

Joe Louis, the Southern Press, and the “Fight of the Century”

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*Joe Louis, the Southern Press, and the “Fight of the Century” . . .
democracy in race relations will never be achieved until
the minds of the people are changed. The direct route
to these minds is through the great agencies
of mass communication.*

L.D. Reddick, historian and civil rights activist (1944)¹

A number of historians have argued that the second fight between African American boxing great Joe Louis and the German fighter Max Schmeling was the “fight of the century.” Coming two years after their first fight, which Schmeling won in twelve tough rounds to give Louis his only loss, the rematch was a much-anticipated affair. However, from a modern perspective, it seems difficult to justify the *fight of the century* label based solely upon the fight, which was one of the shortest and most one-sided championship bouts in the history of boxing. Certainly, there must be some other explanation for its alleged infamy. Coming three and a half years before Germany declared war on the United States (occurring after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor), some of these authors have argued that the fight’s notoriety came because the world was teetering on the brink of war. As a result, they believe that the fight took on additional significance as a battle of good versus evil—Louis, representing democracy and freedom, and Schmeling, fascism and racial bondage. While it is questionable whether Louis saw himself in this light, it seems certain that Schmeling, who only a few months later would hide two Jewish children during *Kristallnacht*, did not.

Although the perception that war was inevitable or even that Germany was the enemy of the United States in the middle of 1938 has been challenged,² these historians have based their arguments on two interrelated assumptions: (1) the fight was widely perceived by the public as one of “freedom against fascism”³ and (2) Joe Louis enjoyed wide enough popularity to be seen as the great American “hope.”

One example is David Margolick’s book *Beyond Glory: Joe Louis vs. Max Schmeling, and a World on the Brink*, which takes the position that the fight took on greater symbolic meaning than any other sporting event in history, affecting “both the future of race relations and the prestige of two powerful nations.” Margolick, relying largely upon quotes from sportswriters of the day, presents a unified America

squarely behind Louis. Citing one writer from the *New York Evening Journal* and another from *Ring* magazine, the author concludes that Americans “generally liked” Louis and that he was seen as a “darn good” American.⁴

Taking a similar stance, Patrick Myler calls the fight “the most politically charged event in boxing history.”⁵ His book *Ring of Hate: Joe Louis vs. Max Schmeling: The Fight of the Century* also stresses the racial and international implications of the fight while concluding that Louis had the backing of masses of Americans.

The world was on a direct course toward war, and the boxers found themselves reluctant pawns in the political game. The fight was seen as symbolizing the looming conflict between the United States and Germany . . . Americans put their faith in Louis to debunk the Aryan “master race” theory by thrashing Hitler’s hero.⁶

Once again, Louis was the great American hope.

Lewis Erenberg’s *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation: Louis vs. Schmeling* refers to Joe Louis as someone who was seen as “an all-American hero” at the time of this fight.⁷ He also sees the issue of race as half-full when it came to the American press, stating that for “every derogatory image of Louis in the white press, there emerged a portrait of him as a black producer hero, a figure of common decency and fair play.”⁸ However, admitting to such widespread feelings of both disrespect and respect does not provide much evidence that Louis was depicted as representing all, or even most, Americans.

In making the argument that Louis represented American democracy and freedom, these authors have had to justify how Louis, an African American born into a poor Alabama sharecropping family, could come to represent America—especially the American South, where treatment of African Americans was akin to that of Jews in Germany. Once again, the evidence for the assumption that Louis symbolized democracy and freedom seems to have originated with syndicated sportswriters of the day. After all, they did witness thousands of Americans flocking to Louis’s fights and likely observed that their articles on boxing were being published by many member newspapers. However, all of Louis’s important 1930s fights occurred in Chicago or the greater New York City area and thus were reported from places that may have been more accommodating to African Americans than may have been the case elsewhere. For example, African Americans could attend Louis’s fights without being segregated, although most sat in the “cheap seats.”⁹ Also, national sportswriters covering Louis’s fights worked almost exclusively in the Northeast and may not have had a great deal of information on how Joe Louis was received in other areas of the country.

