

The Joe Louis Story Has Saddest Of All Finishes

By W.W. EDGAR

The final chapter in one of the most amazing careers in sports history is being written on a sad note.

In the closing episodes in the life of Joe Louis, the "Brown Bomber" who rose from the lowly rank of "hustling axles" at Fords to the world's heavyweight championship in three short years and now is confined in a mental institution in Denver, Col.

A saddened and forlorn figure now, as psychiatrists study his strange case and legal experts ponder the next move, there was a time when his name was a household word and he was acclaimed the greatest heavyweight "first fighter" who ever lived.

ALL ALONE NOW, and bewildered, far from the center of the boxing world that once acclaimed him, he is living out a strange portion of his life. And even his closest friends are frustrated by what has happened.

While nothing official has been announced his doctors claim only "Joe is in deep trouble and needs help." Joe's health has been a matter of concern since he collapsed on the streets of New York little more than a year ago. At that time it was stated he was suffering from exhaustion and he walked out of the hospital in two days. Then, last fall, he was admitted to Ford Hospital for treatment and again, without an official diagnosis of his case, Joe walked out of the hospital.

For a time he was considered to be his old self again. Then word trickled out of Las Vegas, where he supposedly was vacationing that all was not well and his son, Joe Louis Barrow Jr., had him committed.

In the absence of any official medical diagnosis there are some who even hint that he may have become a victim of narcotics. Others say he has fallen prey to an ailment of many old fighters and has become what the trade knows as "punchy."

Until more definite word is released, officially, it can only be assumed that the many punches he took about the head during his 17 years in the ring finally are taking their toll—and the skull that once was the target of the hardest punches in the world now is deteriorating and leaving him mentally ill.

It is a strange ending to a career that is unequalled in any branch of sport. Always a perfect gentleman whose humble beginning and humility were as much acclaimed as his prowess in the ring, an established a record that may never be equaled.

He came along, taking his first steps up the pugilistic ladder when odds were against him because of his

color. Yet, he won over the odds, became acknowledged far and wide as a credit to his race, and there no longer was a racial barrier where he was concerned.

His appearance on the pugilistic scene came at an unusual time in the history of boxing, or what is sometimes referred to in higher circles, as "the many art of self defense."

THE FIGHT INDUSTRY was in great need of an attraction—a hero who would captivate the crowds and be a fitting successor to such greats as John L. Sullivan, "Gentleman Jim" Corbett, Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney. Bad as a new hero was needed, there still were memories of the wild career of Jack Johnson, the first Negro to hold the heavyweight title. He had given the boxing game a "black eye" and caused the general feeling that "no Negro ever again would get a chance to fight for the title."

In the search for the hero, Golden Gloves tournaments were being held across the country and a fresh new supply of talent was being uncovered. In the crop there came a number of black boys—and the first new seeds of racism were sown.

In this new crop was a likeable lad whose Mother dreamed of the day when he would become a great orchestra leader like Cab Calloway. Instead, he traded a soap order violin for

a pair of boxing gloves and became a member of the Detroit Free Press Golden Gloves team.

At the time Joe was getting started at Brewster Center he was coached and trained by an old time Philadelphia Negro lightweight named Art Ellis, who was closing out his work days as a janitor at Fords.

Spotting the latent ability of his new charge and noting what was happening to the boxing game in general, Ellis laid out a course of action for Joe that changed the entire concept of the fight game.

"REMEMBER THIS JOE," he told him one afternoon, "everybody will be trying to knock the nigger's head off and you got to beat them to it."

"Don't you punch first," he cautioned. Let them rush at you, shooting for your head, then side step and let 'em have it. Your best bet is to be a counter puncher."

That's exactly what Joe did. Not only did he become a counter puncher, but was acclaimed the greatest of all time with the fastest fists the game ever has known.

It is a matter of record now that the "Man with the broom from Fords" knew what he was talking about. For, with the coming of the new crop of Negro fighters, all the white battlers became "head punchers." The old time theory, taught by such immortals as O'Leary Sam Langford and Jack

Dempsey, that if you "kill the body the head will die" was discarded and body punches passed from the scene.

Throughout his entire career, from his first pro fight with Jack Kravken in Chicago on July 4, 1934, until his last one where he fell prey to a knockout blow from the late Rocky Marciano, Joe never was called upon to fight a body puncher. And this oddity may be the indirect cause of the Bomber's present trouble.

