

## What they said about Thomas Myler's previous books

### **New York Fight Nights**

Thomas Myler has served up another collection of gripping boxing stories. The author packs such a punch with his masterful storytelling that you will feel you were ringside inhaling the sizzling atmosphere at each clash of the titans.

A must for boxing fans.

*Ireland's Own*

There are few more authoritative voices in boxing than Thomas Myler and this is another wonderfully evocative addition to his growing body of work.

*Irish Independent*

Another great book from the pen of the prolific Thomas Myler.

*RTE, Ireland's national broadcaster*

### **The Mad and the Bad**

Another storytelling gem from Thomas Myler, pouring light into the shadows surrounding some of boxing's most colourful characters.

*Irish Independent*

The best boxing book of the year from a top writer.

*Daily Mail*

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A respected writer, Myler has compiled a worthy volume on the most sensational and talked-about upsets of the glove era, drawing on interviews, archive footage and worldwide contacts.

*Yorkshire Evening Post*

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*Hull Daily Mail*

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*Bert Sugar, US author and broadcaster*

Well written and thoroughly researched by one of the best boxing writers in these islands, Myler has a keen eye for the story behind the story. A must read for all fight fans.

*Yorkshire Post*

### **Close Encounters with the Gloves Off**

Reading like a beautiful love letter to the fight game's glorious past, there's not a better boxing book on the shelves – anywhere.

*Irish Independent*

Admired and respected around the world, Thomas Myler has surpassed himself with this latest offering.

*Dublin Herald*

### **Book of the Month**

*Lonsdale Sports*

Myler's ability to dig deep, gather plenty of background information, coupled with his easy-flowing style of writing, paints a fascinating scene building up to the contests. We urge you to add this book to your collection.

*Boxing News*

Myler doesn't just deal with what happened inside the ropes but also provides a balanced overview of the controversies, personalities and historical contexts that make these fights worth reading about.

*Ring*

### **Ringside with the Celtic Warriors**

The offering from this highly respected boxing writer is well up to the standard we expect from him.

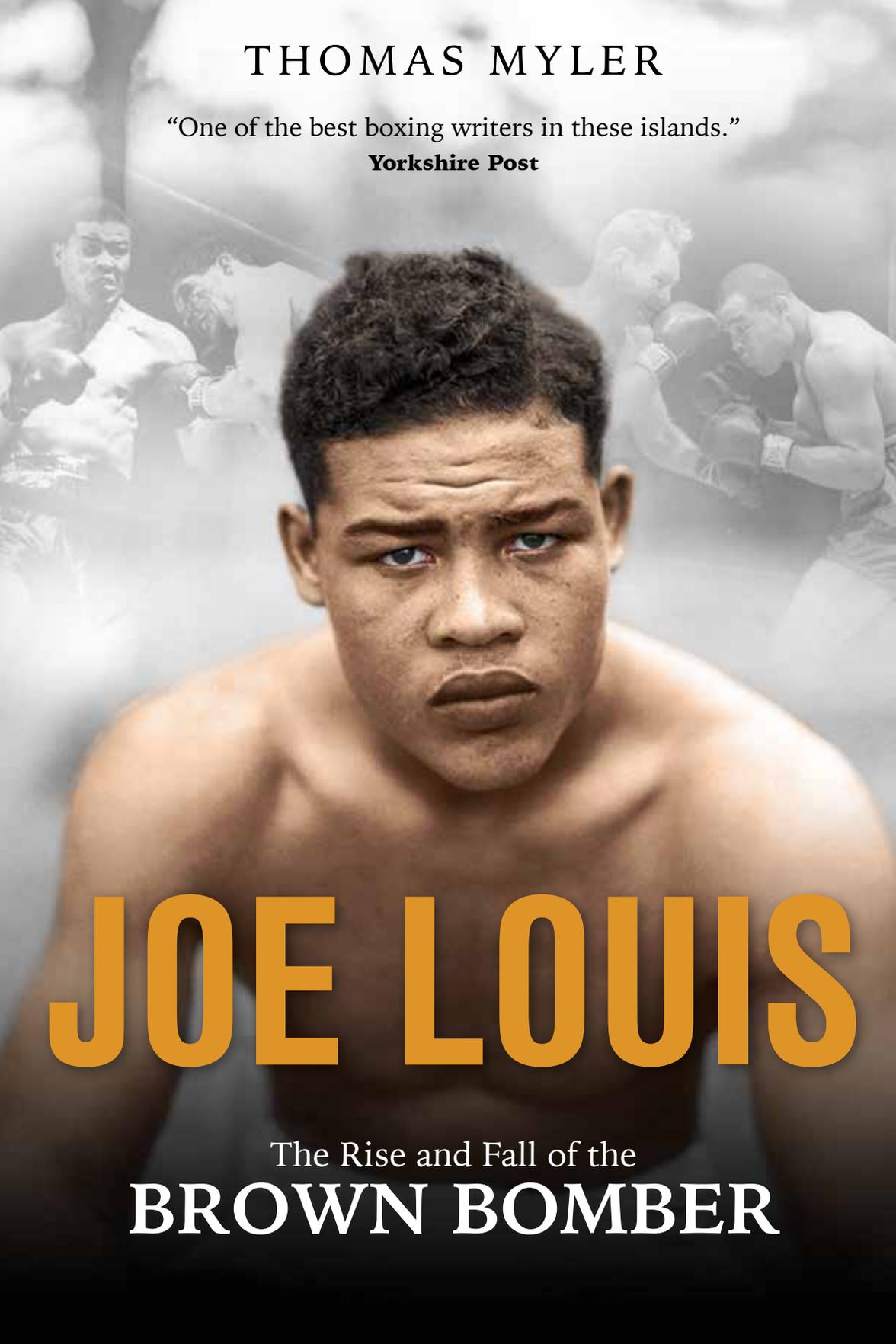
*Boxing News*

Thomas Myler has come up with another gem. His credentials and easy, readable style make this a must book for fight fans.

*The Sun*

As a ring historian, Thomas Myler has few peers.

*Belfast Telegraph*



THOMAS MYLER

“One of the best boxing writers in these islands.”

**Yorkshire Post**

# JOE LOUIS

The Rise and Fall of the  
**BROWN BOMBER**

THOMAS MYLER

# JOE LOUIS

The Rise and Fall of the  
**BROWN BOMBER**



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That's what boxing is,  
the sweet science.

A. J. Liebling, master storyteller  
on the *New Yorker*

# Prologue

As a youngster growing up in the 1940s, it is not difficult to recall that Joe Louis was the number one boxer during the war years. His name was on everybody's lips. Louis, the famous 'Brown Bomber', was heavyweight champion of the world and master of all he surveyed. Hadn't he beaten the best that the division had to offer?

His lone defeat, against Max Schmeling in 1936, was well and truly avenged two years later. There seemed nobody who could take the title from Louis after he won it from a game James J. Braddock in 1937. Many tried and failed, some narrowly.

