

# Louis set the standard, never side-stepped

We will never see his like again.

That was The Stroller's first thought Sunday afternoon when the news of his old friend's death was flashed on the television screen.

Joe Louis may not have been the greatest of all heavyweights, but he did more to bring legitimacy to the boxing game than any other fighter at a time when the sport was controlled by crooks and hustlers.

What he did, in his own quiet way, will leave the name of Joe Louis, the Brown Bomber, engraved in the history book of sports for the rest of time.

AN ILLITERATE factory worker who grew up in Detroit, Louis, born in Lexington, Ala., became a model of courage, justice and humility.

Those qualities alone would have stamped him as a great champion and human being, but maybe the best thing about Joe was his willingness to defend his title against any challenger.

Louis never ducked or side-stepped a fighter. Instead, he invited any heavyweight to meet him in the ring. And it wasn't a boastful dare.

All champions before him had at one stage dodged an opponent. Even Jack Dempsey, hailed as one of the most rugged of all title holders, would not meet Harry Williams, a great black fighter of his day.

But Joe never asked who his next opponent would be. He simply asked, "When do I fight again?"

IT WAS The Stroller's good fortune to meet this amazing man before he ever pulled on a boxing glove.

It happened in the sports department of the Detroit Free Press, where The Stroller was organizing the Golden Gloves tournament a half-century ago.

On this particular afternoon, he looked up from his desk to see a tall black lad who asked, "Is this where you enter the Gloves?"

"Are you a fighter?" The Stroller asked.

The visitor answered, "No, but I hope to be."

Asked to hold his hands up, he did rather awkwardly. The Stroller told him he'd never be a fighter until he learned to hold his left hand high and keep his right hand ready to deliver a punch. The lad promised he would.

BUT THE REAL surprise came when the young man was asked to fill out an entry blank. "Will you fill it out?" the hopeful boxer asked.

So the questions were asked and the answers dictated and placed on the blank. When this was finished, the strapping youngster was asked to sign his name at the bottom.

"Will you sign it?" the visitor asked. It suddenly dawned on The Stroller that the young man could neither read nor write.

"What is your name?"

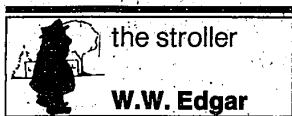
"Joe Louis."

The entry blank was officially signed Joe Lewis. Months afterward, Joe's sister hailed The Stroller one night at the old Olympia and asked, "When are you going to sign my brother's name right? It is 'Louis' and not 'Lewis'."

From that night on, the boxing records contained the right name — almost.

John Roxborough, a bondsman of the day, was well known for giving young black men a break.

Joe had been born Joe Louis Barrow in 1914, and when he told that to Roxborough, it sparked an idea.



"That name is too long," Roxborough replied. "So we are going to cut it to Joe Louis."

Shortly afterward, a sports writer at the Free Press nicknamed Louis "The Brown Bomber." The name soon would be known around the world.

All this time, The Stroller was becoming more and more attached to this young boxer, who trained in the old Brewster Center gym in what was then known as Paradise Valley in Detroit.

And Joe added to the friendship by calling for advice from time to time.

As a result, The Stroller saw every major bout Louis ever fought, and now his death brings back the fond memories and exciting nights.

AN EVENT in Louis' career which The Stroller will never forget took place in 1932, when Joe won the championship of the Golden Gloves. Then in 1934, Roxborough called The Stroller aside and told him he was planning to have Louis turn professional.

"I won't have time to manage him," Roxborough said, "and the Norris family at the Chicago Stadium always has been kind to us, so I think I'll turn Joe over to them."

At the time, young Jim Norris was handling Olympia and had Nate Lewis, a kindly old gent, handle the boxing programs.

A date was set, and Roxborough was to meet with Nate at 1 p.m. in the Leland Hotel and sign the deal. But Nate was an "all-night man" and this day he overslept and didn't keep the appointment.

