

Jackie Robinson and Joe Louis

Two of the greatest African-American athletes of the 20th century, Jackie Robinson and Joe Louis, are remembered not only for their groundbreaking achievements but also for personal courage that allowed them to break the race barrier in their sports a full decade before the Civil Rights Movement began in earnest. The two men were born just five years apart in the rural South, both sons of sharecroppers. Their families ultimately left the region in search of a better life.

Joe Louis Barrow was born in Alabama in 1914. After his father's death, his mother remarried, and in 1924 the family moved to Detroit. When he began boxing as a teenager, he dropped his last name. Known as "The Brown Bomber," Louis fought his two most important bouts against the same opponent, Max Schmeling, a German boxer. During their first match in June 1936, Schmeling knocked Louis out in Round 12. This first professional defeat devastated Louis and his fans, causing tears in the dressing room and riots in Harlem.

Although he beat his next opponent, "Cinderella Man" James J. Braddock, a year later and became the first black heavyweight champion, Louis longed for a rematch with Schmeling. On June 22, 1938, he got his chance. This rematch became a symbolic battle: Nazism and all Hitler stood for, against democracy and the American way of life. Louis took only 124 seconds to knock out Schmeling and become the hero of all Americans.

Jack Roosevelt Robinson was born in Georgia in 1919 but grew up in Pasadena, California. He began his sports career as a semi-professional football quarterback but later played baseball in the

Negro American League. After meeting with Branch Rickey, president of the Brooklyn Dodgers, Robinson's life and professional sports in America forever changed.

On August 28, 1945, Branch Rickey subjected Robinson to shouted racial slurs and dramatizations of demeaning situations. When Robinson proved he could handle the pressure, promising silence for three years despite the expected racial abuse, he was offered a contract to play for the Dodgers' farm team. On April 15, 1947, Jackie Robinson broke the "color line" by walking onto Ebbets Field in a Dodgers uniform wearing number 42. Rookie of the Year in 1947 and National League MVP in 1949, he was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1962, and posthumously awarded a Congressional Gold Medal and the Medal of Freedom. In Robinson's honor, Major League Baseball retired the number 42 from professional baseball.

In Chapter 12 of *A Lesson Before Dying*, Grant relates the euphoria of the men in the bar as they relive some of Jackie Robinson's greatest plays. Grant also remembers the heartbreak of Joe Louis' stunning defeat by Max Schmeling and his inspirational victory two years later. Ultimately, each man's victories—in the ring and on the baseball diamond—promised the hope of a world in which people were judged on merits and abilities rather than skin color.