



The Brown Bomber Battles Hitler's Favorite Fighter

Heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali was famous for loudly proclaiming, “I am the greatest.” Yet even Ali would probably agree that there was one fighter who was at least his equal, if not even greater. That man was known as the Brown Bomber—world heavyweight champion Joe Louis.

Joe Louis was not exactly a natural at boxing. As a teenager in Detroit in 1932, he was knocked down seven times in his first amateur fight. But his family was very poor, and he dreamed of making enough money to lift them all out of poverty. So he kept training and soon started winning. Noticing his raw power, two fight managers took him to see a veteran trainer, Jack Blackburn. Although Blackburn was himself black, he preferred to work with white fighters. There were two reasons for this. One was that in the 1930s it was much easier for whites to get a shot at title fights. This was partly a white reaction to black heavyweight champion Jack Johnson, the title-holder from 1908–1915. At a time when blacks were supposed to “know their place,” Johnson went out of his way to anger whites. He humiliated his opponents. He loved to show off his money by spending it on flashy clothes, fast cars, and the late-night bar scene. Worst of all, he paraded around with white women on his arm. Some might say that Johnson was simply being himself. That was certainly true. But it was also true that in a deeply racist time, Johnson made it even harder for blacks who came after him to get title fights.

Another reason Blackburn was reluctant to train black fighters is that quite often, white judges wouldn't award them decisions. It seemed as if blacks would have to knock out their opponents to be declared the winner of a

bout. As a result, Blackburn swore that the only blacks he would train would have to be world-beaters.

When Jack Blackburn first watched Joe Louis in the ring, he didn't see a world-beater. Twenty-year-old Louis was unpolished. His footwork was slow, and he was easily thrown off balance. He couldn't land combinations. He had a sweet personality and seemed to lack the "killer instinct" necessary to be successful in the ring. Still, Blackburn had to admit that Louis was strong. And Blackburn needed the money. So he told Louis's managers that he would train Louis even though he didn't think they would make a dime on him. To Joe he said, "It's mighty hard for a colored boy to win decisions. The dice is loaded against you. You got to knock 'em out and keep knocking 'em out to get anywhere." Reaching for the young boxer's right hand, he added, "Let your right fist be your referee. Don't ever forget that. Let that right fist there be your referee!"

Blackburn was an excellent trainer, and Joe Louis learned quickly. Soon he began building a reputation as a devastating puncher, earning him the nickname "The Brown Bomber." If there was one thing America loved, it was a great puncher, no matter what his race. Besides, boxing needed new blood. No really exciting fighter had held the heavyweight title since the glory days of Jack Dempsey in the 1920s.

When Gene Tunney defeated Dempsey and then retired in 1928, an elimination tournament was held to decide the next heavyweight champion. A German, Max Schmeling, defeated an American, Jack Sharkey, to win the title. But Schmeling's time at the top was short. In a rematch, he lost to Sharkey. Then Sharkey lost to former circus strongman Primo Carnera. After that, Carnera lost to the colorful Max Baer. Baer had lots of talent, but preferred partying to training. In 1935, a journeyman fighter named Jim Braddock upset him. On September 24, 1935, Joe Louis had his chance against Baer. In the fourth round, he knocked him down with a vicious right and a left to the jaw. Baer got to his knees, but decided not to get to his feet. After the fight, he told reporters, "I could have struggled up once more, but when I get executed, people are going to have to pay more than twenty-five dollars a seat to see it."

When Joe Louis defeated a Spanish fighter named Paulino Uzcudun, Max Schmeling was in the audience. Later, Schmeling took films of the fight back home to Germany to study them. Although Louis had knocked out Uzcudun in the fourth round, Schmeling noticed a flaw in his style. When Louis threw a jab, he brought his left hand back too low, leaving an opening for a right-hand counterpunch.

"I have discovered that Louis can be hit by a right hand," Schmeling told reporters. "I will beat him. Wait until June. You will see."

Although Max Schmeling was German, he liked America and spoke good English. As a result, many American sportswriters liked him. In fact, many white sportswriters *wanted* him to defeat Joe Louis. Remembering the stir that Jack Johnson had caused, they actually preferred a white German champion to a black American champion.

German dictator Adolf Hitler also wanted Schmeling to win. In Hitler's way of thinking, German athletes were "supermen" and the German people were the "master race." People who were not blond and blue-eyed, he believed, were weak and inferior. He looked forward to a Schmeling victory as proof that his racial views were correct.

