

Joe Louis and Jesse Owens

On Alabama's greatest athletes and the state they left behind

Black men look like they rule sport in America today. It was nothing like that in the thirties. America was white and that was that. It didn't do you no good to dream of making it to the big time. It was impossible. And then, y'know, along came Jesse and along came Joe.

-Ruth Owens, wife of Jesse Owens, quoted in Heroes Without A Country by Donald McRae



Born less than a year apart in rural Alabama — sons of sharecroppers, grandsons of slaves — Joe Louis and Jesse Owens each left Alabama as children when their families joined the Great Migration northward. Between 1935 and 1938, the two young men — arguably the greatest athletes Alabama has ever produced — would obliterate world records, win world championships, and become international icons for defeating the best Nazi Germany could offer. All while remaining second-class citizens at home.

In the following essay, originally published in *Alabama in the Twentieth Century*, historian Wayne Flynt explores the two men's lives from an Alabama angle. Would Louis and Owens have become world champions if they stayed in Alabama? And how did Alabamians of the era respond to their native sons' greatest glories?

Above: Joe Louis and Jesse Owens in their prime. Courtesy of the Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

By Wayne Flynt

Boxing and track were the ultimate democratic and individual sports. They required little equipment or money. They provided a person the opportunity for decisive victory, a knockout or a solitary stretch to glory. For some poor white and black children, they were also a ticket out of deprivation and anonymity (and not incidentally for blacks also a ticket out of Alabama). However much these sports might demand of the body, body was all many Alabamians had to offer...

Joe Louis Barrow (he eventually dropped the last name) was born in a sharecropper's cabin on Buckalew Mountain near LaFayette, Alabama, though his family joined the black migration to Detroit early in his life. He escaped Detroit's slums to begin boxing professionally in 1934 and was undefeated in 26 matches before German champion Max Schmeling knocked him out in 1936. A year later, Louis won the heavyweight title from Jim Braddock before 65,000 Chicago boxing fans, becoming only the second African American to claim the championship.

Anyone wondering why a poor black boy from Alabama would absorb the physical abuse inevitable in boxing might consider the Depression-era purse for those eight rounds: \$650,000. A year later 80,000 spectators thronged Yankee Stadium to witness a rematch of the Louis-Schmeling fight, this one with international repercussions given unfolding events in Europe. Louis took only two minutes four seconds to knock out the pride of Nazi Germany.

Alabamians typically reacted to Louis according to race. Whites often deplored boxing for its violence, and when they followed the sport at all, pulled for whites (even from Germany) over their black native son. The *Montgomery Advertiser* referred to Louis as "a 23-year-old boy from the cotton fields of Alabama" in its report on his victory over Braddock. But it printed no congratulatory editorial for the Alabama-born champion, allocating space instead to the state Chamber of Commerce meeting and the state's cotton crop.

Louis retained the heavyweight championship of the world for an amazing 13 years and was a celebrated hero to Alabama's African Americans. Whites claimed him only after the civil rights revolution. In a December 1999 *Birmingham News* list of the state's 50 greatest athletes, Louis finished eighth.



Joe Louis Barrow oil on canvas by Betsy Graves Reyneau, 1946. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of the Harmon Foundation. Copyright Peter Edward Fayard.

The athlete that finished first in that survey was another African American, Jesse Owens. James Cleveland Owens was born to Morgan County sharecroppers. But like the Barrow family, the Owens family gave up on Alabama's racism and poverty, joining the black migration to Cleveland, Ohio. As was the case with Joe Louis, the move brought opportunities hardly imaginable to blacks who remained in the Heart of Dixie.

In Ohio, Owens received the coaching, equipment, and opportunity he never would have had in Alabama.



Alabama didn't give its native sons much ink, but the national press did. In 1935, *Vanity Fair* profiled both Owens and Louis, capitalizing on their rising stars. The article titles, however — "Jesse Owens: dark lightning" and "Mean man" for Joe Louis — were apt previews of the racist and paternalistic language in the stories. Photo by Lusha Nelson, *Vanity Fair*, September 1935. Courtesy of Condé Nast, used by permission.

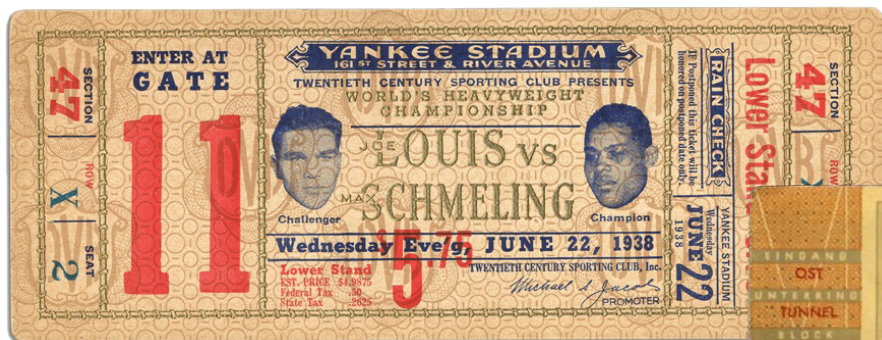
A scholarship to Ohio State University set up two dates with destiny.