Therefore, it is the aim of this study to look more closely at the mainstream daily press to try to shed more light on how white Americans, in the North and West and in the Deep South, were presented the Louis vs. Schmeling fight of June 22, 1938. This content analysis begins with the premise that journalists and editors monitor their audience’s mood, values, and interests. They do this to communicate with their readers within boundaries that are acceptable to them in order to be able to continue their conversation and mutual reliance over time.¹⁰ Supporting this contention, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, in *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion—Our Social Skin*, observed that public opinion is based upon fear and conformity rather

than on information and judgment alone. Because people fear social isolation, they constantly monitor their surroundings to make sure that they are conforming with it. They do this so that they will not be ridiculed or thought less of by others. As a result, most people need to feel certain that others have accepted their position before risking a public stance on any given issue.¹¹

This process occurs when newspaper journalists and editors monitor the climate of opinion in their community and attempt to predict what is important or off-limits for their readers—it was especially alive when it came to the issue of race in the American South. Hodding Carter III, reporter and managing editor for the *Greenville (Mississippi) Delta Democrat-Times* from 1959 to 1977, stated:

I think that many of the failures of the Southern press, when there have been failures, go back to a particularly human desire not to alienate, not to be totally alienated from, the small communities in which one lives. This is over and above the fact that most newspapers in America today . . . are in a large sense representatives of the status quo.¹²

Another relevant example comes from Laurel Leff, author of *Buried by the Times: The Holocaust and America's Most Important Newspaper*, who studied this phenomenon as it related to the rescue of European Jews in the 1930s and 1940s American press. There, she argued that journalists were well aware of the prevalence of antisemitism in American life and reported accordingly by avoiding or trivializing the treatment of Jews in Germany.¹³ Thus, there are many ways that newspaper articles, or the lack of them, can reflect journalists' and editors' perceptions of their readers. As such, insight into their readers' beliefs and worldviews might be revealed by studying how journalists and editors presented a particular topic to their readers.

African American Life in the United States in the 1930s

To live in the American South during the 1930s was to live in a racial caste system controlled by whites, supported by law, and ritualized by local practice.¹⁴ It was also a place where the doctrine of “separate but equal” could be seen in every aspect of daily life beginning with birth in a segregated hospital and ending with burial in a segregated cemetery. In between, African Americans endured inferior and underfunded public services, were prevented from voting, were treated unfairly in courts of law, and constantly feared for their own and their loved ones' safety. Lynchings, the most extreme form of abuse, were all too commonplace as African Americans could be brutally murdered by a mob that would never be charged with a crime.¹⁵

Racial injustice also took on more routine forms of control and was not confined to the South. In *An American Dilemma*, Gunnar Myrdal found racial prejudice to be a national problem that had many dimensions.

The economic situation of the Negroes in America is pathological. Except for a small minority enjoying upper or middle class status, the masses of American Negroes, in the rural South and in the segregated slum quarters in Southern and Northern cities, are destitute.¹⁶

Contributing to the economic status of African Americans was the physical segregation of the races in the United States, which was supported by the regional news presses. In the North, the press left the “Negro problem” invisible and out of their readers’ consciousness, just as the urban slums there were rarely seen or considered by whites. In the South, the press was a critical part of the institutionalization of Jim Crow, which controlled African Americans. There, the Southern press was geared toward providing negative publicity for their readers.¹⁷ As Pulitzer Prize winner and editor-publisher of the *Pascagoula* (Mississippi) *Chronicle* from 1948 to 1963, Ira Harkey, observed about Mississippi newspapers:

Few of the state’s newspapers published announcements of black babies or black marriages, but they published announcements for white babies born and white marriages. No Negro school honor rolls appeared, no cast members of the black school play, no king and queen of the black prom. But a Negro in trouble got space. A captured black fugitive even got his picture in the paper—standing in cuffs and leg irons between grinning deputies, with a bored bloodhound lolling at his feet.¹⁸

To defy such practices risked more than circulation numbers, as historian Susan Weill observed:

The daily newspapers in Mississippi during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s were written, edited and published in an ultraconservative and intolerant place. Mississippi editors who failed to conform did not face just verbal disapproval. Boycotts, bombs and bullets were used.¹⁹

Sports in the 1930s reflected these racial divisions. Professional baseball had successfully excluded African Americans by 1899, less than five years after the *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court ruling.²⁰ As the African American heavyweight champion Jack Johnson proved in 1910, boxing did not officially exclude African Americans; however, most white champions up to and including Jack Dempsey refused to fight African American fighters (and were never forced to by boxing’s hierarchy).²¹ Thus, as in baseball, an unofficial “ban” prevented African American athletes from participation. Professional football, though not a popular sport throughout the 1920s and 1930s, was integrated in the early 1930s thanks largely to a few teams that overlooked the color of a few great African American players in order to put the best possible team on the field. However, professional football officially banned African American players for eleven years beginning in 1934.²²

As was the case with civil rights for African Americans in the 1930s, there were some positive changes in sports. Beginning in 1932, African Americans could compete in the Olympic Games. And even if most white newspapers in the South downplayed the accomplishments that African Americans made at the 1936 Berlin Games, many other Americans were still able to learn of the exploits of Jesse Owens, Ralph Metcalf, and Archie Williams, among others.²³ This was especially the case for readers of the black press, which used their success as an example of how African Americans could succeed in any field.²⁴ While few changes would occur to the color line in major league baseball until after the war, a few owners tried unsuccessfully to bring the matter up for debate in the mid-1930s. It is also clear that the issue of desegregating major league baseball was often discussed at the highest levels. For example, in 1938 one owner admitted to “the fact that the

time is not far off when colored players will take their places beside those of other races in the major leagues” while the president of the National league talked of its “inevitability.”²⁵

