

JOE LOUIS

Hard Times Man

Randy Roberts

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To Marjie
You make each day better

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PREFACE

When times get really hard, really tough, He always send you
somebody. In the Depression it was tough on everybody, but
twice as hard on the colored, and He sent us Joe.

Joe Louis was to lift the colored people's heart.

—*The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*

Thinking back, journalist Robert Lipsyte concluded that it was a “generational thing.”¹ America seemed to be tearing apart at the seams in February 1964. Less than three months before, Lee Harvey Oswald had blown off the back of President John Kennedy’s head. The war in Vietnam had taken a dangerous, violent turn after the November assassination of President Ngo Dinh Diem. No longer was the United States supporting even a nominally democratic regime. Now it was underwriting a war conducted by a corrupt, inefficient military junta headed by a general who had named himself head of state. At home, Martin Luther King’s “dream” had turned into a nightmare. Medgar Evers gunned down in his driveway, four black girls killed when a bomb exploded in a Birmingham church, violent protest marches throughout the South, Malcolm X rejecting integrationists’ goals—the “movement” appeared fractured. Culturally, the look of a new age was showcased on *The Ed Sullivan Show* on February 12, 1964, when four mop-topped musicians sang “I Want To Hold Your Hand” to ecstatic and screaming young girls.

By the last weeks of February, Miami had become the center of the racial and cultural discontent. The Beatles had arrived for a concert. Malcolm X had come as well, although he was not very forthright with the

reasons. But reporters did not have to dig too deeply for the scoop. Malcolm X had become a fixture in the boxing camp of Cassius Clay, who was scheduled to fight Sonny Liston for the heavyweight championship title. Malcolm stayed in the background, saying little to journalists, but always uncomfortably near the young challenger, smiling at Clay's antics, looking very much like the cat that had caught the canary.

What a story for the sportswriters who had descended on Miami for the fight. It seemed like the birth of a new America, fresh, vibrant, in-your-face. For younger reporters such as Lipsyte, Larry Merchant, and Jerry Izenberg, the story in Miami transcended boxing and even sports—it was about America, about history. Clay was a new America, a brash, confident, outrageous, entertaining spectacle. He was the epicenter of now. Just look at the pictures going out from Miami to the world—Clay knocking down the four Beatles, Clay in a serious conversation with Malcolm X, Clay with his mouth wide open proclaiming that he is the chosen one. He was an irresistible story, and the young reporters felt more alive, more hip, just being part of the scene.

A few days before the title match, Joe Louis appeared in Clay's camp. Just a few months short of his fiftieth birthday and still deep in debt to the Internal Revenue Service, the former champion was in town for "walking-around money." The promoters paid him to show up for media events, talk to reporters, and generally lend his considerable prestige to a fight that was regarded as a gross mismatch in Liston's favor. The contrasts between Clay and Louis were stark—Clay was young, articulate, and controversial; Louis was old, quiet, and bland. Clay seemed to dance on air like a pugilistic Astaire; Louis plodded dead-legged and heavy-footed. For Lipsyte, Louis was a "black Dwight D. Eisenhower," a relic from his father's generation, as much a memento of another time as a Roosevelt-Wallace campaign button. Yet the older sportswriters—such legendary scribes as Jimmy Cannon, Red Smith, Arthur Daley, and Barney Nagler—moved from Clay to Louis like a pack of paparazzi deserting a D-lister for a superstar.

Lipsyte did not understand. Later he cornered Nagler and asked why he and the others had wanted to talk to Joe. "How can you hang around that mumbling old has-been, when here's this young beautiful hope of the future?" he asked. Cassius was the story. He was dynamic and interesting, and, something more, he was fun. Nagler looked at Lipsyte almost sadly, because he knew that he could never explain. "You should have seen him then," he offered.

Joe Louis: Hard Times Man is about Nagler's "then"—the roughly decade and a half between 1935, when Louis captured the attention of America, and 1951, when his career ended. For just short of twelve of those years Louis was the heavyweight champion of the world, defending his title an astonishing twenty-five times. No heavyweight champion has ever approached those figures. None have ever combined Louis' power, longevity, and grace. It was as if Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, and Joe DiMaggio had been a single player, a single black player. Louis was like Franklin D. Roosevelt, a moral compass during a turbulent era. Along with Charles Lindbergh, Roosevelt and Louis were the most written-about men in America. From the middle of the Great Depression to the end of World War II, FDR and Louis were two of the most important physical presences and symbolic forces in America.

Joe Louis is the story of a man, and also of a sport. Boxing is no longer relevant to most Americans. It does not even rate its own tab on *USA Today's* sports website. Instead, it is grouped with cycling, horse racing, sailing, soccer, the WNBA, and several other activities in the "More Sports" category. No newspaper or sports magazine has a full-time boxing writer. This had not always been the case. In the nineteenth century, the most recognized and important athlete in America was boxer John L. Sullivan. In the twentieth century, that distinction would be a toss-up between boxers Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali. It is doubtful that any boxer will compete for the title in the twenty-first century. For many Americans today, it is difficult to remember a time when boxing was vitally important, when the heavyweight champion was, in the words of Eldridge Cleaver, "as a symbol . . . the real Mr. America."² During Joe Louis' years in the ring there were only two professional sports that consumed the interests of Americans: baseball and boxing. Winning a World Series ring was the pinnacle of team competition. Winning a heavyweight championship belt was the greatest individual honor. For this reason, I provide a detailed consideration of the meaning of that title for Americans. From the late nineteenth century until the Great Depression, John L. Sullivan, Jack Johnson, and Jack Dempsey helped define what it meant to be a man in America.

Although the mythology holds that baseball is the National Pastime, boxing has been a more global and democratic sport. Winning the World Series has nothing to do with the world. But winning a world boxing

championship does. Louis defended his belt against Americans, South Americans, and Europeans; people from around the world listened to radio broadcasts of his most important fights. In fact, somewhere close to one hundred million people heard the 1938 Louis-Schmeling broadcast. Furthermore, during the vast majority of Louis' ring career, major league baseball was closed to black Americans. From the mid-1880s until 1946 "organized baseball" forced black players to perform on segregated teams in segregated leagues. When, finally, Jackie Robinson did integrate baseball, black and white sportswriters counseled him to be like Joe Louis. As Robinson said at the beginning of "baseball's great experiment," "I'll try to do as good a job as Joe Louis has done. . . . He has done a great job for us and I will try to carry on."³ The color line was never a mandated policy decision in boxing, so only in the ring could black and white athletes compete on anything close to an equal footing. And in the first half of the twentieth century, this made all the difference for millions of black and white Americans.

Although I am interested in the life and career of Joe Louis, in this book I focus in large part on the meaning of that life and career. What did it mean to be Joe Louis? What did Joe Louis mean to black Americans? How was the image of Joe Louis manipulated and presented to millions of people around the world? Why did Hans J. Massaquoi, the child of an African father and a German mother whose formative years were spent in Nazi Germany, decide in a true act of "double consciousness" to switch his allegiance from a fighter who shared his nationality to one who shared his race?⁴ From the beginning of Louis' life, through his marvelous career, to his death, the twin themes of race and nationalism, issues that have vexed black Americans for more than one hundred and fifty years, had coiled around the champion like a snake.