Billy Conn, an ambitious Irish-American from Pittsburgh, almost succeeded with a points lead after 12 rounds in 1941, but Louis knocked him out in the 13th. At the tail end of his career in 1947, Louis won an unpopular points decision over the veteran Jersey Joe Walcott. The referee voted for Walcott but the two judges opted for Louis, allowing him to keep his title. In a return bout six months later, Louis knocked out his man in 11 rounds. Even in the closing years of his career, 1950–1951, he beat top contenders.

It is often hard to point out to modern boxing people how great Louis was, or the powerful influence he had on the fight game. He transcended the sport. He was world heavyweight champion for 11 years and eight months, and put his title

on the line no fewer than 25 times, feats that no previous heavyweight champion had ever achieved. It was also more than the combined total of defences by Louis' nine immediate predecessors going back 32 years. Moreover, if there were any doubts or controversies surrounding any defence, Louis would give the challenger a second shot.

Louis also helped to smash the despicable colour bar that denied many great boxers in the heavyweight division an opportunity to fight for the title. John L. Sullivan, the last world heavyweight champion under the Queensberry Rules in the late 1880s, refused to put his title on the line against a black challenger. In the 1920s, Jack Dempsey never took on his number one contender Harry Wills, the 'Black Panther'.

In the first half-century of the heavyweight championship, only one black boxer, Jack Johnson, managed to win the title – and the big Texan only got his deserved chance by following Tommy Burns across three continents before catching up with him in Australia.

At Rushcutter's Bay Arena in Sydney on 26 December 1908, Johnson made the French-Canadian pay for every ounce of anger, frustration and discrimination he had endured over the years. Taunting and tormenting the outclassed champion, Johnson won when the police at ringside mercifully instructed the referee to stop the one-sided fight in the 14th round.

Johnson lost his title seven years later to a white boxer, Jess Willard, on a controversial knockout in the 26th round. There would not be another black heavyweight champion for 22 years until Louis came along in 1937.

Louis helped to open the way for many other great non-white boxers to compete on level terms. He gave black contenders a chance at the title, an opportunity they would have been denied in the past. In the modern age, black champions seem the norm in any division, which is only right and proper.

## *Prologue*

This writer was fortunate to have met Louis – thankfully outside the ring – when he was on a promotional tour of the UK and Ireland in 1970. For well over an hour of fascinating chat over lunch in a Dublin hotel, the boxing legend proved to be a charming and pleasant individual.

In between fans coming over to our table for an autograph or just to say hello, the ‘Brown Bomber’ was always open and frank, revealing many stories never told before. He offered insights into his big fights and supplied many quotes. Where appropriate, the author has used some of this information in the following pages.

On the downside, Louis was not without his faults, inside and outside the roped square. In the ring, despite his powerful blows, underrated boxing skill and resilience, he was open to a right-hand punch, even though he was beaten inside the distance on just two occasions in 67 fights.

Outside the ring, Louis was a serial womaniser and had a string of lady friends, including many celebrities, all through his three marriages. A notoriously big spender but a decidedly poor businessman, he was forever plagued by income tax demands and in his closing years was ravaged by ill health. It was a sad end to one of the greatest ever boxing champions.

Whenever or wherever Louis’ name comes up for discussion, one big question will surely linger. Was he the best of all the heavyweight kings? Would he have beaten Jack Johnson, or Jack Dempsey, or Rocky Marciano in their primes? What of Muhammad Ali? Could he have landed his powerful punches on the fleet-footed ‘Louisville Lip’? Who can tell? Different eras, different situations, different rules. The answers will never be satisfactorily found but speculation certainly makes for lively discussion.

In *The 100 Greatest Boxers* published by *Boxing News* in 2017, Louis is ranked fourth, directly behind Sugar Ray Robinson,

Ali and Henry Armstrong, the incredible fighter who held three world titles simultaneously – featherweight, lightweight and welterweight – in the days when there were only eight divisions in the whole of boxing, flyweight to heavyweight.

You could name the eight champions then at a moment's notice. The world champion was what he claimed to be, the best boxer in the world. America's two main controlling bodies, the National Boxing Association and the New York State Athletic Commission, often disagreed but generally came together and recognised one official champion in each division. The British Boxing Board of Control and the European Boxing Union usually came on board too.

All that changed drastically from the 1960s when new boxing organisations started popping up like flowers in springtime, each setting up their own 'world' champions. By the 1980s, more had come on the scene. Today, there are no fewer than 17 weight divisions, from minimumweight to heavyweight, and conceivably 17 'world' champions. Can you name the 17? Very unlikely. And the 17 does not even include today's 'super' champions.

There are at least seven 'world' organisations around the world. The four main ones are the World Boxing Association, the World Boxing Council, the International Boxing Federation and the World Boxing Organisation. They are recognised by their initials, the WBA, the WBC, the IBF and the WBO, and are collectively known as the alphabet boys, or alphabet soup. On this subject, the WBA, once a very respected organisation, now lists 29 'world' champions across the 17 divisions. Where will it all end? Maybe Sir Walter Scott had something when he said, 'Oh what a tangled web we weave when first we practise to deceive.'

Meanwhile, enjoy the journey through simpler if turbulent times in the following pages.

## *Round 1*

# Life on the plantation

In a ramshackle, unpainted dwelling in Chambers County, Alabama, about 12 miles from the little village of Lafayette in the Buckalew mountain region, a seventh child was born to Munroe and Lillie Reese-Barrow on 13 May 1914. He was named Joseph Louis Barrow. Munroe did not experience any great joy at the arrival of his new son. He was a sharecropper, which meant that he farmed his own piece of land but had to share the crop with the landowner. In addition, the sharecropper also had to buy or rent a horse, a plough, fertiliser and other essentials from the owner.

Living in the Buckalew region was tough and hard, and Munroe could not foresee a life for his new son that would be different from the one he had always known himself, filled as it was with work and worry, toiling on the land. It was a precarious existence, not far removed from the slavery that preceded it.

Indeed, both Munroe's parents had been slaves, taking the name 'Barrow' from the owner of the plantation on which they worked. Munroe, who was known as Mun, was predominantly African-American while Lillie had Native American blood traced back to the Cherokee tribe. The morning Joseph Louis was born, Susan Radford, a midwife, attended to Lillie while

*Joe Louis: The Rise and Fall of the Brown Bomber*

Munroe and the children worked on the plantation, a regular occurrence from sunrise to sunset. The wheat, cotton and vegetables that Mun raised with Lillie's help were not enough to support their large family in the way they would have liked.

The Barrows were hungry most of the time. They were often shoeless and were dressed in rags. Their home was basically a shack that stood on a 120-acre tract of stubborn, rocky soil they had rented just four years previously. It had been much too small for a family of six children, now seven. Eventually, there would be eight in total.

'He weighed about 11lb when he was born, and except for an earache when he was little, he was never sick a day in his life,' Lillie would recall of Joseph in later years. 'He's always been healthy and strong because I would feed him plenty of collard greens, fat pack and corn pone, all good nourishing food. He didn't talk until he was six and he always liked to sleep too much. It was worth my life to get him out of that bed.'