Some changes were also occurring in college athletics. In the South, where black and white athletic competition was segregated by law until the 1960s and in practice in some cases until the 1970s, subtle changes in the “gentleman’s agreement,” whereby Northern schools would have their African American players sit out athletic contests against Southern schools, began in the 1930s. Called by historian Charles Martin the “second period” of the gentleman’s agreement, which lasted from the 1930s to the 1950s, Northern and Southern universities increasingly ignored the gentleman’s agreement in order to compete for the higher rankings and bigger paydays that intersectional play promised.²⁶

As such, because there was such a contrast in the motivations and practices of the various regional presses and their readers, it is expected that coverage of the Louis vs. Schmeling fight will reflect some of these differences; uncovering these differences is the purpose of this study.

Methodology

This content analysis will study mainstream newspaper coverage of the Joe Louis vs. Max Schmeling fight of June 22, 1938. It includes articles from forty-four daily newspapers in twelve states that were categorized into the regions Deep South and the North and West (hereafter: North/West).²⁷ Each of the articles was provided by one of the news wire services, which had contracted with the newspapers to provide them with news articles on a wide range of subjects. The newspapers’ editors then chose what articles to print, how much of the original article would be cut or added to, and what the headline would read. As such, only on rare occasions would any two articles be the same. Editors would make all of these choices based upon their perception of their readers’ (and their own) interests, values, and beliefs. By analyzing and quantifying these newspaper artifacts, the hope is to shed light on these newspaper editors and their readers.

Information from each relevant article that appeared in these papers was recorded based upon where the article appeared (on the front or sports pages), whether it had a banner headline or a smaller title, and who the author was. The same was done for each photograph that appeared in these papers. Newspapers were chosen for their geographic diversity within the region and state. To ensure that editors needed to be selective in choosing which articles to publish (and would not just choose to publish all that was available), the largest newspapers that had the most space to fill were avoided. In addition, another advantage of using small to medium sized newspapers is that these editors would have a more intimate relationship with their readers.

The Study

Table 1 displays the two regions, the Deep South and the North/West, the average number of pages per weekday issue, and the average number of articles that the regions’ newspapers published during the Louis vs. Schmeling pre- and postfight coverage (June 16 to June 24, 1938). There, the average number of articles per

newspaper in the North/West region for the Louis vs. Schmeling fight (13.4) very nearly doubled that of the Deep South (6.8). There are a number of possible explanations for such a significant difference.

1. The group of newspapers in the study from the North/West region had more pages per issue in which to print news, making it more likely that additional wire service articles might be published.
2. Editors in the Deep South did not perceive boxing to be as important to their readers as did editors from the North/West.
3. Editors in the Deep South perceived their readers to be more intolerant or uninterested in news about an African American boxing champion.

Looking at the average size of the newspapers, it is apparent that the North/West papers in this study had slightly *less* space to fill than their counterparts in the Deep South. In addition, to determine whether readers in the Deep South were not the avid boxing fans as were their counterparts in the North/West, coverage of a comparable championship fight in which two white boxers fought was assessed to determine whether similar differences existed between the two regions. The closest such heavyweight championship fight, chronologically, was the Max Baer vs. James Braddock fight of June 13, 1935 in Long Island City, NY. Referring to Table 1 again, coverage of this fight in the Deep South averaged nearly twice as many articles per newspaper (12.7) than was the case for its coverage of the Louis vs. Schmeling fight (6.8). In addition, the average number of articles per newspaper covering the Baer vs. Braddock fight in the Deep South was significantly higher (12.7) than was the coverage in the North/West (8.8). Supporting the notion that boxing in the Deep South was at least as popular as it was in the North/West was the prevalence of front page articles in the Deep South for the Baer vs. Braddock fight.

Strengthening the case that these Deep South editors were uncomfortable publishing many articles about a successful African American champion is the observation that there was not any preflight rhetoric that attempted to build up any sort of nationalistic sentiment on behalf of Joe Louis. He was never depicted as bearing the burden of representing freedom against tyranny or any other “us vs. them” scenario. In fact, the only comment regarding these sorts of issues that occurred in any of these Deep South newspapers appeared in a small article on the bottom of the sports page in the *Birmingham (Alabama) News* that stated, “Newspapers do not say it, but it is tacitly understood that a Louis victory would be taken here

Table 1 Coverage of the Louis vs. Schmeling and Baer vs. Braddock Fights by Region