In all of his fights he was subjected to head-punching, but unlike many other members of his race who supposedly have thick skulls, Joe could shake off blows to the chin, but a punch that landed at, or above, his temple, seemed to bother him.

Proof of his ability to withstand terrific blows on the jaw is evidenced by the fact that Max Schmeling landed 57 right hand smashes before he inflicted the first knockout of Joe's career.

NO ONE PAID much attention at the time, but Joe's present trouble and his one weakness can be traced back to a night in 1934 when Joe met Alex Buruch, a chunky Windsor heavyweight in his fourth professional fight.

It was Joe's debut in his home town as a pro fighter and the Naval Academy was jammed. Early in the fight, however, Alex landed a solid right to the head and Joe "froze." That is his entire body became numb and he just stood motionless in the center of the ring.

After a blow possibly would have finished him and no doubt would have curbed what became an amazing career. Instead of following up his advantage, figuring Louis was playing "possum" laid back. Meantime Joe came to, regained his senses, and finished off the Windsor fighter in a few more rounds.

The "freezing" was the first evidence that Joe could be hurt with a blow to the head. It also revealed his one weakness he carried through his career. This was his inability to guard against a right hand.

Over the rest of the journey that took him to the top Joe survived many blows to the head. Because of the power of his own punches and the long string of knockouts he compiled, no one paid attention to possible danger to Joe. And he certainly never showed any outward damage.

GOING OVER HIS record, one who has seen all of his fights, now can recall that even light hitting Billy Conn, a built up heavyweight out of Pittsburgh, staggered Joe with a right hand high on the head just before falling victim to Joe's blistering left hook and right cross.

Fat and blubbery Tony Galento humiliated Joe one night in Yankee Stadium by dropping him with a hard right to the head. Max Baer also did him with several hard right hand punches, but Louis always shook them off.

Then came his fight with Schmeling—the first one—when Max said, "I see zumping" and vowed that he'd stop Joe when they met in Yankee Stadium in 1936.

Queried about what he saw, Max admitted in an exclusive interview at Nappanock, that Joe carried his left hand, too low and that when he feinted he didn't punch. He didn't punch until he feinted the second time.

"If I start my right hand when he feints first time," Schmeling said, "I land on his jaw when he feints the second time."

That's just what happened. Sitting at the ringside the veteran fight writers noticed Max counting with his head, then landing a hard right above Joe's temple in the first round. He did it again in the second, forcing Joe back on his heels, and in the fourth round he knocked him down.

In the flurry of the fighting Max landed a stiff right after the bell in the fifth round. It was a blow from which Joe never recovered and finally was dropped for the full count in the 12th round.

IT SEEMS IRONICAL to look back now. But on the morning after that fight I called on Joe at his headquarters to ask what had gone wrong. His left jaw was badly swollen,



DOWN AND OUT goes Louis in the first meeting with Max Schmeling, the hard-hitting German, who has arms high in air and a big smile. Joe took a terrific beat-

Unheeded advice prior to Marciano fight: "Throughout your climb to the title and your many defenses of it, you never suffered more than a bloody nose. Now rank amateurs are starting to cut you up."

len, his face actually knocked over that was a terrible sight—and very downcast. It is ironical, too, that John Roxborough, his manager, explained, "If he isn't hurt inwardly, the terrible beating might do him some good. He sure learned a lesson last night."

That morning, even in the gloom of defeat, no one dreamed that the blows possibly would be sending Joe on his way to a mental hospital.

It is history that Joe came back after that setback to win the heavyweight title from Jimmy Braddock in Chicago. After Jimmy had knocked him down in the first round and that he annihilated Schmeling in a return fight in 1938.

Joe was riding the crest, doing what no other champion ever did. He was giving every challenger a chance at the title, fighting every month in defeat of only once a year.

FINALLY RUNNING out of opponents Joe went into retirement. But the urge to fight—and recoup some of his financial losses, which is another story, brought him back to the ring against the advice of his closest friends.

First, he lost to Ezzard Charles in a boxing match, and the aura of invincibility dimmed. Then, on his own, Joe sought a match with hard hitting Rocky Marciano—and his downfall.

Memory of the Marciano fight recalls an afternoon spent with Joe pleading with him not to take the fight. At the time Joe was wearing a patch to cover a rash on his left cheek, a memento of an exhibition bout with a novice a few nights earlier in Boston.

After attempting to talk him out of considering a fight with Marciano to regain the title, I said—

"Joe, doesn't that mark on your cheek tell you something?"

