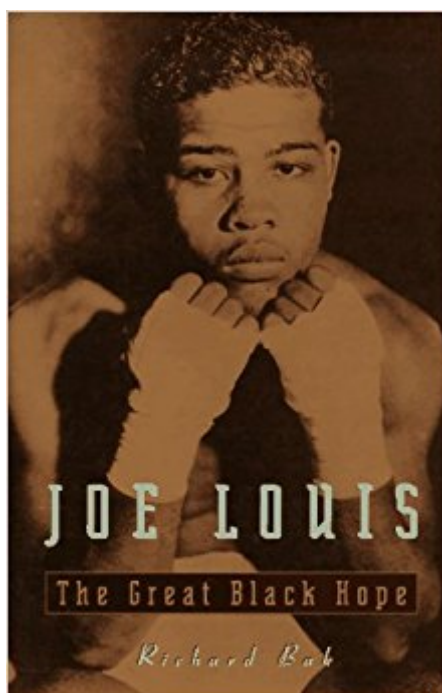


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Joe Louis: The Great Black Hope



Synopsis

More than a simple biography, Joe Louis provides an in-depth look at what constitutes a "hero" in America's black community. As much as any drug store sit-in, civil rights march, or Senate Hill bill, Louis' fists figuratively and literally demolished the myth of white supremacy; his quiet dignity and unquestioned patriotism opened the door for the wave of black athletes who followed him. 32 pages of photos, many in color.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This biography of heavyweight boxing champ Louis provides not just an account of Louis' career, but an accompanying survey of what makes a 'hero' in American black community eyes. Louis helped force the integration of America, opening the door for other black athletes: this explores his impact on black interests as a whole. -- Midwest Book Review

Richard Bak, a native of Detroit, is the author of eight books, including the critically acclaimed Lou Gehrig: An American Genius and Ty Cobb: His Tumultuous Life and Times. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

Probably the best Joe Louis biography I've ever seen. I'm especially interested in Joe Louis in his retirement years, and this book covers it well.

Excellent read! Thought I knew more about Joe Louis and his life before reading this. Wow, was I

mistaken.

As a boxing fan a must read. A great fighter. Held the title longer than anyone else.

Richard Bak was born and raised in Detroit - the town where Joe Louis learned the sporting craft of boxing. He does a very good job in his biography of Joe Louis to capture the socio-political context of the events in the life of Joe Louis and to demonstrate how that context affected the decisions and actions of Joe Louis in his life and his boxing career. After 3 pages of acknowledgments and a prologue are 12 chapters: chapter 1) From `Bama to Black Bottom; chapter 2) A Punch in Either Hand; chapter 3) The Long Shadow of Papa Jack; chapter 4) No Ordinary Joe; chapter 5) Tan Tarzan, Black Messiah; chapter 6) Champion of All, Save One; chapter 7) Knocking Out Hitler; chapter 8) Bummin'; chapter 9) On God's Side; chapter 10) Cruel Twilight; chapter 11) No Joe Louis, No Jackie Robinson; and chapter 12) Your Whole Life is Your Funeral. These chapters are followed by a 3-paged appendix of Joe's Prize Fighting Ring Record, a 5-paged bibliography, and a 9-paged index. Altogether there are 320 pages between the covers with 58 photos. In chapter 1, we learn that Joe Louis was born Joe Louis Barrow in the desegregated State of Alabama. His stepfather relocated Joe and his family to the racist city of Detroit but with integrated schools where Ford was hiring and paying good wages. Joe had a speech impediment, was bored with schoolwork, but loved learning by doing - especially flag duty. In chapter 2, Joe had a percipient teacher who recommended that Joe enroll at vocational school where he could learn skills according to Joe's kinesthetic learning style. He also took up amateur boxing and eventually became the national AAU and Golden Gloves national champion. He compiled an amateur record of 50 wins (43 by knockout) and 4 losses. In chapter 3, Joe made the decision to become a prize fighter. When boxing for money, rules are not followed as they are in amateur boxing. So flagrant are the fixes and rules violations that it's best not to refer to prize fighting as boxing. Bak tells us about Jack Johnson and how he perfected his boxing craft while in jail for illegally prizefighting with his cellmate who had just knocked him out. Bak says that after Johnson became heavyweight champion of the world that he "inflamed public opinion with his open dalliances with women, including his second wife" (p53). Joe Louis's publicists gave Joe an opposite spin - "a God-fearing, Bible-reading, clean-living young man . . . neither a showoff nor a dummy" (p75). In chapter 4, Joe has his first prizefight on the 4th of July, 1934. One week later, Joe fought his second fight. Eventually, Joe caught the attention of Jewish-American fight promoter Mike Jacobs. Joe said in his autobiography - "If it wasn't for Mike Jacobs I would never have got to be champion" (p87). In this