Hitler had already begun to put these views into practice. By 1936, German Jews had already been stripped of their citizenship. Far worse treatment would soon follow. But Hitler and his Nazi followers were not only anti-Jewish; they were also anti-black. The Nazis had an unflattering name for Joe Louis. They called him "Clay Face." They thought that because he was a member of an "inferior" race, he should never be given a chance at the championship.

Like many "good Germans" who weren't members of the Nazi party, Max Schmeling went along with Hitler. Before returning to the United States, he had lunch with the German dictator and posed for news photos with him. After meeting

with Hitler, Schmeling gushed to a reporter, “[that] was the most wonderful hour of my life!”

When Schmeling returned to America, he began training hard for his bout with Louis. He ran mile after mile every day in upstate New York and took countless jabs from his sparring partners. He believed that taking such punishment would prepare him to get close enough to Louis to knock him out with a terrific right hand.

Meanwhile, Joe Louis trained in Lakewood, New Jersey, but he didn’t train very hard. He had fought a number of fights and had won them fairly easily. Thinking that fighting Schmeling would mean another easy victory, Louis cut down on the time he spent running, skipping rope, and punching the bags. He talked back to Jack Blackburn when the trainer told him to work harder. Some days Louis spent more time on a nearby golf course than in the boxing ring. Sportswriters who visited his training camp thought that he had gotten lazy. As one sportswriter put it, “Instead of the relentless kid fighting for his life, Joe is now a guy fighting for more money in the bank, another car, another suit, another day in the sun over Lakewood.”

Still, on the day of the fight, July 19, 1936, the odds were 10–1 that Joe Louis would defeat Max Schmeling. As the fight began that night in Yankee Stadium, Louis scored with his left jab, closing Schmeling’s left eye and splitting his lip.

In the second round, Schmeling landed a right that momentarily dazed Louis. Still, Louis won the first two rounds. In the third round, Louis continued to punish Schmeling with his left jab. But by the fourth round, Schmeling could time Louis's jabs. Doing so enabled Schmeling to react more quickly. When Louis came in again and threw a quick jab, the German threw a right cross over Louis's lowered left hand. The punch hit Louis squarely in the face, causing him to stagger backward. Schmeling followed, landing another right. A third right struck Louis's jaw and knocked him on his backside. This was the first time Louis had ever been knocked down as a pro.

Nazi broadcaster Arno Hellmis was joyful. "Louis is down . . . Max knocked him down! Bravo, Max! Bravo!"

At ringside, Louis's wife Marva cried, "Joe, honey, get up!" Louis staggered to his feet, dazed. He got Schmeling in a clinch to avoid further damage that round.

However, when Schmeling walked to his corner, he told his trainer, "Now I got him."

In the fifth round, all Joe Louis could do was try to avoid Schmeling. At the end of the round, Schmeling pulled his arm back to throw another right. Hearing the bell, Louis dropped his hands, and Schmeling landed a terrific right against his jaw. The punch knocked Louis senseless. His handlers had to drag him to his corner. In the

sixth and seventh rounds, Schmeling continued to batter Joe Louis. Louis's mother was among those at Yankee Stadium that night. Seeing the beating her son was taking, she cried out, "My God, my God, don't let him kill my child!" A family friend led her from the stadium.

Only Louis's youth, courage, and excellent conditioning enabled him to last until the twelfth round. In that round, Schmeling's final punch sent Louis sprawling against the ropes, then down on his knees. Finally, Louis fell flat onto the canvas, rolled onto his belly, and was counted out. It took several men to carry him back to his dressing room.

Many American whites cheered for Schmeling.

"Louis is just a beaten, pitifully dejected colored boy," one wrote. Another said that Louis's nickname should be changed from the "Brown Bomber" to the "Brown Bummer." However, blacks and Jewish people didn't celebrate. To both groups, Joe Louis's defeat at the hands of Hitler's favorite fighter was a nightmare.

"I guess I fooled you guys," Schmeling told the press. Reporters called his victory the greatest upset in ring history. Hitler sent him a congratulatory telegram.

After being given smelling salts, Joe Louis woke up in his dressing room. Then he hid his badly swollen face in his hands and cried. A

rumor spread that he had been drugged before the fight, but Louis quickly laid this rumor to rest.

“There was nothing wrong in my fight with Schmeling but his right hand,” he told reporters.

“The myth of Joe Louis is smashed, smashed for all times,” proclaimed a Nazi newspaper. Former heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey agreed. “Black fighters are never the same after a punishing loss,” he said.

