

The main event: Joe Louis documentary on HBO

by Jerry Magee

On HBO on Feb. 23, Wladimir Klitschko and Sultan Ibragimov came out trying to bat down each other's jabs. One got the feeling one was watching a couple of guys swatting at flies.

A bit later, on the same network, there was a reminder that boxing can have grandeur. It came with the showing of "Joe Louis: America's Hero ... Betrayed," a documentary that followed Louis from his birth in Lafayette, Ala., through the period when he challenged the nation's notion of race and class and on into his later life, when in order to address his tax debts he had to assume roles of the most demeaning sort.

For HBO to have presented the Louis chronicle after the Klitschko-Ibragimov joke of a heavyweight title fight was all wrong. The Louis film was being offered as walk-out fights are - after the main event, just something to glance at while leaving the arena. The main event on this evening was the Louis saga. Being able to witness it on the same program as Klitschko and Ibragimov said everything for Louis and nothing for the other two.

Ibragimov would not have gone a round with Louis. How a man so little schooled in boxing's fundamentals could have been a party to a heavyweight unification fight was a commentary on the sport's current status.

At 6-feet-7, Klitschko has obvious physical attributes, but he is the most mechanical of fighters, and one of the most tentative. Risking nothing, he gains nothing.

The Louis documentary is scheduled to be reshowed at various times through the end of March. On HBO On Demand, it is available through March 17. Do view it. Its value, I think, is that Louis came along before television. Publicly, he had no face; his face was a mask when he was in the ring, his expression never changing. This program lends him a face. It is, ultimately, a tragic one, with the fighter striving in various ways to satisfy the tax debts that had multiplied while he was serving during World War II.

"He wasn't running from the debt," says his son, Joe Louis Barrow Jr., in the film. "He was just trying to deal with it in a civil fashion, in a responsible way, and they just dogged him forever. He had set up a trust fund for my sister and me. And the IRS took the trust funds from us. I just think they wanted to rein him in and basically say, 'You still are under our thumb, boy.'"

Louis died in 1981 in Las Vegas, four years after suffering a stroke. He posthumously received a Congressional Gold Medal and was given a full military funeral and burial in Arlington National Cemetery.

One thing that is admirable about the HBO documentary is that it does not portray Louis as a person without flaws. He liked chorus girls (and they him). After Caesars Palace in Las Vegas employed him as a greeter, he spent a good deal more time at the gaming tables than at the front door. Visitors to the casino would give him money to bet, and when he won, he kept the money.

But he had changed how athletes of color were regarded in this country. The second Louis-Max Schmeling fight in 1938 probably represented the first time in American history that a black man ended up being a white hope.

I was 10 years old, growing up in Omaha, in 1938. Clem McCarthy, with that hoarse voice of his, did the radio call on Louis-Schmeling II. With the German helpless after 2:04 of Round 1, McCarthy rasped, "The men are in the ring. The fight is over."

After viewing HBO's documentary, I looked up what the late Jimmy Cannon had written of Louis:

"There was conceit in him but he controlled it. There was a lot of pride in him, too, but it never took charge of him. He was shy and he hid in silence when there were strangers around, but he was easygoing and good company if you were a friend.

"I admired him, but I tried to see him clearly. At the end, when he needed help, I was sympathetic but I knew he was a goner and I said so. He never complained about it and it never spoiled our relationship. He was a great champion and I'm glad he was a champion in my time.

"He was mean at his work but he was able to leave it in the ring. The cruelty was there, all right. The poverty of his boyhood formed him, as it does all fighters. But he was never resentful and he always did the best he could. His best was wonderful."

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