chapter, Joe demolished the Italian giant Primo Carnera at the time when Mussolini had just invaded the starving land of Ethiopia while waving white superiority. Joe Louis gave Mussolini a black eye. Chapter 5 explains how "Joe's handlers understood that it was crucial to develop and maintain a favorable public image in order to win acceptance by white America" (p110). In chapter 6, we learn that German fighter Max Schmeling was making a comeback and that Hitler did not want the heavyweight champion - Jewish-American Max Baer, fighting Schmeling and possibly giving Hitler and his theory of white supremacy a black eye like Mussolini suffered when Joe Louis knocked out Primo Carnera. Instead, Schmeling fought Joe Louis. Schmeling was confident that he could defeat Louis, saying "I see something" - he saw how Joe dropped his left after a jab and was subsequently open for a right cross. In their fight, Schmeling dropped Joe several times before delivering the knockout. Fight announcers downplayed any notions of white supremacy but many in the audience were giving voice to it. Back in Germany, Hitler and his Nazis were ecstatic. Schmeling was not allowed by U.S. boxing officials to fight for the heavyweight title at that time. Meanwhile Joe bounced back quickly and eventually knocked out Braddock to become the heavyweight champion of the world. In chapter 7, Joe had his rematch with Schmeling where he knocked him out in the first round after hitting him so hard to the body that he squealed like a pig. Hitler was humiliated and Joe became America's boxing patriot. In chapter 8, Joe fought a series of 'bums'. In 1936, he paused to go to Hollywood to make a boxing film for the Jewish-American cartel called "Spirit of Youth". Here Bak reveals Joe's penchant for white women and the collusion among the black media to hide his indiscretions from the white public. In chapter 9, Bak makes short shrift of the Louis-Conn fight. And he doesn't say a word about FDR provoking the Japanese to retaliate, which they did at Pearl Harbor. Nor does he say that Winston Churchill came up with the Pearl Harbor plan in order to suck America back into the second part of the World War. Americans were opposed to making the mistake they had made in the first part of the World War, which was to ignore Thomas Jefferson's maxim of "peace and friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none". But after FDR allowed the Japanese to hit U.S. naval ships at Pearl Harbor, Americans went war crazy. Joe said "I was mad, I was furious, you name it" (p203). Joe and Billy Conn joined the Army as enlisted, while non-Irish white boxers were made officers. Joe and Billy gave boxing exhibitions while Joe noted Billy's weaknesses for a future rematch after the war. The remaining chapters tell a tragic story of Joe's fight with the IRS. It's a story where he continually gets pummeled with interest and penalties until he marries Martha Malone Jefferson, California's first black female lawyer, and she gets the IRS to stop hounding him although they never erased the debt. And after he died, the government buried his body in their cemetery at Arlington. There is also the story of how Joe panicked after the

mob killed his friend Sonny Liston. Bak doesn't tell us that Joe had to hide out in a Denver psychiatric hospital in order to be safe from the mob, while his wife convinced the mob that his "paranoid delusions" would discredit him if he ever repeated anything that Liston had told him. In short, Bak did a great job dealing with a symbol of black power, a symbol of nationalism, and a man with many weaknesses outside of the ring. I am humbled to review this.

This is an outstanding book. It's enlightening entertaining and very enjoyable. JL's life from early childhood in Alabama to his youth in Detroit is clearly written. His amateur career is well documented as are all his professional fights. His boxing coterie and family life are also well drawn. I didn't know much about JL before reading this book, but I came away liking him very much and obviously respecting his boxing abilities. Mr. Bak has written an instructive and very enlightening book.

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