Region	Week of June 22, 1938: Average Number of Pages per Newspaper	Louis vs. Schmeling, June 22, 1938: Average Number of Articles per Newspaper	Baer vs. Braddock, June 13, 1935: Average Number of Articles per Newspaper
Deep South, n = 22	12.9	6.8	12.7
North/West, n = 22	12.7	13.4	8.8

[in Germany] as a disgrace from the Nazi racial viewpoint.”²⁸ The only possible postfight reference that could be considered in any way nationalistic was a single headline from the *Jackson (Mississippi) Daily News* sports page that proclaimed, “Brown Bomber Explodes Germany’s Pugilistic Myth.”²⁹ In fact, the only reference in the Deep South regarding this fight being unique in any way came from sportswriter Bill Braucher, who stated that the matchup between a champion and a fighter who had beaten him only two years before made “the meeting of Louis and Schmeling strangely different from any other heavyweight championship battle in the ring’s long history.”³⁰

According to the *Birmingham (Alabama) News* article titled “Boxing Writers Think Joe Louis Will Win Bout,” sixty percent of national sportswriters favored Louis over Schmeling.³¹ However, articles predicting a win by Louis did not appear in these Deep South newspapers, even though writers like Alan Gould, Eddie Brietz, and Harry Grayson, who had picked Louis to win, published columns that appeared there regularly. However, columnists like Henry McLemore and Bill Braucher did have articles published in the Deep South expressing their belief that Schmeling would win,³² as did the popular Grantland Rice, who suggested that the odds, at two to one in favor of Louis, were wrong and should have been “even money” because he believed that Schmeling had an excellent chance to win.³³

There were other signs that Schmeling was portrayed as a favorite in the Deep South. First, Max Schmeling was often referred to in headlines as “Max” or “Maxie,” whereas Joe Louis was either “Louis” or the “Negro Champion.” In addition, many postfight articles showed concern for Schmeling and reported on his condition days after the fight. As such, it seems apparent that Schmeling was not perceived as some kind of enemy. If anything, the press in the Deep South preferred Schmeling to Louis.

Press coverage in the North/West was much more diverse, ranging from New York State, where coverage was most like what Erenberg, Margolick, and Myler argued was happening across the country, to Wisconsin, which was more like what one might have expected to see in the Deep South. In addition, whereas the Deep South press used the Associated Press widely, there were many newspapers in the North/West that utilized the United Press. On its face this may not seem like an important distinction but for one exception: the Associated Press sportswriters were less likely to include racially charged language in their reports.

Coverage of the fight in the five newspapers from New York, the *Canandaigua Daily Messenger*, the *Dunkirk Evening Observer*, the *Kingston Daily Freeman*, the *Middletown Times Herald*, and the *Syracuse Herald*, did include articles that played up the international aspect of the fight. For example, there was one United Press article written by Henry McLemore covering his interview with Max Schmeling. Therein, McLemore proclaimed that a “lie detector should be part of the standard equipment of a fight critic” because Schmeling stated that he was not a Nazi party member, was not concerned with politics, and that “Adolf Hitler was a much too busy man to be interested in such a minor person” as him.³⁴ There were also a number of places where the fight was described as pitting a German or occasionally, a Nazi, against a Negro. For example, Harry Grayson, sports editor for the Newspaper Enterprise Association wire service, predicted that Schmeling had more to lose than Louis given the “Nazi belief in the physical superiority of the Aryans,” adding that his “future in the Fatherland would be shot” if he lost the

fight.³⁵ Finally, two New York newspapers ran an article on how Germany was in shock after hearing that Schmeling, the great “Aryan hope,” lost the fight.³⁶ While this may not seem like a great deal of coverage, it was certainly more concentrated than anywhere else in the study.

There were other ways that press coverage differed in the North/West region. First, newspaper editors published columnists’ predictions of a Joe Louis victory along with those of Max Schmeling. For example, Harry Grayson’s article “Louis Is Logical Choice Over Max in Coming Battle,”³⁷ Gayle Talbot’s “Louis Favored Over Schmeling in N. Y. Match,”³⁸ and Paul Mickelson’s column, “Sports Trail,”³⁹ all openly chose Louis to win. Also, as was the case with Schmeling in the Deep South, newspapers in the North/West often addressed Louis as “Joe” or the “Champion.” Here, the *Santa Fe New Mexican* ran the large banner headline “Max and Joe Meet Tonight After Two Years”⁴⁰ and the *Alton (Illinois) Evening Telegraph* published an article entitled “Schmeling Calm as Joe Threatens to Skin Him Alive.”⁴¹ Finally, when the word *Negro* was used in the North/West region, it was capitalized a majority of the time, showing a form of respect similar to the use of courtesy titles. For example, while only 13.6% of these Deep South newspapers used an upper case *N* in the word *Negro*, 65% of the North/West newspapers did. Because this would have involved formal editorial policy on the part of individual newspapers, it is apparent that this was a conscious way to express a form of respect or, of course, a lack of it.

