

# Fate of a Champion

January 19, 2011



IT USED TO BE SAID that if you walked down any street in a black neighborhood during a Joe Louis fight you would not miss a word of the broadcast because every radio in every house would be tuned to the same station ... and turned up loud. A few years later, the same thing could be said about a Sugar Ray Robinson fight. Sugar Ray and Joe Louis dominated their respective divisions for nearly three decades. There was one other thing said about Sugar that made him unique to older men: "Pound for pound, Sugar Ray Robinson was the greatest fighter to ever step into the ring. He had it all: speed, power, endurance, savvy and style. There will never be another like him," reminisced men in their seventies or eighties who felt themselves lucky to have seen him fight.

The rollicking life of Sugar Ray Robinson is told by the book under review here and by other books — *Pound for Pound: A Biography of Sugar Ray Robinson*, by Herb Boyd (HarperCollins, 2005) and *Sugar Ray: The Sugar Ray Robinson Story*, (Sugar Ray Robinson and Dave Anderson, New York: Da Capo, 1994). All the books tell much about the colorful life of Sugar Ray but less about the times, but more of that later. In any event, the trajectory of Sugar's life at an early age and Joe Louis's, and mine, were so similar because we were part of the Great Migration happening at the time: the migration of blacks escaping the Hell of life in the South to the Purgatory of the North; the stream of blacks attracted by the promise of jobs — dirty, physical, and hard — but jobs nevertheless and the stress of blacks escaping Jim Crow life in the South.

Joe Louis Barrow came North to Detroit from Alabama; Walker Smith, Jr. (Sugar) came from Georgia and my parents came from Mississippi and Arkansas to Detroit where I was born. All three of us were thrown into the turmoil of Detroit's Black Bottom and Hastings Street and found some respite at Brewster Recreation Center. For 25 cents a month membership, the Center provided escape from the streets with checkers, table tennis, and amateur boxing.

The press of the Migration can be grasped from two stark numbers: Between 1910 and 1930, the influx of people into Detroit grew from 5,000 to 125,000! Herb Boyd's book, because he is almost a native Detroiter, is much richer in describing the social milieu of growing up black in Detroit in the early thirties. Haygood, while not a native, relies on his research to give us a broader picture of race relations at the time: the 1923 Ku Klux Klan rally around City Hall; the 1925 Clarence Darrow defense of Dr. Ossian Sweet for standing up to a white mob; etc. Leila Smith was so concerned for the safety of her two daughters and five-year-old Walker, Jr. that she took them back South! But "The South was still the South," and Leila saved her money and moved her family back to Detroit within a year. There, Walker Jr. found Brewster Recreation Center and his hero — Joe Louis Barrow — was starting to accumulate amateur boxing trophies for the Center. Little Walker followed him around like a puppy. The first seeds of becoming a boxer were planted.

When discussing his book, Haygood usually preceded his talk with a brief film clip of one of Sugar Ray's fights to give his audience, most of whom were under age sixty, a glimpse of what Sugar Ray's famous style and power were all about. In 1950, three young men from Detroit were eager to see Sugar Ray's power for themselves. They drove from Detroit on the newly opened Pennsylvania Turnpike to New York. They hung out in the heady atmosphere of the post-fight excitement of Sugar

Ray's Bar as the crowd exploded with collective shouts when their conquering hero appeared. Some years later the three men were: one, the Deputy Chief of the Detroit Police Department; two, the Chief Physician of the Wayne State University Health Service and; three, myself, the President of Wayne County Community College.

How Sugar Ray got his name provides an amusing aside. Before his first fight Walker's manager got a request for his AAU card (required to certify he was an amateur). George Gainford, his manager, knew Walker didn't have one, but George always kept a bunch of extra cards in his pocket. So, he reached in and pulled out one of a boxer who was no longer fighting — Ray Robinson. After Walker's victory, someone said, "You sure got a sweet fighter there." A woman in the crowd shouted, "Yeah, sweet as sugar." A sportswriter printed it the next day and Sugar Ray Robinson was born.

From there Sugar Ray went on to compile — 1940 to 1965 — a record unequalled in boxing history: 85 amateur fights, 85 victories, 69 by knockout, 49 in the first round! 194 professional fights (109 knockouts), 19 defeats, only one by KO!

## II

SO WHAT IS ONE TO MAKE of this Sugar Ray Robinson and his life and times? Let's look at both sides of his life as depicted by Boyd and Haygood: THE GOOD SIDE: Besides the spectacular boxing record — travel all over Europe, Hawaii, Canada, Trinidad, Mexico, and Jamaica. Earning millions and having homes in New York and California. Owning a nightclub, a restaurant, a barbershop, a beauty parlor and Cadillacs, Lincolns, and several sport cars. THE BAD SIDE. Dying broke and in debt. Plagued with diabetes, arteriosclerosis and hypertension. And finally ravaged with Alzheimer's disease, sadly robbing him of "the memory of his greatest triumphs before thousands of cheering fans." (Boyd, 260). The thousands of broken bodies, the thousands of wrecked lives — from the great Joe Louis ending as a doorman in Vegas, Henry Armstrong nearly blinded. And thousands like them. They were the detritus of seconds, sparring partners, and the defeated pugilists that it took to produce one Sugar. It was that which turned me away from the mayhem of the ring long ago and made me an advocate for its abolishment.