But Joe Louis knew that he had lost to Schmeling because he had been overconfident, not because Schmeling was the better fighter.

“I let myself down. I let a whole race of people down because I was some kind of hot s--t,” he said. “I’m gonna come back.”

It would take two years before Louis and Schmeling met again. During that time, Americans awakened to the threat of Hitler and Nazism. By now they knew of the concentration camps Hitler had built to get rid of so-called “undesirables.” They also knew that Hitler was building up Germany’s military might in a bid to control all of Europe. When Hitler invaded Austria in March 1938 and threatened to take over part of Czechoslovakia, it looked as if war with Germany would come soon.

On June 22, 1937, Joe Louis won the heavyweight championship by knocking out reigning champion Jim Braddock in Chicago. Blacks rejoiced at Louis’s victory. However,

Louis knew the world would not really accept him as heavyweight champion until he defeated Schmeling.

In the weeks leading up to the second Louis–Schmeling fight, Joe Louis trained harder than ever before. There was no more playing golf. By now Louis had a grudge against Schmeling. He thought the German had hit him late during the fifth round of their first fight. Also, trainer Jack Blackburn had told Joe what Hitler thought of blacks.

“I don’t like Schmeling because his people don’t like my people,” Joe Louis told the press. Together he and Blackburn worked to correct the flaw in Louis’s technique that had contributed to his defeat. As the date of the fight drew closer, Louis grew more and more confident. But this time his confidence was based on solid preparation, not arrogance. He predicted that he would defeat Schmeling in the second round.

On the day of the rematch, June 22, 1938, someone handed Max Schmeling a telegram from Adolf Hitler. It read, “To the next world’s champion, Max Schmeling. Wishing you every success.”

Nearly 67,000 fans poured into Yankee Stadium for the fight. Nearly one hundred million people listened to it on the radio—the largest radio audience in history. In Germany, millions of people woke up at 3 a.m. to listen in

and root for Schmeling. However, by now most Americans were rooting for Joe Louis. They had grown to like and admire him. Although he had defeated white opponents, he didn't gloat over the fact. Even more importantly, Americans now saw him as a champion of democracy in the face of the Nazi threat.

As the bell rang to start the fight, Joe Louis's face was taut with rage. Since he had learned the hard way that Schmeling did best when the pace of the fight was slow, Louis took the fight right to him. Moving quickly across the ring, he drove Schmeling against the ropes with a barrage of punches. And this time he kept his left hand raised after each jab. Thirty seconds into the fight, Louis hit Schmeling with a right that spun the German's head around. A few seconds later, a ferocious punch to Schmeling's side caused him to scream in pain. A reporter at ringside called the terrible cry "half human, half animal."

"How's that, Mr. Super-race?" Louis later said. Louis's punches came so fast that the eye could not follow them. Five punches to the head had Schmeling sagging against the ropes. A minute and a half into the fight, Louis knocked Schmeling to his knees with two mighty rights. As the referee rushed over to begin the count, Schmeling rose to his feet. Louis then hit the challenger with another vicious right that once more sent him to the canvas. This time Schmeling rose to his feet at the count of four.

“Louis attacks again! Why, this is madness!” wailed Nazi broadcaster Arno Hellmis. Again Louis knocked Schmeling down. By now, even some reporters were shouting, “Stop it!” Seeing the brutal beating that Schmeling was taking, his trainer, Max Machon, threw a white towel into the ring. But the referee simply picked up the towel and threw it toward the ropes. At that point, Machon threw *himself* into the ring. As Schmeling struggled to get up, the referee declared the fight over.

By now Arno Hellmis was practically crying. His German “superman” had been crushed.

This time, Americans celebrated Joe Louis’s victory. A cartoon in the *Chicago Daily News* showed a plane named the Brown Bomber dropping a bomb next to Adolf Hitler. In Harlem and other black communities across America, people danced in the streets. One black sportswriter said it was like Christmas, New Year’s Eve, and the Fourth of July all rolled into one.

“*Now* I feel like a champ,” said Joe Louis.

As Max Schmeling retreated to Germany, Joe Louis became a national hero—the first African American to do so. Despite spending three years in the army during World War II, he defended his title 25 times and held it until he retired in 1949. No champion has held the title longer or defended it so successfully.

To this day, boxing fans spend countless hours debating who was the greater fighter: Joe

Louis or Muhammad Ali. While that dispute can never be settled, it is clear that Joe Louis helped pave the way for countless black athletes—including Ali. In so doing, he made America a more democratic place than it had ever been before.