“Ah’m Sho’ Nuff Champeen Now”

Joseph Boskin traces back the existence of “Sambo,” a set of minstrel character stereotypes that had emerged in the United States as early as the seventeenth century. Even though Sambo was the “first truly indigenous American humor character,” Boskin finds Sambo to be a descendant of the earlier European court jesters. However, the American version lacked the few positive qualities of his forefather, having been created without the wisdom or independence associated with its much older kin.⁴² Thus, even though he always had a smile painted on his face, Sambo, like the smile, would forever be controlled:

Sambo was an extraordinary type of social control, at once extremely subtle, devious, and encompassing. To exercise a high degree of control meant also to be able to manipulate the full range of humor; to create, ultimately, an insidious type of buffoon. To make the black male into an object of laughter, and, conversely, to force him to devise laughter, was to strip him of masculinity, dignity, and self-possession. Sambo was, then, an illustration of humor as a device of oppression, and one of the most potent in American popular culture. The ultimate objective for whites was to effect mastery; to render the black male powerless as a potential warrior, as a sexual competitor, as an economic adversary.⁴³

Early in the twentieth century, depictions of minstrel characters evolved into character stereotypes in new modes of popular culture, like film, that included, according to film historian David Bogle, “Toms,” “Coons,” “Mammies,” and “Black

Bucks.” As had always been the case, the purpose of these characters was to project inferiority or animal-like qualities onto African Americans. For example, the character of the Coon, depicted as harmless and congenial, yet lazy and unintelligent, made the transition to film with the child “pickaninny” characters of the 1920s and the acting of Stepin Fetchit in 1929.⁴⁴ In addition, the “Black Buck” character role, first introduced to film in D. W. Griffiths’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), became the most damaging and enduring character stereotype because it depicted African American males as “big, bad niggers, oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh.” This character stereotype fed into existing perceptions that supported lynching and violence against African Americans.⁴⁵ As it evolved into film, the Black Buck character role can be observed in other forms of popular culture, like professional sports. Here, the first African American boxing champion, Jack Johnson, whose many high-profile relationships with white women helped to characterize him as a dangerous Black Buck. Eventually, Johnson was legally lynched via the Mann Act because his relationships with white women were viewed as a heinous crime.⁴⁶

In the 1930s, the Sambo character could be found in just about any newspaper in the Deep South, and with less frequency elsewhere. For example, a number of newspapers carried “Hambone’s Meditations,” a cartoon that appeared with regularity on two newspapers’ front pages in this study.⁴⁷ Hambone fits the Coon genre of characters by speaking in “dialect” and depicting African Americans as childlike, uneducated, and lacking intelligence. In one cartoon, Hambone is shown doing laundry in a washtub and exclaiming, “Pahson ax Aunt Cherry why she ain’ git ma’ied en she ’low, “How in de worl’ is I gwine git ma’ied by mahse’f!”⁴⁸

Other Coon-like characters could be found in the form of single-frame cartoons that were observed in newspapers throughout the country. For example, a single-frame cartoon entitled “In All Innocence” showed a child in blackface being followed by a flock of chickens that were eating corn that was falling out of the sack he was carrying. When told that he was “spillin’” all his corn and “chickens from everywhere” were following him home, he remarked, “You tellin’ me?”—the implication being that African Americans, even the young, were chicken thieves.⁴⁹

There were a number of ways that Joe Louis was depicted in the Coon minstrel character stereotype. For example, Associated Press syndicated sportswriter Drew Middleton authored an article that had Louis speaking in dialect after the victory. Here, Louis’s proclamation “Ah’m sho’ nuff champeen now” could be found in many areas of the country. For example, in Wisconsin, a state with a large German American population, Louis’s “quote” appeared in some form in all four newspapers in this study.⁵⁰ However, while Middleton’s depiction of Louis appeared in many Deep South newspapers,⁵¹ it was published only rarely in the other North/West newspapers outside of Wisconsin.

It was also common to depict Louis as lazy or slow. For example, a front-page article by United Press’s Henry McLemore began, “Joe Louis, a slow and lazy colored boy from the canebrakes of Alabama.”⁵² Elsewhere, Louis’s intelligence was questioned. For instance, sportswriter M.L. Kelley stated that “Louis, being a black boy, has a lot of forgetting to do.” Another showing the caption of a photograph of Louis with his trainer, Jack Blackburn, lamented that it is “really too bad that Jack Blackburn, left, can’t think for Joe Louis.”⁵³

“He Is a Jungle Man”

In her study of jungle-horror films in the 1930s, film historian Rhona Berenstein concludes that African American males were often depicted as “monstrous dark animals” who had the ability to move from one species to another. As a popularly held belief dating back to the 1700s, this perception of African Americans managed to survive through the 1930s because it supported the mania regarding fears that African American males might have sexual relations with white women.⁵⁴

White fears of black male sexual aggression against white women were, not surprisingly, manufactured by whites themselves in the United States: first, to justify the physical and sexual abuse of blacks during slavery and, second, to defend lynching as a punishment to fit the “most” heinous crime.⁵⁵

Thus, depicting African American males as savages or dark animals was a social construction in the Black Buck character stereotype that implied a threat to white women in the minds of white men.

