



Jack Johnson
1878 — 1946
Boxing
Inducted 1971

The searing white Nevada sun was like a furnace that dramatic afternoon at Reno in 1910. It was the Fourth of July — Independence Day to most Americans, at least to white Americans.

But Jack Arthur Johnson was a black man, a black man who possessed athletic and physical skills America's white world of sports was not yet ready to accept. So the teeming, lusting crowd which spilled to the very canvas of the open-air boxing ring there on the Nevada desert wildly screamed encouragement to their Great White Hope, Jim Jeffries, and cursed and taunted the chocolate-skinned giant from Galveston, Texas who almost tore Jeffries' head from his shoulders with savage, punishing blows round after brutal round.

The next day's headlines told the story: **JOHNSON KNOCKS OUT JEFFRIES IN 15TH ROUND!** Jack Johnson had successfully defended his heavyweight championship against the outraged demands of America that a Great White Hope should send him back to the Galveston wharfs from where he had stalked this pinnacle of American sports against almost incalculable odds.

Jack London, the foremost chronicler of boxing in that infancy of the 20th century, and the man whose pen was dominant in the clamor to dethrone this black Texas giant, wrote in the papers of July 5, 1910: "The greatest battle of the century was a monologue delivered to the 20,000 spectators by a smiling Negro who was never in doubt and who was never serious for more than a moment at a time."

Indeed, Jack Johnson was never serious more than a moment at a time throughout his controversial, frequently-troubled life. For Jack Johnson loved life, and he lived it to the hilt, whether the white man liked it or not.

But despite the disdain and hate he faced at every step, this son of a Galveston school house janitor, tore determinedly at those barriers with his lethal ebony fists until he took the heavyweight crown from the head of Tommy Burns in Australia in 1908.

That was two years before Johnson was to crush the Great White Hope in the Fight of the Century at Reno. It was nine years before he was to finally lose the heavyweight crown to an awkward but immensely strong Jess Willard under a blazing sun at Havana in 1915, a fight that remains today as one of boxing's most mysterious and controversial battles.

A furor was caused by the publication of a picture that showed Johnson prostrate in the ring, apparently shielding his eyes from the sun with his right arm. Many persons accused him of "throwing" the fight.

Perhaps the winner, Jess Willard, had the most pertinent comment on the controversy. He pointed out that he and Johnson had fought an hour and 40 minutes and were into the 26th round when the knockout came. If a man were going to lose deliberately, wouldn't he have done it sooner, in that broiling heat?

An automobile crash at Raleigh, N.C. in 1946 ended the stormy life of Jack Johnson, just one year after he had climbed into the ring for the last time, an exhibition match at the age of 67.

It also ended the legend of the black athlete's first triumph over the inhumanity of the paying customer in America, almost 40 years before Jackie Robinson was to take the field for the Brooklyn Dodgers and bring racial barriers crashing for the magnificent skills of America's black athletes.

Johnson was born in Galveston on March 31, 1878. He was 6-feet 1¼ inches tall and weighed from 195 to 220 pounds for the 112 fights of his extraordinary career. He lost only seven of those 112 matches. He was managed for most of those bouts by Sam Fitzpatrick.

Boxing had never even crossed the mind of young Jack Johnson when he