An angry Roxborough returned to New York, and arrangements were made for Mike Jacobs and the Twentieth Century Boxing Club to take over the handling of Joe's activities.

So if old Nate Lewis had not overslept, Joe may never have been steered to the heavyweight championship of the world. Under Jacobs' guidance, Joe was on the right track from the start.

AS A TRIBUTE to the New York fans, he was matched against Primo Carnera, a one-time heavyweight champion, for an outdoor battle.

Primo was a massive, awkward fellow who was easy to hit, and Louis didn't miss the mark. It was at the time of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia — June 25, 1935 — and the entire world was stirred up by the battle and its outcome.

Of all the Louis fights that followed, a few stand out above all others in The Stroller's mind.

One was Joe's fight with Max Baer in late September 1935, and this too was held in New York. Baer was a wonderful physical specimen, and many figured Louis was being rushed.

THAT FIGHT really was decided at the weigh-in at noon on the day of the battle.

There an argument started over the gloves to be used.



Joe Louis, legendary heavyweight boxing champion, and W.W. (Eddie) Edgar, "The Stroller" columnist and former Free Press sports editor, were friends

They had a special padding for Baer's right thumb. In the midst of the debate, Louis calmly leaned over the table and, looking at Baer, asked, "Do we need gloves?"

Baer was a beaten man from then on. Despite the fact he had Dempsey in his corner, Baer was counted out in the fourth round.

What made this victory all the more remarkable was that Louis and his girl friend, Martha Trotter, stepped off on the way to Yankee Stadium and got married.

The Stroller learned about the battle of nerves when he was invited to join the group for the trip to the church. Never had he seen so calm an athlete turn so vicious as Louis did from the time he left the altar until he got in the ring with Baer.

AND HE NEVER will forget the night that Max Schmeling, the beetle-browed German, handed Joe his first knockout to temporarily halt his meteoric rise.

The next day, with his face badly battered, Joe was asked, "What happened?"

Joe shrugged and said, "He fought me sideways."

Louis never had fought a fellow who used a crouching style, and it bamboozled him. But there were no excuses.

Then came the match with Jimmy Braddock for the world championship in Chicago in June 1937. Braddock was over the hill, but he knocked Joe down in the first round only to lose his title when Joe stopped him in the eighth.

Hustling into the dressing room, The Stroller grabbed Joe's hand and said, "Congratulations, Champ."

Joe just stared a moment and answered, "I ain't no champ. A champion is supposed to be the best, ain't he? Well, there's a fellow walking around who beat me."

JOE MEANT Schmeling, and he never figured he was the world champion until he conquered Schmeling in the

first round of the most vicious fight The Stroller has ever seen.

Preparing for the fight, Joe was warned it wouldn't last long; that someone would go down in a hurry, and it might as well be Schmeling.

Joe was coached to leave his corner at the opening bell, race right for Schmeling and open up on him with both fists.

The real drama came before the fight. Joe was taken out to Yankee Stadium at 6 o'clock, four hours before the scheduled time of the fight. Once there he was told to dress leisurely for the ring. He did. And then, of all things, he fell asleep in the dressing room.

Old Jack Blackburn, his trainer, got him up and made him box six rounds just to get warmed up. That finished, Joe was wrapped in a terrycloth robe, a towel was placed over his head, and he started for the ring. It was the first time Joe wore a towel over his head, but it was the tip-off that he was ready.

As they walked out the door of the dressing room, Joe looked at Roxborough, who had a cigar in his mouth and his pocket filled with more, because he usually chewed one every round.

"That one," Joe said, pointing to the cigar in Roxborough's mouth, "is all you're going to need."

JOE WAS right.

Never did he give an opponent such a beating as he gave Max Schmeling in those first two minutes. And as the German was virtually being carried to his corner, Joe Louis' name was emblazoned high in the pugilistic sky, and there it will remain.

The Brown Bomber may be gone from the square circle down here, but his memory will live on . . . and on.

The Stroller will never see his like again, God rest his soul.



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