And yet there are thousands of young men, overwhelmingly African-American, who would give their eye-teeth to be like Sugar Ray Robinson, young men who have bought the myth so painfully spelled out in black lives and literature. It is the myth of black superiority in sport and strength as a reversal of the equally held myth of black inferiority that has been held for centuries.

For instance, after Jack Johnson finally defeated the white champion, Tommy Burns, in 1908 (after chasing him all over the globe), the myth of the "white superiority of strength" was gradually transformed into "white = intellectual superiority; black= brute physical superiority." There had been statements and thoughts of that, of course, long before Jack Johnson but his startling and decisive victory caused mass hysteria in the press. Before the fight, Jack London, in his newspaper column, declared, "The white man must defeat the black man." (Yes, that Jack London, the socialist.) After World War II, as opportunity gradually opened for black athletes in other sports than boxing, they swarmed into them and gradually began to dominate them. This was not only an American phenomenon but also a universal one. "After England was defeated by the Sri Lankans at the 1996 world championships, the chairman of the English Cricket Board said, "If our team keeps going the way it has been going, then our game will die." The British black boxer, Jimmy Dublin, once said, "We don't do very well at reading and writing, but we're made for physical things." Thus, the reversal was accepted by both the whites and the blacks, if not quite so blatantly.

AFRICAN-AMERICANS NOW DOMINATE nearly every American sport and this is thought to be perfectly normal, rather than based on opportunity and inordinate training as well as recruiting the "best" into

training at the earliest age and opportunity. Football is the major sinner in this respect. American colleges are usually ranked by their football and basketball teams' performance, curiously, rather than by their "academic merit." So it is "normal" that their football coaches make more money than their presidents, and their black or other disadvantaged athletes are given extra weight on their SATs (for admission purposes), for their athletic ability rather than their educational disadvantages. Since it is presumed that they are being groomed for the professional teams, their educational needs are given only enough attention to keep them eligible. This outrageous activity is sanctioned by the more prestigious universities as well as the other schools and the NCAA. "Decades of popular scientific speculation about the special endowments of black athletes have shaped the thinking of entire populations," says the massively documented study of this phenomena (*Darwin's Athletes* by John Hoberman, New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1997). It will be hard to dislodge this belief in either race because it serves a purpose in both races — both nefarious. The myth of the black super athlete is attractive to African-Americans and it's equally attractive to whites who tend to believe that they have to "earn" their place in athletic prominence whereas African-Americans are "naturally" gifted and require less thought and effort in their attainment. Thus, blacks were suitable for the line in football but were kept from the quarterback position which required skills and knowledge, or so it was assumed. Even today, when blacks make up 52 percent of professional football players, they are rarely the quarterback of any team. Affirmative action is OK on the athletic field but is fought fiercely when it is applied to the classroom, as the Grutter case, involving affirmative action for blacks, confirms at the University of Michigan. As I watch the overwhelmingly white spectators stream from the stadium after watching a predominantly black victory, shouting "We won! We won!" I wonder who "we" is.

Basketball is equally unbalanced. Blacks make up nearly 70 percent of the players. John Thompson, former basketball coach of Georgetown University, was once asked what racial balance he would prefer on a basketball team. He replied, "For diversity, I would like two or three whites. If I wanted to win, give me five blacks." The answer is both sad and poignant. Black players often beg their coaches to find a white player to make their team more attractive to the spectators.

People forget that Michael Jordan was at first rejected by his high school coach. He went back and practiced until he got better and made the team. There is nothing "natural" about "Air Jordan." You might "still hear talk that blacks possess an extra bone in the heel" that make them good at sprinting (Hoberman, 125). That theory held until Kenyans started winning the New York marathons!

The belief that African-Americans have a natural athletic ability (with limited intellectual endowment) while whites have to work hard athletically but have great mental agility, is a tenaciously held thought by both whites and blacks and shows "how sport has damaged black America and preserved the myth of race" (Hoberman, 1).

And what of Sugar Ray Robinson? We will never see his like again. The days of spectacular heavyweight or middleweight champions is gone forever. (Q. Who is the current heavyweight boxing champion? A. Some black guy, I think). Black youngsters must be persuaded that there is another active way to claim their humanity in attempting to make an impact on the world around them. To begin with, the vision of Paul Robeson comes to mind. He was an All-American in football at Rutgers and a Phi Beta Kappa in scholarship, as well as valedictorian of his class. He also made a tremendous and lasting impact on American society. That's a start.