Louis' own recollections matched his mother's memory of a slow-developing child. 'Mom always told me I was a worse cry-baby than my brothers and sisters,' he said. 'I hollered louder than the others. I took a long time to walk, too. I think it was almost a year before I could get around. I was stubborn in school and my teacher used to make me say words over and over again. I didn't like that because the other kids in class didn't have to do it. Maybe that's why, when I was coming up in boxing, I never liked to talk too much. Still don't. If a man has something to say, he can say it in a couple of words. He doesn't need all week to make his point.'

Louis grew up to be a big, strong boy who never had a day's illness. Sadly, Mun was not so fortunate. From 1906 onwards, he spent short spells in the Searcy State Hospital for the Criminally Insane at Mount Vernon in Mobile, Alabama. A melancholy man of 6ft and weighing close to 200lb, the long

## *Life on the plantation*

years of strain, hard work on the plantation and struggle to rear a large family were becoming too much. In 1916, when Louis was two, Mun was led away to Searcy, where he would spend the rest of his life.

The hospital, built in 1828 and today nothing more than a decaying tourist attraction, was Mun's haven. As a result, Louis knew very little of his biological father. By the time of Mun's death on 27 November 1938, aged 59, he knew nothing of his famous son's accomplishments in the boxing ring or outside it, which had made him the best-known African-American in the land.

Louis felt the loss of the father. He wished he could have shared with Mun some of his earnings, which in 1938 totalled more than a million dollars. He showed his love in the only way he knew, by providing a costly funeral. Relatives from Detroit joined those from the Buckalew region to hear the minister's oration and watch the ornate metal casket being lowered into the ground. The little burial ground at the foot of Buckalew mountain claimed as a hero the man who had lived in obscurity.

Back in 1920, Lillie had received information from a hospital official that Mun had died and made arrangements for 'a decent burial'. She would not be in attendance, preferring to remember him as he was: big and strong. It was only in later years that Lillie, having remarried, discovered that she had been given the wrong information and that Mun was still alive, though still institutionalised. She would still visit him in Searcy, though he would not know who she was.

'When momma had the time, she was a great teacher,' recalled Louis. 'Time for her was hard to come by. When daddy was taken away, she was left with eight children to raise on a back-breaking piece of land. She worked as hard, and many times harder, than any man around. She could plough a good straight furrow, plant and pick with the best of them, cut cord

wood like a lumberjack, then leave the fields an hour earlier than anyone else and fix a meal for her family. God, I loved that woman.

‘Don’t get me wrong, though. Momma could mix it up, tough and tender. If you stepped out of line with her, she’d put your head between your knees and whip you with a strap. One thing, though. Nobody around could say that the Barrow children were wild or bad or didn’t have any manners.’

When Louis was six years old, the family moved to Mount Sinai, a hamlet deeper in the Buckalew mountains. By this time, his mother, working on the assumption that Mun was dead, was keeping company with Patrick Brooks, a slender, fair-haired widower with five children of his own. They would soon marry. According to Louis’ younger sister Vunies, Brooks ‘worked for the richest man in Alabama, at least that’s what he said. His boss apparently was a white man who had something to do with building bridges. Because of our stepdad, our situation improved. It was certainly better than we had known.’

At the same time, life was not ideal. With 13 children now in the household, the family would sleep three in a bed. Louis, more than the others, would rebel against this form of crowding. What he remembered most was how cold it was in the mountains. The kids did not wear shoes and were required to save their good clothes for Sundays. By then, Louis was in school and his sister, Eulalia, would escort him and Vunies to the Mount Sinai Baptist Church on Sundays.

Louis would remember that his mother was very religious and that despite being so busy at work, she would make sure that all her children had clean clothes before going to church for a day of worship. He recalled that she always made sure they did the right thing, made the right decisions and that each and every one of her children took pride in themselves. He would

say that she always said that a good name was more important than money.

‘When I was a little boy, I always wanted my momma to smile on me,’ Louis recalled. ‘Sometimes I’d run off and try to sneak away from my chores and play games, but lots of times I’d scrub all the floors in the house. When momma would come home and see what I had done, she would grab me and give me a big kiss for it. Then I could have floated clear up to the sky.’

Louis’ most pleasant memories of Alabama revolved around Saturday trips to the town of Camp Hill in nearby Tallapoosa County. His stepfather would take all the children there in his Model T Ford. They would look forward to these trips because Camp Hill had a lot of stores on the main street and it would be fun just to sit in the car and observe the busy scene as their stepfather did his business.

On his return, he would have cheese and crackers for ‘a little party, a kind of holiday’. Louis would remember that real holidays like Easter and Christmas would be celebrated with egg hunts and the Christmas stocking at the end of the bed. This would be filled with apples, oranges and red peppermint sweets.

Such meagre pleasures were the order of the day. America then was still primarily rural and heavily agricultural. It was not until 1920, around the time the Barrow and Brooks families combined forces, that the official US census finally showed more Americans living in towns and cities than on farms. If not exactly blissful, life in the Alabama countryside was necessarily simple. Kerosene lamps, not electricity, provided light. Water for bathing, washing and cooking was brought in from outside. Wood needed to be chopped to feed the large cast-iron stove.

Though it was not fancy, nor even plentiful, it was varied. Fish, bacon, chicken, corn and potatoes found their way to the table and were devoured by the hard-working family. They

were early risers. By the time the sun came up in the morning, the family were already back in the fields, toiling to keep the cotton growing, bending their backs to assure themselves of a reasonable share of the proceeds after the landlord took his portion. They seldom came home before sundown.

‘We played lots of games, like hide and seek in a tree until the fellow called the leader found you,’ Louis remembered. ‘Sometimes we would just swing in the trees like little Tarzans. It was good for the development of shoulders and arms. One time near a tree, I found half a bottle of White Lightning, a strong cider. Of course, I drank it, out of curiosity more than anything else, and naturally got drunk. I wandered around stumbling until I fell asleep under the tree. Momma came looking for me and found me, still asleep. She didn’t spank me but did give me a lecture on the evils of drink. It was many decades before I touched a drink of alcohol, and then only rarely and very little.’

Louis was not aware of any racial tension at the time. Not once, he insisted, did he hear talk of lynching or the difficulties of being a black man in the Alabama of his youth. In his adult years, people would often ask him about life then, and if the Ku Klux Klan ever bothered his family. ‘To tell the absolute truth, there didn’t seem to be anything bad between blacks and whites in Lafayette, but you have to remember I was a little boy,’ he said.

‘There were other things that I did not take a hold on. I remember black people getting together and talking about how much white blood they had, and how much Indian blood they had, but hardly anybody talked about how much black blood they had.

