

Contemporary Collectibles: Joe Louis KOs collectors

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

There were great prizefighters before, such as John L. Sullivan and Jack Dempsey, and after, such as Mohammad Ali, but none quite commanded the respect and affection of the American public as Joe Louis, who reigned as heavyweight champion for almost 12 years, from 1937 to 1949, defending his title 25 times.

Known universally (and politically incorrectly) as The Brown Bomber, his fame crossed color lines to make him an outstanding national hero, appreciated for his power, style and skill. In 2005, he was named the greatest heavyweight boxer of all time.

Joe Louis Barrow was born on May 13, 1914, the seventh child of a poor cotton sharecropper named Monroe "Mun" Barrow in LaFayette, Ala. While he was still a young boy, his father suffered a mental breakdown and died in a state hospital. His mother remarried a widower with several children, and the blended family moved to Detroit in 1924, where young Joe became interested in boxing, at 16 entering his first amateur match.

In 1934, he won the Golden Gloves as a light heavyweight, at which point he turned pro, winning 12 fights in his first year. After 27 straight wins (including 23 KOs), he finally lost to Max Schmeling, a German who was promoted as part of Hitler's "Aryan superiority." But in a dramatic 1938 rematch, Schmeling was knocked out 2 minutes and 4 seconds into the first round, dealing a devastating blow to the Nazi cause and fueling the fight for racial equality in the U.S.

In the succeeding years, he defeated five former champions before he was inducted into the Army, traveling extensively and giving boxing exhibitions. He retired an undefeated champion in 1949, coming out of retirement the following year, losing to Ezzard Charles, then winning eight more fights before losing to Rocky Marciano and retiring for good.

Joe Louis was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal in 1982, because he "did so much to bolster the spirit of the American people during one of the most crucial times in American history." He died of a heart attack in 1981, and was buried in Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors.

Boxing may not have quite the range of equipment and memorabilia found with some other sports, but it is still possible to put together an interesting Joe Louis collection. Some pieces of personal equipment have found their way to auction houses, including headgear, mouthpieces and a bronzed, fight-worn shoe that fetched \$12,500 in 1992. Louis wore Everlast and Benlee trunks and gloves in various matches, but those items would be virtually impossible to find.

Boxing trading cards featuring Louis are much easier to find, including a black-and-white photo in a set put

out by the African Tobacco Manufacturers in 1939; a series called "Famous Fighters in Action"; American Tobacco Co. sets; a Cartledge Razor Blades set of "Famous Prize Fighters"; and others sponsored by Bond Bread, Leaf Gum, Philadelphia Carmel Co., Topps Chewing Gum and United Tobacco Co., to name just a few.

Printed matter include books, comics and periodicals, posters promoting various fights (especially prized are posters for the Louis-Jersey Joe Walcott match of 1947), movie posters for "The Joe Louis Story" and other films, boxing programs (most notably Louis vs. Max Baer, James J. Braddock, Max Schmeling, Tony Galente, Billy Conn, Joe Walcott, Ezzard Charles and Rocky Marciano), tickets, matchbooks and autographs (Louis was an amenable, prolific signer).

In the miscellaneous category fall various pin-back buttons ("Brown Bomber Baking Co. Anti-Crime Club Member"), coasters promoting the Louis-Walcott fight, a 1981 brass coin, an Anheuser Busch Joe Louis stein, Joe Louis hair pomade, limited-edition bronze sculptures, records, puppets, clocks and even a Joe Louis prophylactic box.

Linda Rosenkrantz has edited Auction magazine and authored 15 books, including "The Baby Name Bible" (St. Martin's Press; www.babynamebible.com). She cannot answer letters personally.

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