The first came on May 25, 1935, at the conference championships. Many sports historians consider Owens' performance that day the greatest single demonstration of versatility in the history of track and field. Despite a bruised back that caused friends to advise him to withdraw from the meet, the college sophomore shattered three world records and tied a fourth. After that record-smashing performance, he won the low hurdles in a time only four-tenths of a second off the world record.

But it was his triumphs a year later in Berlin that transformed Owens into an American icon. The same year that German boxing champion Max Schmeling scored a victory for Aryan supremacy over Joe Louis, the 11th Olympiad got under way in Germany. Buoyed by Schmeling's victory, Reichsfuehrer Adolph Hitler expected to preside over a Teutonic rout. More than 100,000 people, mostly Germans, packed the massive double-deck concrete stadium for the most spectacular opening day in the modern history of the games.

On August 2, Jesse Owens ran 100-meter trial heats in a world record 10.2 seconds. The next day he won the first of his four gold medals in the 200 meters before he broke another record in the broad jump. In four successive days, Owens dazzled nearly half a million spectators with bursts of speed and leaping that established U.S. supremacy in the games, derailed Hitler's racial agenda, and earned Owens two new Olympic records, a tie for a third, and two world records. Owens became only the fourth American ever to capture three or more championships in a single Olympiad, the first from any country to do so since 1924, and only the fifth American Negro ever to win a gold.

Apparently the *Montgomery Advertiser* either did not realize Owens was from Alabama or didn't care. During his amazing string of victories, the newspaper ran editorials about inflation, isolationism, and Dothan peanut



Tickets to history: Joe Louis vs. Max Schmeling, 1938; courtesy of the Alabama Sports Hall of Fame. 1936 Olympics ticket for the day Jesse Owens won his second gold medal; courtesy of the Jesse Owens Museum.



eatery. The paper even reprinted an editorial from the *Atlanta Journal* bragging about a University of Georgia student who had become the first from his state ever to win an Olympic gold medal. But not a word of editorial space did the *Advertiser* devote to native son Jesse Owens, whose feat is still celebrated as one of the century's transcendent moments in sports history. After many years of neglect, Lawrence County erected a memorial park to Owens in 1996 but later cut funds to maintain it.

[Editor's note: Lawrence County, which owns the Jesse Owens Museum and Memorial Park, does again provide maintenance and security for the internationally recognized facility. No museum in the state commemorates Joe Louis' roots, though a bronze statue of the Brown Bomber was dedicated in 2010 next to the Chambers County courthouse.]

Alabama blacks did celebrate Owens's career. One young boy who idolized the Olympian was Carl Lewis of

Birmingham (like the others, the Lewis family moved north when Carl was a boy). Carl's father took the nine year old to the Jesse Owens Youth Games in Philadelphia. There the boy had his picture taken with Owens and his soul imprinted by his idol. In the 1984 Olympics, Lewis equaled Owens's performance, winning four golds. He became the only athlete other than his idol to win golds in both sprint and long jump. During his incredible 17-year career, Lewis won nine gold medals, matching the all-time record for golds during four Olympic games (he would have run in an unprecedented fifth but for the 1980 U.S. boycott).

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The day Jesse Owens raced Joe Louis

Despite his Berlin triumph, Jesse Owens found few doors open to the riches that often await Olympic champions. To capitalize financially on his fame, Owens resorted to racing horses, dogs, trains — anything with speed.

On Independence Day 1938, Owens recruited a friend and fellow Alabamian to join him in one of these races — Joe Louis, one of the few American sports figures of the era who could match Owens' fame. The icons would race in front of 7,000 fans at Chicago's South Side Park, following a Negro Leagues baseball game between the host American Giants and the visiting Birmingham Black Barons. Author Donald McRae documents the event in his book, *Heroes Without A Country: America's Betrayal of Joe Louis and Jesse Owens*.

"You ready, Joe?" Jesse asked as they walked toward the makeshift starting line.

Joe shrugged. "Let's give 'em what they want..."

Louis won the "competition" thanks to a pratfall by the fleet-footed Owens. As the crowd laughed and cheered, McRae notes:

Jesse stretched out his hand as Joe turned toward him. The fighter pulled him in close, as if consoling an opponent in defeat. They held each other for a moment, their heads bowed.