

Jack Johnson: Breaking the Color Barriers of Boxing

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Imagine being arguably the best in your sport in the nation with public support. No jerseys with the number 23, no bobble head dolls, no baseball cards. Training and winning day in and day out but no one seems to notice. This is exactly how Jack Johnson felt in beginning of the 20th century. As a major star in a desegregated sport, Johnson suffered the prejudices of a highly segregated country.

Jack Johnson was born in 1878 and educated primarily from the streets. His career began in amateur fighting leagues near his home in Galveston, Texas.¹ He quickly climbed into the top tier of fighters. Unfortunately, his country was not ready to accept this. He was not able to have many fights in the United States and his first Heavyweight Championship title match was held in Australia in 1908. Fueled by prejudices, the country began the search for the "Great White Hope", any white boxer who could defeat Johnson and reaffirm the inequality of blacks.²

The most anticipated match of Johnson's career came on July 4, 1910 in Reno, Nevada. After the boxing community had scoured the country looking for an opponent they were confident could beat Johnson, they thought they had found their man. Jim Jefferies, a former heavyweight champion himself, was dragged out of retirement for the fight. Although the match-up was the best that the white community could produce, there was no contest. Johnson quickly polished off Jefferies and destroyed any goals that whites may have had of reaffirming the idea of inequality.³

To add to the annoyance that whites were experiencing, Johnson began to show a controversial personality. While he was fortunate to be successful in a desegregated sport, he was still forced to deal with the stereotypes of a segregated country. He also dated white women, which was a social taboo to say the least at the time.⁴ In a time of our nation's history that did not tolerate interracial couples, Johnson refused to follow the social norms. He pushed the boundaries of what was accepted and created a large amount of enemies because of it.

Johnson's outgoing personality and ability to hit on the very issues that caused heated debate throughout the nation caused him to be easily hated by whites and feared by blacks. As he became an easier target, whites figured out a way for the law to stop him. The Mann Act of 1910, which was created to prohibit the transportation of women across state boundaries for immoral purposes, was thought, by many, to have been created with Johnson specifically in mind. He was found in violation of the Act and forced to serve one year in jail.⁵ Jack Johnson's trouble with the law essentially marked the end of his boxing career but not before he was able to make a lasting impression on the country.

One of the most significant ways Johnson impacted society was the symbol of his success both in the ring and in the business world. Johnson, as one single black man, was not the threat to the white community, but rather it was what he stood for. He was no longer dependent on whites and, in fact, it took the whole white community eight years to find a white boxer that could defeat Johnson. Johnson's personality kept him from having an impact to the likes of Jackie Robinson. However, he challenged the nation to accept desegregation and the idea that all men are created equal. Johnson, without a doubt, helped pave the way for black athletes that came after him. He is often overlooked as a trailblazer of desegregation in sports but that is far from the truth. Jack Johnson is arguably one of the most influential black athletes of the segregated era, even if there are no bobble head dolls or shiny boxing shorts commemorating his contributions.

Works Cited

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End Notes

¹ Randy Roberts, *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hope* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1983), 6.

² Roberts, 16-17.

³ Nat Fleischer, *The Heavyweight Championship* (New York, NY: Van Reese Press, 1949). 150.

⁴ Jack Johnson, *Jack Johnson: In the Ring and Out* (Chicago, IL: National Sports Publishing Company, 1927), 70-88.

⁵ Roberts, 144.