Learning a lesson from Jack Johnson, Joe Louis and his handlers were especially careful to avoid any appearance that he too might be perceived as having sexual relations with white women. However, this did not prevent Louis from being depicted as a savage dark animal. Here, the quality of not only being beastly and savage, but “interstitial,” what Berenstein defined as being able to move from one species to another, seemed to be attributed to Louis in his fight with Schmeling. Once again, the United Press’s popular columnist Henry McLemore led the way.

Looking back over last night’s fight, one is thankful that this boxing championship, the most primitive of sports, was held in a civilized setting. Had it been held in the jungle, with survival and not the championship at stake, it is no exaggeration to say that Schmeling . . . would be dead. Louis shed his mercy as easily as he did his bathrobe last night. When the bell rang . . . Louis shuffled out for the kill. . . . For some 15 seconds he stalked the German.⁵⁶

Then in an article the following day:

The slow motion picture of the 124 seconds of the Joe Louis–Max Schmeling fight is probably the most faithful recording ever made of human savagery. . . . I was appalled by the knowledge that this ruthless, unmerciful killer . . . was one and the same man as the Joe Louis whom I had just left a few minutes before . . . he is a jungle man, as completely primitive as any savage. . . . He fought instinctively and not by any man-made pattern.⁵⁷

However, McLemore was not the only writer who made these kinds of observations.

The 24-year-old Alabama Negro . . . turned loose an attack of such suddenness and ferocity that the German never had a chance. Beaten to the first punch by the Bomber’s snake-like left. . . . Panther-like, measuring his man, Louis stepped up quickly to deliver the finishing punch.⁵⁸

Like the black panther . . . Joe will stay in the woods until the last possible moment, and will not reach Madison Square Garden [for the official weigh-in] until a few minutes before he is scheduled to smile, shake hands, and be generally agreeable.⁵⁹

Like Adolf Hitler's belief that Jesse Owens and the other African American athletes at the 1936 Olympic Games had an unfair advantage because of their "primitive physiques,"⁶⁰ describing Louis as an animal helped to explain how a white man could lose to an African American. After all, how would any "civilized" athlete have a realistic chance against such a monstrous dark animal?

Joe Must Not Be Very Photogenic

Writing in the *Negro Digest* in 1946, Eldon Roark, an African American columnist with the *Memphis* (Tennessee) *Press-Scimitar*, noted how photographs of African Americans were censored in Southern newspapers. In fact, according to Roark there was an unwritten rule assuring that the "only Negroes who ever got their pictures in the papers were those who were dangling at the ends of ropes thrown over the limbs of trees."⁶¹

In a study of the photographic representation of African Americans in four major U.S. dailies, historian Paul Martin Lester found an absence of photos that included African Americans—although he did note a "remarkable" change over time. Here, Lester's pre-Civil Rights era data (1937–1952) is especially revealing. Therein, the lone Southern newspaper, the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, stood out for its near-total failure to publish photographs of African Americans. In fact, only 23 of the 16,958 photographs published in the *Times-Picayune* during the pre-Civil Rights period included an African American (.1%). The other three dailies, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *New York Times*, and the *San Francisco Chronicle*, were not at all generous either, although they averaged over 1200% more photographs than the *Times-Picayune*, with 1.3% of their photographs including African Americans. In addition, the three newspapers outside of the Deep South included more images of African American athletes than any other category, with a majority of all the photos in the study sports related. This number grew in the Civil Rights era (1957–1972) and again in the "modern era" (1978–1990).⁶² In all three periods, more than half of the photographs published of African Americans were athletes. Thus, competing in sports was one of the few ways African Americans could be publicly recognized for something positive.