‘I didn’t know too much but I could easily see that all those white-blooded, Indian-blooded black people lived a damn sight worse than some of the poorest white people I saw. I knew

there was a difference but it made no difference to me. My folks seemed to get along with the white people in the area. Maybe it was a case of, "You got your place and I got mine." Probably we never crossed the line to cause the angers and hurts and lynchings that took place all over the South. Another funny thing. I never heard about lynchings, and nobody white ever called me a nigger until my family moved to Detroit.'

Louis played with white children, and while he was aware of differences, he accepted them as a matter of course. A quiet boy by nature, he was certainly less given to arguments than the others. He would recall on one occasion when a boy picked a fight with him in the school yard over something or other. The teacher had seen the fracas from the school window. She rushed and separated them, but for some reason, chose to reprimand Louis as an act of discipline. He never really understood why. 'Guess for no other reason than I was bigger,' he recalled in later years.

Louis would remember Patrick Brooks as the only father he ever really knew. 'He was a good man and worked hard and did the best he could,' said Louis. 'He always looked after my mother and all the children. He was always fair and treated us all as equally as he could. There were no favourites. He would just as soon lay a hand on his own young son, Pat Junior, as he would on Joe Louis Barrow. His kids and my brothers and sisters fit in like one big family, although we were too much for his little house or the one momma had. So we moved to a larger house in Camp Hill, deeper into the Buckalew mountains.

'My stepbrother, Pat Brooks Jr, and I were the same age and we got on well. Of course we did have disagreements sometimes. I remember one day we had a fight. He took up a brick and hit me on the head, and I still have that scar. Another time I'd fight if we had a disagreement about marbles. If somebody bothered my sisters, I'd fight too. But generally, we all got on well.'

Some of Patrick Brooks' relatives often came from Detroit to visit the family and talked of life in the big city. On more than one occasion, they talked about the family moving to Detroit for a better life. It was not idle talk but talk of reality. It was now 1926. It was a fact that tens of thousands of African-Americans were departing the South. Most boarded railway cars and watched as the cotton fields, tobacco farms and rich plantations of home gave way to land planted with corn and wheat.

In the Midwest, they stopped at stations without the familiar 'White' and 'Coloured' signs. Most continued to ride the train until it reached one of the booming Midwestern cities such as Detroit, Chicago, Gary or Cleveland, or one of the northern cities with established black communities. No longer was the landscape planted with crops. Instead of corn and wheat, they saw factories, some larger than towns, breathing fire and belching smoke. In the words of Randy Roberts, prolific author and Professor of History at Purdue University, Indiana, 'They had arrived in a place that looked like hell but promised heavenly opportunities.'

One day, Brooks was visited by relatives who told him that the Ford Motor Company in Detroit was paying good money to factory hands and it was a good place to work. Henry Ford was the son of an Irishman who had emigrated to the US from County Cork, via Somerset in England, and set up the company in 1901. He was considered a good and fair employer. Some 11,000 African-Americans were working in Detroit's auto plants. Ten years earlier, there had been none. World War One had brought about a change in attitude.

With many white workers called into military service, industrialists had no choice but to employ black people. Ford, tinkering with social problems as much as he did with mechanical ones, allowed them into all job classifications

## *Life on the plantation*

and paid them the same salary as whites. The paternalistic billionaire was regularly seen meeting with Baptist teachers and national race leaders such as Booker T. Washington. In the eyes of many African-Americans, he was their greatest white advocate since Abraham Lincoln.

A smile crossed Brooks' face at the thought of economic salvation in the North. He was also persuaded to move after a brush with the Ku Klux Klan. Arrangements were made for Peter Reese, a brother of Louis' mother, to look after the family until Joe's stepfather and Momma Louis had saved up enough money to bring them up to Detroit. They lived with a relative in Macomb Street on the city's East Side and Brooks soon got employment at the Ford factory.

Louis would say that he missed his mother and stepfather very much and couldn't wait to see them again, even though her brother was doing a very good job of taking care of the family. 'It seemed like a hundred years before I joined them, even though it was only a few months before they sent for us,' he said.

The big day arrived when they boarded the train for the 800-mile journey to Detroit. In their newly adopted city, they lived in a tenement house at 2700 Catherine Street, now Madison Street, in the poor Black Bottom area of the city. It was called Black Bottom not because of its black population but originally after the rich, black soil of its farming days. Another future great, Sugar Ray Robinson, who was also a resident of Black Bottom in his early days, said it was so called because it really was the bottom and that 'you couldn't sink any lower'.

Louis remembered, 'The place we lived in was crowded but you can't imagine the impact the city had on me. I never saw so many people in one place, or so many cars at one time. There were other things that I had never heard of – parks, libraries,

brick schoolhouses, movie theatres. We had something too in Detroit that we didn't have in Alabama, an inside toilet. Another thing, there were electric lights.

'I had heard about electricity but I had never seen it at home. Seemed like everybody I knew had kerosene lamps that smoked and smelled all over the house. I used to think to myself, "What did we need electricity for when practically everybody was going to sleep by sundown?" But you can't imagine the impact the city had on me.'

Being the country boy he was, Louis was overwhelmed by the size of the city. He attended Duffield School where, he was dismayed to discover, his lack of good schooling in Alabama had put him at a considerable disadvantage. Older than the other children and big for his age, Joseph felt his size was accentuated when the school authorities, in consideration of the rural training he'd had, put him a year behind other children of his age. He was troubled and confused to be faced suddenly with facts he should have learned but had never even heard about. Lessons seemed a hopeless jumble.

Joe's pronounced Southern accent and the strange jargon which he had learned to use in the Buckalew region complicated matters further. It was not very easy to make himself understood. He was also embarrassed by a bad stammer he had developed in Alabama. One day, a classmate was asked by her father, 'What does Joe Barrow do in school?' 'Pop,' she replied, 'he just looks out the window.' The whole school thing seemed to him to be a complete waste of time.

It seemed a great relief when he got a job after school at an ice company. Now aged 12 and carrying blocks of ice, often weighing as much as 50lb, up flights of stairs, he would later claim helped to develop his powerful shoulders and muscular arms. More importantly, he was bringing in a dollar a week, a helpful addition to the family budget. Still, things were looking

decidedly bleak before an unexpected boom changed things around considerably.

By applying to the Detroit Welfare Board, they were able to secure \$269, paid to them over a period of seven months. It hurt Lillie's pride to accept charity, even for the sake of feeding and clothing her brood. It would not be until 1935 that she reconciled accepting the board's gift. Then Joe Louis, who had become the most famous heavyweight since the great Jack Dempsey, wrote out a cheque for \$269 and handed it over to the board in repayment and heartfelt thanks.

After Joe had completed seventh grade at Duffield School, one of his teachers, Miss Veda Schwader, thought he would fare better in a trade school. 'Your boy is going to make a living with his hands,' she told his parents, 'and he had better start now rather than later.' They took Veda's advice and had their son enrolled at Bronson Trade School, where he learned how to use the tools of a cabinetmaker. He made tables, chairs, little closets and shelves, and when he brought them home, they added to the meagre furnishings his mother had been able to collect. Joe liked the woodworking trade and felt he might be able to make a good living at it.

