Louis*, 77. Unfortunately, Edmonds does not include a specific citation for the German newspaper.
43Ibid.
47*Chicago Sonntagpost*, 31 May 1936, p. 16.
50Ibid.
54 Time, 29 June 1936, p. 36.
62 Ibid.
64 “Louis’s Stepfather Not Told of Result.”
69 “Louis’s Stepfather Not Told of Result.”
70 Ibid.
78 “Why Louis Lost.”
90“Here’s the Winner,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, 20 June 1936.
91Wade, “Max Schmeling.”
97“Fight Excitement Causes 12 Deaths.”
98“Germany is Proud of Max Schmeling,” *Deutscher Weckruf und Beobachter* (N.Y.), 9 July 1936, p. 4.
100Ibid.
101Louis himself recalled certain rumors that may have upset attendance at the fight. In one of his autobiographies he wrote, “What did bother me and Mike Jacobs was the box office receipts. He had expected a crowd of 85,000, and five days before the fight less than 50,000 tickets were sold. We found out later that some Jewish organization had sent out a big batch of flyers to storekeepers asking them to boycott the fight because Schmeling ‘represented’ Nazi Germany. The whole thing made me uneasy.” Joe Louis, *Joe Louis: My Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, 1978), 85-86. Several groups on both sides of the Atlantic unsuccessfully called for boycotts, including the NAACP, the Anti-Nazi League, and the German *Reich Sports Journal*. Young, “Joe Louis,” 126.
104Young, “Joe Louis,” 102.
107“Epilogue to the Schmeling Victory.”
108Ibid.