During the period studied for the second Schmeling vs. Louis fight, the North/West carried more than twice as many photographs per newspaper than did the Deep South papers (5.58 to 2.59). However, even these numbers are somewhat misleading because published posed photos that only show Louis were few. Of the twenty-two Deep South newspapers in the study, six had no photos at all of the fight, four only showed Schmeling, and three only included distant action shots of the fight. That is not to say that the photojournalistic coverage in the other nine papers depicted Louis in a positive manner. The only posed photo of Louis in the *Huntsville* (Alabama) *Times* showed a "Droop-lidded Joe Louis," with both eyes nearly closed.⁶³ In addition, the title for the only non-fight photo of Louis in the *Birmingham* (Alabama) *News* utilized Middleton's "Ah'm Sho' Nuff Champeen Now" in the title⁶⁴ and his two photos in the *Jackson* (Mississippi) *Daily News* utilized the same image—one of Louis looking somewhat menacing.⁶⁵ The newspaper that seemed to be the most "flattering" to Louis in the Deep South was the *Florence* (South Carolina) *Morning News*, where the three photos of Louis were not obviously negative, but instead showed him with a blank, dull sort of stare.⁶⁶ As such, many of these photographs depicted Louis in some stereotypical way: from the tired, lazy, and unintelligent to the menacing Black Buck. There was not a

single photograph in these newspapers that depicted Louis as having a more human side—never was he shown smiling.

Photojournalistic coverage in the North/West contrasted with that of the Deep South, but with a few exceptions. In addition to carrying more than twice as many photos per newspaper covering the fight, ten of the twenty-two dailies published posed photographs of Louis that could be characterized as flattering. For example, the *Canadaigua* (New York) *Daily Press*, the *Kingston* (New York) *Daily Freeman*, and the *Syracuse* (New York) *Herald* all included photos of Louis smiling.⁶⁷ There was, however, one daily that did not publish any photographs of the fight and four that included only fight photos. Even though it was much less common, there were some negative depictions of Louis as well. For example, the *Manitowoc* (Wisconsin) *Herald-Times* published the “Droop-lidded Joe Louis” photo⁶⁸ and the *Rhineland* (Wisconsin) *Daily News* ran a photo of Louis under the title “Sho Nuff Champeen Now.”⁶⁹

Conclusion

Can publicity influence attitudes about race? There have been a number of studies that have concluded that the press can be quite influential in helping to create or continue perceptions of race. For example, historian L.D. Reddick sees the press as being better at this than other forms of media, such as film and radio.

The power of the press to influence public attitudes is obvious. The newspaper is unlike the movie and the radio which are essentially forms of mass entertainment. The press is deliberately a purveyor of news and opinion. It is a more permanent form than the others. It is older and is in far too many instances an integral part of the social structure based upon subordination of the Negro and others. The case of the Negro against the American press is a strong one.⁷⁰

Supporting Reddick’s conclusion is David Domke’s content analysis study of fourteen major U.S. dailies’ coverage of the Supreme Court’s rulings in the *Civil Rights Cases* of 1883 and *Plessy v. Ferguson* of 1896 that found “the mainstream press, through the selection and framing of language, news, and opinion, contributed to the outcome.”⁷¹ Also, Shanna Gildersleeve, in her work on the Scottsboro Boys trials of the 1930s, observed that the initial judgment in the Alabama courts was influenced by the many negative press reports in the South. Gildersleeve also argued that the African American and communist presses, along with a few Northern newspapers like the *New York Times*, won public support in the North and helped fuel an appeals process that eventually overturned many of the Alabama court decisions. For Gildersleeve, each region’s press influenced the outcome.⁷²

As news of a negative fashion has its effect, certainly news of a positive nature could help to break down existing prejudices, especially among those who did not have strongly formed opinions already—like the young. Along these lines, a number of sports historians have made the connection between the desegregation of baseball and Civil Rights in the United States. For example, Bruce Adelson argues in *Brushing Back Jim Crow: The Integration of Minor-League Baseball in the American South* that it was important for people of all races to see African American and white ballplayers playing side by side. As such, Adelson suggests that

the integration of baseball and other sports, coming after WWII, was an important factor in the success of the Civil Rights Movement. Here, the author supports this assertion with the voices of athletes and civil rights leaders alike.

The whites that were in the southern states were not used to seeing black and white people playing together. . . . As much as people talk about what the civil rights workers did by marching in the streets, we did some things in baseball. We proved that given the opportunity, we could do the same things as anybody else could do. [Henry Aaron]

Jackie Robinson showed white America that here's a black guy who can compete in what had been a white sport. . . . The athletes played an enormous role in breaking down barriers. . . . Those who are not there are going to read about it, follow it at some distance, are also affected by it. Human beings are affected by these things. [Julian Bond]⁷³

Did Louis's second fight with Schmeling have a similar effect? Certainly, there is ample evidence, based upon the many news reports of the celebrations in Harlem and the many other "darktowns" in Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Washington D.C., and elsewhere, that African Americans felt empowered by Louis's victory. It is also apparent that many North/West newspapers did not ignore the news of this successful African American, as Gunnar Myrdal might have expected. However, there is little evidence that white Americans, especially if they lived in the South, would have had their existing belief structures challenged in any way. In fact, because many of the published articles and photographs supported existing prejudices and stereotypes, the opposite would have been more likely the case.