Soon, America would be in the grip of the Great Depression. On the morning of 24 October 1929, panic swept the New York Stock Exchange on Wall Street. The bottom fell out of the market in stocks and shares. Investors ordered their brokers to sell at any price, and during the day a total of 12,894,650 shares were sold. America had been experiencing a boom and now the bubble had burst. Some had vast fortunes wiped out and many smaller investors also faced ruin. There were several suicides and the effect was felt worldwide. Patrick Brooks lost his job at Ford.

An aimlessness born of despair swept over Louis and the family. He spent long hours running with the Purple Gang

and regularly got into fights. Concerned, his mother felt he ought to take violin lessons to take his mind off fighting in the streets and mixing with the wrong company. Lillie always loved music and at some sacrifice she purchased a violin and enrolled him with a teacher on Woodward Avenue at 50 cents a class. To please her, he went to his music teacher with what was, to him, monotonous regularity. While Joe's fondness for it sprang mostly from the sense of rhythm that guided his every movement, drums might have suited him better.

When he grew into adulthood, Joe would develop a deep love for jazz and blues. But classical music was just not his thing. It never was, so the move into cultural matters did not take hold. When out of his mother's sight, he strummed the violin instead of using the bow. After having five or six lessons, he quit. 'You cannot imagine the kidding I got from the other guys,' he said in later years. 'Here I was, a big guy over six feet tall and carrying a little violin. They used to call me a sissy.'

When the teacher came by the family home and asked Lillie where her son was, the answer she got was, 'I understood he was having his lessons.' When Joe came home later and was quizzed by his mother, she was told he had used the money to pay for a locker, where he hid the violin, at the Brewster Recreation Center. The centre had a gym where amateur boxers gathered and trained. Louis had been reading about famous boxers, notably his idol Jack Dempsey, who had fought his way to be heavyweight champion of the world. He told his mother he wanted to be a boxer, not a musician.

Angry at first, and anxious to keep the peace, she consented. 'If that's what you really want, that's OK,' she said, giving her son a hug. Joe told her he had sparred with some of the regulars there and enjoyed it. What he did not tell her was that kids used to jeer him when they saw him carrying his violin case, and that on his way from his last violin lesson, he smashed

the instrument over the head of one of them and it broke into little pieces.

Privately, Lillie felt that some day he would come home with his face cut and eyes blackened and that would be the end of it. Joe was now working as a lathe operator at the Briggs car factory. Lillie only hoped that, if he did not want to be a violin player and get into an orchestra, then he might settle down at the factory and forget this crazy boxing lark.

Among those who trained at the Brewster Center was a promising young amateur flyweight named Walker Smith Jr, who would become famous as Sugar Ray Robinson. They would remain close friends all their lives. 'Louis was known as Joe Barrow and a good boxer, the big hero of the neighbourhood,' Robinson said in later years. 'We kids used to tag along behind him. He lived a couple of blocks away from me. When it was time for him to go to the Brewster Center to train, I'd go over and stand in front of his home waiting for him.

'When he'd come out, I'd grab the little bag he carried, with his shoes and stuff, and carry it for him. He got to know me and called me Junior, but I don't think he ever knew my name. When my mom took us kids to live in New York a few years later, I still followed Joe's career in the newspapers and magazines. Later on, we would meet up on big fight nights and always kept in touch.'

Another young boxer who trained at the centre was Thurston McKinney, his former classmate at Duffield School. McKinney had become amateur lightweight champion of Michigan and was something of a celebrity in the neighbourhood. He had earlier seen Louis from time to time carrying his violin case.

'Are you going to be a musician or a boxer?' asked McKinney one day.

'I'm taking violin lessons but I'd prefer the gym.'

'Oh, come on Joe. Give up the violin and take up the gloves.'

‘I’ll think about it, Thurston.’

One afternoon, McKinney told Louis he had an important bout coming up and Joe agreed to spar with him in the gym. For the first few minutes of the session, McKinney jabbed and hooked and made Louis very uncomfortable. After all, Thurston was the state champion and very experienced. In the second round of their spar, McKinney landed a hard right to Joe’s chin that staggered him. But it had the effect of making Louis angry, something that seldom happened to him. Instinctively, he struck back with his own right and was astonished to see McKinney stagger back and start to fall. Louis, his anger gone, stepped in right away and held his opponent up. Apologising to Thurston, who said, ‘That’s OK, Joe,’ the light had dawned. ‘I could have knocked him out,’ Louis kept telling himself. ‘He’s the champion of all Michigan, and I could have knocked him out.’ Around this time, he told McKinney he had given up the violin lessons.

When he signed amateur forms at the Brewster Center in the early months of 1932 at the age of 17, the barely literate Louis wrote his name so large that there was no room for his last name. Thus Joe Louis Barrow became simply Joe Louis for the remainder of his boxing career, amateur and professional. His trainers were Holman Williams and Atler Ellis. They were two of the top coaches in the city, particularly Williams, who was also an active boxer with a busy career ahead of him as a middleweight.

In a 16-year career, Williams would have 187 fights in three divisions, losing just 30, defeating big names like future world light-heavyweight champion Archie Moore and perennial contender Charlie Burley. Williams lost a disputed decision to Jake LaMotta three years before Jake won the world middleweight title.

‘In the early years, Williams won the Detroit Golden Gloves title in 1932 and would develop into a great boxer but

he never got the recognition he deserved because he wasn't a puncher,' said Eddie Futch, one of Louis' sparring partners whose experience at the Brewster Center resulted in a long, distinguished career tutoring such world champions as Joe Frazier, Alexis Arguello, Larry Holmes, Ken Norton, Riddick Bowe and Wayne McCullough.

'Williams was probably the greatest technician who ever lived,' he said. 'He had an excellent jab, deft footwork and taut defence but after his hands were broken, he resorted to skilful boxing. He had the finesse of Sugar Ray Robinson but no punch. I would rather watch Williams shadow box than watch most other fighters in action.

'As for Louis, like many others I saw great potential in him. He had the makings of a world champion in his amateur days but it would take time. I remember he was always persistent. If you had an apple, he'd beg and beg for a bite until you gave him a little bite. So in the gym, he always got me into the ring to spar with me. But I told myself, "if he wanted to work with me, I'd have to know where those fast punches were coming from".

'Remember, I was just a lightweight and he was a light-heavyweight, so he'd have maybe a 50 or 55lb weight advantage over me. I'd have to know the moves he wanted to make before he threw the punches because he never telegraphed anything. The left hook came out of nowhere. Bang. You just saw a light in your head. Like a camera flash going off.'

Williams and Ellis arranged for Louis to meet Johnny Miler. 'Miler was a good fighter and he would be a member of the US boxing team for the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles later that year,' recalled Louis. 'He was experienced and tough, and certainly the best in the light-heavyweight division. Holman was not keen on the match. He said I was going in over my head and he didn't think I was ready, considering my very limited

experience. But my mind was made up. I felt I could beat him and it would be a great start to my amateur career.