When he sat silent for a moment I continued—

"Throughout your climb to the title and your many defenses of it, you never suffered more than a bloody nose, so

far as the eye could see. You escaped, cut eyes, cauliflower ears and a mashed nose and you fought the hardest punchers in the world. Now, rank amateurs are starting to cut you. That, should tell you something."

"But Marciano is a swinger," Joe replied. "He throws roundhouse punches and it should be easy to step inside of them and tag him."

Joe seemed to be dreaming of his glamorous days as the champion and the sparkle in his eye seemed to tell that he was missing the spotlight and wanted it back.

"You know," I continued, "I was with Jack Dempsey the day he hung up the gloves for good—over in Harry Tutthill's gym on Monroe Avenue, and I'll always remember what he told me that day."

"Sitting on an old battered trunk, Jack asked me to hang up his gloves for him, then he confided that his legs finally gave out on him."

"I STILL CAN hit as hard as ever," he explained. "When I see an opening my legs won't take me in fast enough to punch. And when I see a punch coming, I can't get out of the way fast enough—so fellows are starting to hit me and it's time to quit."

He did that musty afternoon in downtown Detroit. Louis listened intently, but he wasn't convinced.

He kept saying, "Rocky is a swinger—he should be easy."

It did little good to tell him that he wasn't moving out of the way of punches any more—that amateurs now were cutting him with 14 punches gloves and that, maybe, his legs wouldn't carry him inside Marciano's swings.

So, against all advice Joe sought and got the fight. He was an old man going into the ring. His shoulders were a bit sloped. There was a telltale bald spot on the back of his head.

The spirit was willing. The old fear was there. But once the bell rang, Joe saw his mistake.

He couldn't get out of the way of the swings. He went

DOWN AND OUT goes Louis in the first meeting with Max Schmeling, the hard-hitting German, who has arms high in air and a big smile. Joe took a terrific beat-

Unheeded advice prior to Marciano fight: "Throughout your climb to the title and your many defenses of it, you never suffered more than a bloody nose. Now rank amateurs are starting to cut you up."

down quickly from one of those "roundhouse" rights. Up again, he couldn't get out of the way. The spirit now was willing, but the flesh was weak. His legs betrayed him. Finally, another solid right hand smash dumped him to the canvas for the long count. It was the blow that ended his dreams of regaining the heavyweight title.

Little did we, at the ringside, think that it was a blow that might be the turning point of a sad tale in later years.

Joe took the defeat gracefully. A gentleman to the last he never offered an alibi. And just a little more than a year ago when I had the privilege of interviewing him on television he chuckled when he recalled how he rejected the warning.

Sports in general and boxing in particular may never see the likes of him again.

THE FIRST SIGN that he



JUNE 12-13

Friday and Saturday

COIN and STAMP BOURSE

25-30 Dealers will display a variety of foreign, Canadian and American Coins also ancient Roman and Egyptian coins. The display of stamps will include American and British 19th Century stamps, both coins and stamps for novice or collector. Free appreciation. LOOK-BUY-SELL-TRADE!

NATIONAL BANK OF DETROIT MONEY MUSEUM

June 12-20

See one of the largest coin collections in the world. No admission charge.

NOW THRU JUNE 13 JETT PETTING ZOO

A super treat for the small fry. Your children can see, feed and pet such exotic animals as llamas, wallabies, anteaters, macaws, stump-tail macaques, Indian zebu, Barbados sheep, goats, ponies, ducks, collie and a baby Indian elephant. Looking free-feeding and petting-25 cents. BRING YOUR CAMERA.

STARTING JUNE 18 CHILDREN'S MOVIE SHOWS

Special cartoon and children's programs at Cinema 1 from 10 a.m. until noon on Thursdays, starting June 18. Open to all children 12 and under.

OPEN EVERY EVENING 'til 9 p.m.

Meet You At The Mall

There's always something going on at...

LIVONIA MALL

7 MILE AT MODERELY



CLEARLY SHOWING the effects of the battering from Marciano, this is how Joe is in the dressing room after being knocked out in the ring. He is a far cry from the powerful youngster shown above.



YOUTHFUL Joe Louis, a strong, clear-eyed youngster, looked like this shortly after winning the world's heavyweight championship. His big ambition was to fight as often as possible and win.



IS THIS THE FIGHT that started Louis on the way to his present condition? Joe tried to make a comeback against Rocky Marciano and wound up in a heap on the floor—a dazed, beaten fighter.