

To be Called a Champion

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Walking into the ring at the start of a fight requires a specific kind of courage; however, battling to become the champion of the world involves an even greater challenge. Boxing is no doubt the world's most contact-driven sport. Every punch, jab and movement defines a champion. Boxing does not just need this physicality; it thrives on it. Other than brute strength and cunning moves, a boxer's physical appearance plays a major role in identifying a champion. The numerous weight divisions illustrate the tremendous shapes and sizes among each individual boxer. No matter how large or small, each boxer fights in the same arena. Standing alone in the ring can be daunting to any fighter, but to African Americans, like Jack Johnson and Joe Louis, their solitude was a lot more intense. As the majority of Americans, and most of the world, saw Jack Johnson and Joe Louis as lesser beings of color, boxing turned its progressive head away from the inequalities of society and looked at these men through colorless lenses. Decades before the great Jackie Robinson walked onto a professional baseball diamond, Johnson and Louis stood before the world as individuals fighting both physically and metaphorically. African Americans, as well as other minority groups, saw these two men as their own personal heroes and champions of their "team" fighting for equality and freedom.

Elements of race, ethnicity and identity are all extremely important in boxing simply because of the individuality of the sport. Boxing is not a traditional "team" sport, like football or baseball. Of course, there are trainers and managers in every corner of the ring, but once the bell rings, the ending relies solely on the performance of one person. Boxing fans have always recognized this individual courage, and with this recognition comes an overwhelming feeling of

respect and pride for each boxer. This respect was greatly felt for early champions of the sport, like Jack Johnson and Joe Louis. Racial inequality and segregation defined American society at the time of these two champions, yet they had risen to become more than just impressive fighters, but the greatest of all heavyweights. The obstacles these two fighters overcame were brutal. After conquering all the social and political barriers, Johnson and Louis prevailed to become Heavyweight Champions, obtaining the greatest prize in sports. As African Americans saw members of their race achieve something unbelievable, the impossible suddenly became possible. Self discrimination slowly began to disappear, and a special pride grew stronger in the African American community. These champions helped jumpstart the Civil Rights Movement.

The Civil Rights Movements and the influential African Americans associated with this cause did not just want to benefit African Americans. Civil Rights were meant for all people, including women and other minority groups in the United States. Boxing, arguably the first progressive sport in the country, fought alongside Martin Luther King Jr. and Oliver L. Brown to bring forth great change and to help broaden the term “champion.” Great fighters, like Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier and George Foreman vocally stood by their sport and their race as well, promoting the need to continue bringing color to the sport of boxing. Fighters, like Roberto Duran, Julio Cesar Chavez and Sugar Ray Leonard followed in other weight divisions. As diversity rose in boxing, so did its fan base. Latinos, Italians, African Americans, Irish, etc. flooded arenas worldwide to cheer for “their” fighters. Pride in oneself and in one’s background provided boxing with an internal fire, fueling the sport to spread this open-minded tradition within its sport and to others outside it.

Early African American champions were both boxing pioneers and social activists. When Joe Louis defeated Max Schmeling in 1938, he single handedly became an American icon; a hero among the “entire” nation. Muhammad Ali made great strides in the cultural and political landscapes of boxing and American society, becoming a significant, worldwide figure. Continuing these traditions, Manny Pacquiao represents the constant diversity initiative present in boxing. All are great individuals, and all are champions for multiple reasons. From enduring an onslaught of punches in the ring to bearing the prejudices of society, present and past boxers have prevailed and made their marks in American history. Social change begins with a fearless leader, and who better to fight than a boxer? Personally, I have an overwhelming pride for this sport and its athletes. Boxing is filled with heartfelt stories, inspiring individuals and undaunted courage from men and even women of all sizes. There will be great social heroes to come, and our boxing champions will be there for the KO.