‘It would be over three rounds. Miler was better than I expected and he knocked me down seven times before winning the decision. I made the mistake of trying to knock him out instead of boxing him. The defeat didn’t discourage me. Williams and Holman both assured me that anybody who can get up after seven times must have something. I was determined to carry on.’

The loss came as a shock as most boxers starting off would win their first bout, but in this case Louis learned from the defeat and would soon win the Brewster club championship. In 1933, he became the Detroit-area Golden Gloves novice division champion but lost in the Chicago Golden Gloves Tournament of Champions.

Everybody in boxing knew the prestige attached to the Golden Gloves. The competition started in 1923 when Arch Ward, sports editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, came up with the idea of a city-wide amateur boxing tournament. He secured sponsorship from the newspaper in 1927 and it became an annual tournament between Chicago and New York.

In later years the idea was taken up by other cities, and a national tournament was held. The New York and Chicago tournaments, however, were viewed as the two elite Golden Gloves championships in the United States. Winning a Golden Gloves title was considered a stepping stone to the professional ranks. One of the most famous Golden Gloves champions who went on to great success in the paid ranks was Barney Ross, winner of world titles at lightweight, junior welterweight and welterweight.

In 1934, Louis won the Tournament of Champions and the Golden Gloves open division tournament, both in Chicago. A hand injury prevented him from competing in the prestigious

New York v Chicago Golden Gloves event in the Windy City. Later that year, he was successful in the US Amateur Athletic Union tournament, effectively the American championships, in St Louis, Missouri.

‘For the first time in my life, I was being away from my family,’ he said. ‘It felt strange but I liked it. It was like being in a new family. You knew all the guys in the amateur circle. You would eat and sleep together and you became friends. Going to new cities and new places, both in the US and Canada, opened my eyes.

‘I saw things I wanted that I had never really known about. I met important people and I felt I wanted to be important too. Doctors, lawyers, big-time gamblers would come up to me and talk to me and encourage me. It gave me great confidence, and that was something I never had before, certainly in my schooldays and growing up.

‘By now, Holman Williams felt I was moving too fast for him, especially as Williams himself had his own career to attend to. After consultation with his co-coach Atler Ellis, Williams recommended a new trainer, George Slayton, who ran the Detroit Athletic Club. Slayton had a good team at the club and looked after all his members very well. He knew his boxing too and had the reputation of being strict but fair. His mantra was, ‘Live a good, clean life, learn the rudiments of the sport, train hard and you are on to a good start.’

Under Slayton’s guidance, Louis continued to improve so much that the trainer suggested he should turn professional and make some good money with his undoubted talent. Joe said he would think about it but felt there was still a lot of learning to be done.

In the summer of 1934, with Louis now into his second year as an amateur and in the midst of his early success with rare losses, he was defeated by a former Notre Dame football

player named Max Marek. The pair fought for the first two rounds on even terms but Marek came on strong in the third by outboxing Louis and winning the decision. By then, Louis had switched to the Detroit Amateur Club, where George Moody was in charge. Moody was a respected coach and had a good team of boxers to look after.

One afternoon, a prominent 40-year-old Detroit businessman named John Roxborough, who had boxing connections, dropped into the gym. It was something he often did to look over any young boxers he might consider signing up, amateur or professional. On this occasion, it was a visit that changed the destination of Louis' life and altered the course of boxing history. To paraphrase the words of Humphrey Bogart's character in the movie *Casablanca*, it was the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

A wealthy lawyer and insurance man, Roxborough made his money in the numbers game, an illegal Italian lottery played mostly in poor and working-class neighbourhoods in the US but overlooked in the context of the times. He also ran a nightclub. A dapper dresser, Roxborough was described by Randy Roberts as 'a singular-looking man whose face was almost round and looked like a balloon on the verge of popping, or something out of the workshop of *The Wizard of Oz*.

'He was bald and plump and had a tiny, perfectly trimmed moustache. Poised and well spoken, he dressed immaculately as a Wall Street banker and smelled like a flower shop. This man had real class. Very light skinned, he didn't seem flashy but stylish and rich-looking. He wore gray, silk suits, the kind you don't buy off the rack. It made me look twice. His attitude was gentle, like a gentleman should be.'

Roxborough was also a forceful figure in the Young Negroes Progressive Association and the Urban League, and people in the African-American community regarded him as

a completely worthwhile man whose work on behalf of his race was quietly done and usually effective. He also ran an estate agency and had many connections in boxing, the type of links a promising young boxer would need.

In the gym, Roxborough liked what he saw of Louis in a sparring session. They chatted when Louis got out of the ring. He was soft of voice and mood, and early on gained from Louis a measure of respect that never declined. 'I'll tell you what I can do for you,' he told the young boxer. 'You come to live with me in my house. You can eat and sleep right. You'll eat the right foods and I'll make sure you get some good clothes. What do you say?'

Louis went home and discussed the proposal with his mother and stepfather. There was full unemployment in the household, and the family was on home relief. What was there to lose by moving in with Roxborough? Lillie was a bit concerned when Joe told her about the man's involvement in the numbers racket but consented when her son told her he would be well taken care of. Joe moved out the next day.

Straight away, life bloomed for the young amateur from Alabama. Some of Roxborough's expensive clothes were altered to fit him. He ate with his new mentor, who also provided \$5 a week pocket money.

Louis went into the ring draped in a splendid terrycloth robe and instead of wearing old bandages to protect his hands, he wrapped his fists in new bandages for each fight. His old tennis sneakers were replaced by leather boxing boots. 'Sometimes he would invite me to his home for dinner,' said Louis. 'It was a beautiful house and he had a good-looking and gracious wife. I loved it. I never saw black people living this way and I was envious and watched everything he did.'

Finally, on 12 June 1934, Louis had his last contest as an amateur. Fittingly, it was held in Detroit, in an inter-city tournament. His opponent, Joe Butler, lasted only one round.

*Joe Louis: The Rise and Fall of the Brown Bomber*

Louis landed a solid right just above the cheekbone and the man from Cleveland, Ohio sank to the canvas to be counted out. It had lasted just 90 seconds.

The newspaper reports the next day were impressive and noted that Louis was turning professional in the very near future. An exciting new star had arrived on the boxing scene and there was every indication that he would do well. He left behind an impressive record, losing only four of his 54 contests, with 43 wins either by count-outs or stoppages and seven on points.

Even before considering Louis' entry into the professional ranks, Roxborough knew of the problems involving African-American boxers. Racial discrimination was a thorny issue in America. It was one thing being a black amateur, where there was no evidence of any discrimination whatsoever, but it was different in the pro ranks. Roxborough knew only too well there would be problems to be faced but he also felt they would be overcome in time.

'I've always done all right in business and I've done business with whites as well as blacks,' he explained. 'I find no prejudice. If Joe is handled well, I don't think the public will care who manages him.' He would mould his boxer 'into a veritable ambassador of goodwill,' as he put it.

