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Max Schmeling

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Max Schmeling
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The death of Max Schmeling on Friday has been much commented upon over the past few days. I take this to be a recognition of the significance of this man and the memories he evokes around the world. For Americans these memories center on his relationship, both personal and athletic, with Joe Louis.

In June of 1936 as a heavyweight and ex-champion he fought and defeated the young and rising star of the 1930s, Joe Louis. It was a knockout in the twelfth round and came as a surprise, maybe even a shock, to most boxing fans. Schmeling was a ten to one underdog. Two years later nearly to the day, Louis, by then heavyweight champion took out Schmeling in the first round.

To recite these bare facts is to miss entirely the significance of the men and these two fights. Schmeling was a German who held the heavyweight title early and briefly in the Thirties. By the time he first fought Louis he was aged 30 and on the downside of his career. Hitler was in power and it was the eve of the Nazi Olympics. The Nazi propaganda machine chose not to put Aryan supremacy on the line in this fight, and in fact Goebbels had written an editorial opposing the fight. Hitler personally expressed to Schmeling his concern that the boxer might be risking the reputation of Aryan supremacy by fighting Louis. The post-fight interest by Goebbels and Hitler was markedly different as Schmeling was now treated as a hero and a representative of the Nazi State.

Going into the 1938 fight the American public treated Schmeling in the same vein. In the case of both fights such symbolic representation was not of Schmeling's making or desire. He was not a member of the Nazi Party, he refused to fire his Jewish American manager, and he was uncomfortable in the Aryan role. On the other hand he did represent the German government in 1935 offering Americans assurances that Jewish and American athletes would be treated fairly at the 1936 Olympic Games. This served to assist USOC president Avery Brundage in his effort to prevent an American boycott of the '36 games.

Schmeling's defenders point out that he saved the lives of two Jewish boys who were children of a friend at the time of Kristallnacht, that he saved other Jewish friends from

concentration camps, and that he befriended Joe Louis on several occasions and paid for Louis' funeral expenses. The U.S. government had destroyed Joe Louis financially by hounding him over back taxes, and physically by forcing him to return to boxing for financial solvency after his ring career should have been over.

No matter how one reads Max Schmeling's life and evaluates his character, these episodes and discussions surrounding Schmeling have always raised two basic issues for me. First, as with so many that were faced with the evil of the Nazi regime, how can anyone at this distance individually sit in judgment of anyone else? When faced with evil and overwhelming power, when propagandized by the state and caught in the pressure of public judgment, and when faced with the risk of one's life, how would any of us react?

It is a simple matter to tally up the facts and make a judgment about Max Schmeling. It is a more sobering and productive exercise to contemplate how each one of us might act in similar circumstances. Courage in the abstract is much more common than courage in the moment, especially when the kind of courage required is both moral and physical.

Second, the appropriation of Joe Louis as a hero to fight and defeat the symbolic Nazi, has always been for me one of the more perplexing episodes in modern American history. Here is an African American fighter who finds it very difficult to get a shot at the heavyweight title because of his color, and here is a person who is subject to all the racial restrictions of American life in the Thirties. He lives in a society that has isolated the African American and held them as second class citizens while denying their existence as complete human beings.

Yet this same white society appropriated Joe Louis to take on and defeat the evil Nazi whose ideology of racial superiority was expressing itself militarily across Europe. Was this America of the Thirties so feckless that it could not see the contradictions inherent in its choice of weapons to defeat Nazi racism? The case of Jesse Owens as hero of American democracy against the Nazis at the 1936 Olympics raised the same questions. Both Louis and Owens, having served the needs of the moment in the fight against the Nazi ideology were cast back into their "place" in American life. Did no one notice the irony or the madness?

Two things may help to come to some understanding of this phenomenon. First, it is likely that for most people it was not Joe Louis the person who they saw in the struggle against Schmeling and the Nazi regime. Rather it was Joe Louis the abstract symbol who was appropriated for the moment, and once the moment had passed was no longer an abstraction. He was once again, Joe Louis, the Negro who happened to be a very good boxer.

Second it is important to remember that although Louis was seen as a hero in his second fight with Schmeling, he was not universally cheered in the American white world. In fact many both north and the south continued to allow racism to trump all else, and a number of Southern sportswriters openly cheered for Schmeling.

So the death of Max Schmeling, heavyweight champion and at one point a symbol of Nazism, should remind us all of the difficult choices which many faced in the Europe of the Thirties in the face of genocide. It should also remind us of the contradictions of race in America and how easy it was to slide the mind over them in that time and place in history.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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