Other than in the Northeast, coverage of the fight rarely displayed signs of the buildup that Margolick, Myler, and Erenberg described. In this respect, it makes sense that in the areas where the fight might draw ticket sales, such as New York, Philadelphia, and even Chicago, where trains came in for the fight, the rhetoric might be elevated to utilize any possible angle available to the promoters. In this context and for many of those in attendance or who listened on the radio in the Northeast, the nationalistic banter could have elevated the excitement of the fight. However, this rhetoric was not a national phenomenon. Joe Louis was not transformed into the great American hope defending the free world from Nazism in 1938. As such, he was still seen as many different things to many different people; for most Americans, however, he remained the "Negro Champion" rather than the great American hope. In the 1940s, this would begin change with his actions during World War II.⁷⁴

Notes

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3. David Margolick, *Beyond Glory: Joe Louis vs. Max Schmeling, and a World on the Brink* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 6.
4. *Ibid.*, 6–12.

5. Patrick Myler, *Ring of Hate: Joe Louis vs. Max Schmeling: The Fight of the Century* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2011), xii.
6. *Ibid.*, 2.
7. Lewis Erenberg, *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation: Louis vs. Schmeling* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 2.
8. *Ibid.*, 44.
9. Margolick, *Beyond Glory*, 11.
10. Studies that support the use of content analysis as an appropriate research method are many. See, for example, Daniel Rife, Stephen Lacy, and Frederick Fico, *Analyzing Media Messages: Using Quantitative Content Analysis in Research* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998); Guido Stempel III, David Weaver, and G. Cleveland Wilhoit (eds.), *Mass Communication Research and Theory* (Boston, MA: Pearson Education, 2003).
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13. Laurel Leff, “A Distinction Journalists Like to Ignore,” *Nieman Reports*, Summer (2006) 60: 86.
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19. Weill, *In a Madhouse’s Din*, 10.
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21. Jeffrey Sammons, *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 73–77.
22. John M. Carroll, “Fritz Pollard and Integration in Early Professional Football” in Scott Brooks and Charles K. Ross (eds.), *Race and Sport: the Struggle for Equality On and Off the Field* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2005), 3–14.
23. Robert Drake, “Jesse Who? Race, the Southern Press, and the 1936 Olympic Games,” *American Journalism*, 28:4 Fall (2011): 81–110.
24. David K. Wiggins, *Glory Bound: Black Athletes in a White America* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 78.
25. Tygiel, *Baseball’s Great Experiment*, 31–32.
26. Charles H. Martin, *Benching Jim Crow: The Rise and Fall of the Color Line in Southern College Sports, 1890-1980* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010), xiv–xvii.
27. In the Deep South: *Birmingham (AL) News, Decatur (AL) Daily, Dothan (AL) Eagle, Huntsville (AL) Times, Albany (GA) Herald, Dublin (GA) Courier-Herald, LaGrange (GA) Daily News, Macon (GA) Evening News, Valdosta (GA) Daily Times, Baton Rouge (LA) Morn-*

ing *Advocate*, *Monroe (LA) Morning World*, *Ruston (LA) Daily Leader*, *Greenville (MS) Daily Democrat-Times*, *Gulfport (MS) Daily Herald*, *Jackson (MS) Daily News*, *Meridian (MS) Star*, *Natchez (MS) Democrat*, *Vicksburg (MS) Evening Post*, *Charleston (SC) Evening Post*, *Columbia (SC) State*, *Florence (SC) Morning News*, *Greenville (SC) News*; In the North/West: *Yuma (AZ) Daily Sun*, *Hayward (CA) Review*, *San Mateo (CA) Times*, *Woodland (CA) Democrat*, *Alton (IL) Evening Telegraph*, *Edwardsville (IL) Intelligencer*, *Freeport (IL) Journal Standard*, *Albuquerque (NM) Journal*, *Las Vegas (NM) Optic*, *Santa Fe (NM) New Mexican*, *Canandaigua (NY) Daily Messenger*, *Dunkirk (NY) Evening Observer*, *Kingston (NY) Daily Freeman*, *Middletown (NY) Times Herald*, *Syracuse (NY) Herald*, *Chester (PA) Times*, *Gettysburg (PA) Times*, *Lock Haven (PA) Express*, *Manitowoc (WI) Herald-Times*, *Oshkosh (WI) Northwestern*, *Rhineland (WI) Daily News*, *Sheboygan (WI) Press*.

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39. Paul Mickelson, "Sports Trail," *Albuquerque (NM) Journal*, June 21, 1938, 4.
40. "Max and Joe Meet Tonight After Two Years," *Santa Fe (NM) New Mexican*, June 22, 1938, 9.
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