Some of Roxborough's friends advised him to forget his plan to get involved in professional boxing and instead help his people in a more conventional manner. They pointed out that as vice-president of the Great Lakes Mutual Life Insurance Company, he had gained a good deal of respect for himself and his cause. His activities as chairman of the board of the Superior Life Insurance Society for obtaining employment for African-Americans had performed a similar function.

What was he doing looking after a boxer? Should he not concentrate on the type of things that had gained good results?

But Roxborough, in his quiet way, had already made his mind up. He would do it his way. Even when he became Louis' mentor, he always made sure he was seen as little as possible. When Joe won the heavyweight championship of the world, he refused to climb into the brightly lit ring with him and work in the corner.

Roxborough had a business associate in Chicago named Julian Black. He too was in real estate, as well as having strong associations in the numbers racket. He also ran a successful nightclub and had a stable of boxers. A chunky man with a slight limp and shiny black hair combed back, he had the reputation of being cold and calculating, unlike Roxborough. However, on his first meeting with Black, Joe recalled, 'He was always friendly enough to me, but I knew he was basically a tough guy. Maybe the kind of guy I needed in the fight business.'

Black and Roxborough did a deal. With Louis' approval, they would be co-managers and both would invest a total of \$2,000 in the boxer. The next move would be to get not just a trainer, but a good trainer. This is where Jack Blackburn came into the picture. A former great lightweight who never got the breaks because of the colour of his skin, Blackburn would achieve greater fame as a trainer. He now coached boxers at George Trafton's gym on the city's South Side. So it was in Blackburn's direction that Roxborough and Black looked for help. Maybe, just maybe, he could train Louis if a deal could be arranged.

Born in Versailles, Kentucky in 1883 and the son of a minister, Blackburn moved with his family to Terre Haute, Indiana, where he began his boxing. Later relocating to Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, he continued his ring career. *Ring* magazine described him as 'a fast, fearless, snappy puncher, with a fine left jab and a powerful left hook'. Although he weighed only 135lb and could comfortably make the lightweight limit,

he often fought much heavier men, including welterweights and middleweights.

Blackburn put up good showings against greats like world lightweight champion Joe Gans and perennial contender Sam Langford, who fought from lightweight to light-heavyweight. Blackburn also gave world 175lb champion Philadelphia Jack O'Brien all he could handle in a no-decision bout. But he was continually sidetracked because of the contemptible colour bar.

In January 1909, Blackburn's career was derailed when he went on a shooting spree in Philadelphia. In the midst of an argument, he killed three people, including his wife. He was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to 10 to 15 years in prison. Blackburn gave boxing lessons to the warden and his children, and was released for good behaviour after four years and eight months.

Returning to the ring, and still with no sign of a world title fight, he finally retired in 1923. His official record shows 38 wins, three losses, 12 draws and 50 no-decision contests, but he always claimed to have fought 385 times. Blackburn then became a trainer and guided Sammy Mandell to the world lightweight title in 1926 and Bud Taylor to the world bantamweight championship the following year. He also worked for a time with future world heavyweight champion Jersey Joe Walcott.

Roxborough travelled to Chicago in June 1934 and met up with Black before heading for Trafton's gym, where they met Blackburn, by then a grizzly, world-weary trainer. Outlining their plans for Louis, Roxborough told Blackburn, 'Jack, we would like you to train our boxer because I believe he has great potential and can be a world champion. You are one of the best and most experienced in the business.'

Blackburn, who was 51 at the time and showing the effects of arthritis and heavy drinking, was silent for a few moments.

Finally, he agreed to have a look at Louis, but insisted that if he were to train their boxer he would be on a regular salary every week. 'None of this percentage of the gate for me,' he said. 'A salary straight up.'

Arrangements were made the next day for Louis to have a sparring session in the gym with a local light-heavyweight. When Joe climbed out of the ring and exchanged greetings with Blackburn, the trainer said to him in blunt terms, 'So you think you'll get somewhere in this fight game. Well, let me tell you something right off. It's next to impossible for a black heavyweight to get anywhere, never mind a world title fight. He's got to be very good outside the ring and very bad inside the ring. Mr Roxborough here, who has known you for some time, tells me he is convinced that you can be depended on to behave yourself at all times, but inside that ring, you've got to be a killer but also you've got to be fair.'

'Otherwise, I'm afraid I'm getting too old to be wasting my time on you. You see, too many people remember all the trouble there was when Jack Johnson was champion. Johnson is the only black man to have held the world heavyweight title, and he was a braggart. I doubt if the public is really ready for another Jack Johnson.'

A brilliant defensive boxer with a knockout punch in both hands, Johnson was champion for seven years, from 1908 to 1915. He was also a gaudy, bold fighter who lived just as he wanted, and enraged the defenders of white supremacy with his blatant refusal to accept anything less than equality. *The Boxing Register*, official record book of the International Boxing Hall of Fame, said of Johnson, 'He was beloved by blacks and some whites, but thoroughly hated and eventually conquered by those who saw him as a threat to America's divided society.'

Denied a title fight for many years, when he finally got the chance against Tommy Burns in 1908, Johnson made

the Canadian pay dearly for every moment of frustration and discrimination he had endured over the years. He tormented and angered Burns, taunting him with phrases like, 'Is that the best you can do, Tommy?' and 'Hit me here, white boy.' The one-sided battle was stopped by the police in the 14th round as his handlers escorted the champion, now the ex-champion, to his corner.

Jack London, then boxing writer for the *New York Herald*, sent back a report that was graphic and reeked of racialism. 'The fight!' said London. 'This was no fight. No Armenian massacre could compare to the hopeless slaughter that took place here in Sydney. It was like a pygmy and a colossus, like a grown man cuffing a naughty child.' London concluded his report with, 'One thing now remains. James J Jeffries must emerge from retirement on his farm and remove the golden smile from Jack Johnson's face. It's up to you, Jeff.'

Other writers and politicians soon took up the call. Jeffries, who had retired undefeated six years earlier, finally agreed to put on the gloves again and face Johnson. On Independence Day, 1910, Jeffries climbed into the ring in Reno, Nevada and was subjected to a merciless beating before being stopped in the 15th round. The one-sided battle set off race riots, lynchings and gang fights across the United States. On 4 July alone, the day of the fight, there were reports of 19 deaths, hundreds injured and over 5,000 arrested. A specially commissioned film of the fight was banned by Congress.

As calls for a 'white hope' to dethrone Johnson continued, Jack's penchant for white wives and assorted girlfriends got him into trouble with the Establishment, which was looking for any excuse to bring him down. He befriended prostitutes and was prosecuted for 'transporting a woman across state lines for immoral purposes'. Avoiding a jail term, he fled to Europe and finished up in Havana, Cuba, where he lost his

title under controversial circumstances to big Jess Willard on a knockout in 26 rounds on 5 April 1915. He claimed he sold his title after working out a deal with the US government that in defeat, the conviction would be quashed. Yet he served eight months in a Kansas prison. If a deal had been done, it was reneged upon.

