New biography a reminder of Joe Louis' clout

Joe Louis

_**Hard Times Man**_

By Randy Roberts

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Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

When he broke into the fight game, Joe Louis evoked strong emotions.

"Something sly and sinister and perhaps not quite human came out of the African jungle last night," wrote reporter Davis Walsh. The minute Louis, "the strange, walleyed, unblinking Negro," disposed of Primo Carnera, the Italian giant, "there rose a cry that smote upon the eardrums and left them shivering." African Americans were celebrating "this amazing person who has risen overnight to challenge and defy the white man's innate sense of superiority."

In the 1930s, Randy Roberts, a professor of history at Purdue University, points out, Louis was an icon for blacks - and "a dark, dangerous, primordial, incomprehensible force" for many whites.

But after he knocked out Max Schmeling, Hitler's buddy, in the first round of their rematch at Yankee Stadium in 1938, in what the New York World-Telegram called "The Battle of Awesome Implications," Louis became a symbol to millions of Americans, white and black, of opposition to the racial theories of the Nazis.

In _**Joe Louis**_, Roberts assesses the significance of the person - and the persona - dubbed "The Brown Bomber." Throughout Louis' life, Roberts argues, the themes of race and nationalism coiled around him "like a snake."

Well-researched, intelligent, and insightful, _**Joe Louis**_ is not a definitive biography. Roberts' style is breezy, with occasionally hyperbolic gusts. Louis, he writes, was a "sort of Superman" to blacks. During the Great Depression and World War II, he adds, the champ gave "as much hope" to Americans as Franklin D. Roosevelt. Depending on newspapers and magazines (and occasionally urban legends) as primary sources, moreover, Roberts is unable to say much about the inner life of his "frustratingly reticent" - and notoriously profligate and promiscuous - subject. Or solve the mystery of how Louis led boxing out of its Depression-era doldrums into new, million-dollar
heights.

Although his analysis of black-white relations is, by turns, persuasive and poignant, Roberts rarely deviates from conventional wisdom. He's right, of course, to portray Louis as embodying some of the hopes and dreams of African Americans. But he might have done more with the observation of novelist Richard Wright that "forced to live a separate and impoverished life, they were glad for even the meager acceptance of their humanity implied in the championship."

Joe Louis is at its best when Roberts, the author of biographies of Jack Johnson and Jack Dempsey, turns to boxing. Although it's no longer on the radar screen of most Americans, in the '30s and '40s, he reminds, prizefighting was the national pastime along with baseball (and, at times, horse racing). After all, almost 100 million Americans heard Louis knock out Schmeling on their radios.

Unlike other sports, Roberts writes, no one "played" boxing. He understands - and illuminates - the roles of trainers, managers, and promoters and of hometown decisions, crooked referees, and fixed fights. Most important, he's able to capture the drama, brutality, and pathos of Louis' epic battles - against Carnera, Max Baer, James J. Braddock, Schmeling, and Billy Conn.

Before he died, Louis was eclipsed by Muhammad Ali, whose antics he neither understood nor approved. To many young people in the 1960s and '70s, Louis was "a relic of another time and another America." He rarely took public stands on the racial issues of his day. Mostly, he kept his mouth shut and let his jab and his hook, his preparation, determination, stamina, skill, and courage do his talking. His performance in the ring, Roberts reminds us, spoke - and speaks - "eloquently of equality."

Those who came after him stood on his shoulders.

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