Trevor Wignall of the *Daily Express* reflected how the liberals of the era viewed Johnson, ‘Jack Johnson had many defects. He was a swaggerer by nature but this is not altogether surprising when it is recalled that for many years he was an absolute idol. If he had not been so insanely pestered by women, and if he had not been so ridiculously flattered by men, he would probably have been a better fellow.

‘On one visit to see Johnson, I was compelled to force my way into the building past crowds of women. Johnson was conscious of the colour of his skin, and was firmly convinced he had a mission in life. He believed it was his duty to “lift the black race,” that they would be superior to the whites. He did considerable harm to boxing but the men to whom he rendered the greatest disservice were boxers of his own hue.’

Even if Johnson had behaved in the manner that white America believed correct, the history of other sports suggests that the doors would still have been closed off to non-whites. The author Gerald Astor noted that before the turn of the 20th century, blacks had already been barred from major league baseball. US college football teams had few black players in the early 1900s.

Golf and tennis were never friendly to black players in the early days. Both games developed in private clubs that usually restricted membership to whites by cost and by choice, even up to the 1970s. Horse racing in America started almost exclusively with black jockeys. In the first Kentucky Derby of 1875, which attracted 15 entries, 14 of the riders were black. Colour bars

began to appear in the next 25 years. By 1911, blacks had been excluded from the Kentucky event.

In basketball, few colleges used black players and professional basketball kept its colour line until 1949. In track and field, George Poage became the first non-white participant to represent the US in the Olympics when he competed in the 400 metres in St Louis in 1904. Several other black competitors took part in the London Games in 1908 but non-whites seemed to vanish during the 1920s before reappearing for good in 1932, preceding the triumphs of Jesse Owens in the Berlin Olympics of 1936.

In the immediate fall-out from the Johnson–Jeffries fight, its promoter Tex Rickard refused to stage another black v white world heavyweight title contest, resulting in the perennial No. 1 contender Harry Wills, the ‘Black Panther’, being denied a title shot.

With all this in mind, Black, Roxborough and Blackburn knew only too well that it was going to be very difficult to break down racial barriers and to have another black heavyweight in their midst. ‘Mr Roxborough explained that white managers and promoters would have no real interest in seeing a black boxer work his way up to title contention,’ Louis recalled. ‘He told me about the fate of most black fighters, ones with white managers who were wound up, burned out and broke before they reached their prime.

‘He said the white managers were only interested in the money they could make from them. They didn’t take the proper time to see that their boxers had proper training, that they lived well or ate well or had some pocket money. Mr Roxborough was talking about Black Power before it became popular and accepted.’

Roxborough, Black and Blackburn made sure that Louis’ image was carefully crafted. Remembering Jack Johnson’s

## *Life on the plantation*

misadventures inside and outside the ring two decades earlier, they were keen for their charge not to alienate the public or make the mistakes Johnson made. They drew up seven commandments for Louis:

- He was never to have his photograph taken with a white woman.
- He was never to go to a nightclub alone.
- There would never be any soft fights.
- There would never be any fixed fights.
- He was never to gloat over an opponent.
- He would keep a 'dead pan' face in front of the cameras.
- He would always live and fight clean.

Blackburn revamped Louis' rather mobile, defence-orientated philosophy, a legacy of Holman Williams' instruction. 'You won't get anywhere nowadays trying to outpoint fellows,' Blackburn told Louis. 'It's mighty hard for a black man to win decisions. You will find the dice is loaded against you. Take it from me, I know. It happened to me many times. You have to knock them out, and keep knocking them out, to get anywhere. Let that right fist there be your referee and you will start to go places.'

Blackburn also worked on Joe's left jab, which had been a hallmark of all the boxers Blackburn trained. Louis had demonstrated a powerful left hook but with Blackburn's help, he developed a piston-like left lead with which to create openings in his opponent's defence. The trainer spent hours sparring with his boxer, showing him how to block punches without ducking, and stressing balance at all times. He preached that a boxer, properly balanced, could pick off a punch and fire off two, three or four of his own in return. Louis would in time develop into a powerful counter-puncher. The respect in which

Louis held Blackburn became mutual and both came to call the other 'Chappie'.

'When I began with "Chappie" Blackburn, he saw things I did not notice myself,' Joe remembered. 'He saw that I couldn't follow a left hook with a right without picking up on one foot. He said that was no good, and that a boxer had to keep both feet planted on the canvas to get proper balance and to get power to punch, or to take a punch. I used to be clumsy-footed when I was a kid in Alabama. He soon had me throwing a series of punches. Whatever he told me to do, I did it. He was the best teacher anybody ever had, and I'm convinced of that.'

As with all trainers and managers, Roxborough, Black and Blackburn planned to select Joe's opponents carefully. The idea was to build up the boxer's confidence and record by matching him with progressively tougher opponents. 'We felt we had a great prospect in Joe and we did not wish to take any unnecessary risks by overmatching him,' recalled Black. 'We'd seen too many prospects, outstanding prospects, rushed into fights for which they were not ready. We did not want to make that mistake with Louis. John and I had more confidence in Joe than Blackburn had, even though Jack felt he could make the grade, but caution was still the keyword.'

Late in June, Louis was informed by his co-managers that he would have his first professional fight in early July against an opponent yet to be selected. 'You know,' Blackburn said to Louis as the team took a breather one afternoon at Trafton's gym in Chicago, 'I've told you before that it's going to be tough because of the colour of your skin.'

'There hasn't been a black heavyweight champion since Jack Johnson way back and I don't think the public really want another one, certainly not one like Johnson. People haven't forgotten the way he belittled white opponents and the way he carried on with his private life, acting like he owned the world.'

If you do the right things, and fight the right way, you can make people forget Jack Johnson ever existed.'

When Louis became world champion, Johnson belittled him at every opportunity, calling him 'an amateur who does everything wrong'. But when they met socially while Louis was still an amateur, he had been full of praise for Joe, while Louis felt he himself was in the presence of greatness. Characteristically, he would always refuse to pass judgement on Johnson. 'Every man has a right to his own mistakes,' said Louis of that initial introduction. 'There is no man alive who did not make a mistake.' Years later, Louis again defended the former champion. 'When I won the world title, half the letters I got had some word about Jack Johnson,' he said. 'A lot was from old black people in the South. They thought he disgraced his race. I just figured he did what he wanted to do, and what he did had no effect on me.'

Johnson was a severe critic of Louis up to the end, and was destined to die in the same hell-bent fashion he had lived. Driving his sports car too fast on the afternoon of 10 June 1946 near Raleigh, North Carolina, he skidded off the road, slammed into a telegraph pole and overturned. He received multiple injuries that proved to be fatal. Ironically, Johnson had been on the way to New York to watch Louis defend his title in a return bout with Billy Conn at the Yankee Stadium.