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Emperors of Masculinity: John L. Sullivan, Jack Johnson, and Changing Ideas of Manhood and Race in America

BY RANDY ROBERTS

"Boxing is for men, and is about men, and is men. A celebration of the lost religion of masculinity all the more trenchant for being lost." (Oates, 1987, 72)

William Lyon Phelps (BA Yale, MA Harvard, and PhD Yale) was the very model of rectitude. In his forty-one years as a literature professor at Yale, he was known for wide-ranging scholarship, astute critical pronouncements, and unimpeachable humanity. He was the quintessence of the gentleman scholar. In fact, it was Phelps who provided a lasting American definition of a gentleman when he pronounced, "This is the first test of a gentleman: his respect for those who can be of no possible value to him" (Ruggiero 2008, 80). Phelps, like many of Yale's students and professors, came from a religious family. His father was an orthodox Baptist minister—New England Baptist, not southern Baptist. Daily, as an act of filial love, he read the news of the day to his elderly father. One day in 1892, as he was working through the newspaper, he read the headline
about the outcome of a prize fight—CORBETT DEFEATS SULLIVAN—and then turned the page. Never in his life had he heard his father mention Corbett or Sullivan, nor prize fighting for that matter. Such men and activities were beneath the scope of the Phelps family. The younger Phelps assumed his father did not know “anything on that subject, or cared anything about it.” But the son was mistaken. As he turned the page his father “leaned forward and said earnestly, ‘Read it by rounds!’” (quoted in Somers, 1972, 185). The statement must have given William Lyon Phelps pause. The world in which he had grown to manhood—the tight, clanish, White Anglo-Saxon Protestant America that he inherited from his father—was changing. The days when the only emotion that a prize fight would elicit from a New England Baptist minister was disgust were drawing to a close. And John L. Sullivan stood as a symbol of a new world.

A fundamental question for this chapter is why professional boxing, and especially the heavyweight championship, mattered to Americans in the first four decades of the twentieth century. For most of modern history, the sport of prize fighting was publically deplored, politically outlawed, and morally condemned. It was considered barbarous and archaic—a throw-back to a time when man walked with his knuckles scraping the ground. But for various reasons a new construction of the meaning of boxing emerged in England in the beginning of the nineteenth century and America at the end of that century. In England bare-knuckle boxing had enjoyed the popularity and patronage of sporting aristocrats. In the mid-eighteenth century, the early decades of the nineteenth century, and again briefly in the mid-nineteenth century, the prize ring captured the popular imagination. Ideal for betting, easily corruptible for gamblers, and diffused with an argot, traditions, and culture all its own, prize fighting attracted wealthy supports with a healthy nostalgie de la boue (Brailsford, 1988).

It also communicated the basic social and cultural instincts of English life. As practiced under the London Prize Ring Rules, it was an uncompromising, violent activity. Fighters battled with their bare fists. A round lasted until one of the contestants threw or knocked his opponent to the ground. The felled fighter then received a thirty second rest, after which period he had to “come up to scratch,” a line drawn in the center of the ring. All important matches were battled to the finish, lasting until a fighter was too beaten to “toe the line.” Fights could, and often did, last for hours, with the combatants sustaining terrible beatings. In the first two decades of the nineteenth century, when Britons were battling Frenchmen on the waves of the Atlantic and the dirt of the continent, prize fighting symbolized the bulldog tenacity—the refusal to give an inch—of John Bull. Regency boxers showed the nation how to confront danger, absorb frightful punishment, win with grace, and lose with dignity. The very language of the ring—including such phrases as “the manly art of self-defense,” “toe the line,” “up (or not up) to scratch,” and “throwing one’s hat into the ring”—connected boxing to the most revered masculine traits of the age. Wellington may have won the Battle of Waterloo on the playing fields of Eton, but his officers and soldiers learned something about being a man from the examples of the English prize ring (Brailsford, 1988).

By comparison, bare-knuckle boxing generally languished in the United States. Not until the 1840s did it begin to dig roots in American soil, and then only with a certain “unsavory” class of men. American prize fighting was a product of ethnic, working-class culture, and most of the earliest American boxers were Irish and, by that time, largely Catholic immigrants. It was generally an illegal fringe activity, populated and patronized by Irish politicians, saloon keepers, emigrant runners, shoulder hitters, pickpockets, second-floor men, pimps, prostitutes, and other sorts of “unworthies,” along with a small group of sons of privilege out for a good time. But the bloody, violent sport spoke to working-class men whose lives were similarly violent. As the historian Elliott J. Gorn eloquently observed, “The death sounds of livestock slaughtered in public markets, the smell of open sewers, the feverish cries of children during cholera season, the sight of countless men maimed on the job, all were part of day-to-day street life” (Gorn, 1986, 144). Bare knuckle was brutal,
brutish, and occasionally even deadly. But so was the working class life of the immigrant.

In the two decades before the Civil War, interest in the prize ring outgrew its ethnic minority base. Part of the reason was that the sport found a voice. The “penny press” redefined what news was fit to print. Beginning with Benjamin Day’s New York Sun and James Gordon Bennett’s New York Herald in the 1830s, newspaper editors discovered that there was an inexhaustible market for stories about murder, violence, mayhem, crime, prostitution, and sordid tales of alcoholics and drug addicts. News, they concluded, was a malleable commodity, and as the stewards of the news, they determined what it was and what it was not—altogether an enviable seat to occupy. Sex, violence, and drugs—especially if they were accompanied by eye-popping illustrations—sold newspapers. And prize fighting, surfeit with blood and violence, nicely fit into their updated definition of the news (Gorn, 1986).

During the 1840s, and especially the 1850s, the penny press gave prize fighters a national audience. “Yankee” Sullivan, Tom Hyer, John Morrissey, and John C. Heenan—three of the four Irish or first generation Irish American boxers—received significant newspaper coverage during the years when hundreds of thousands of hungry, potato-famine Irish were arriving on American shores. Their greatest fights were often against native-born Americans, a dramatic factor that would not be lost on later generations of promoters. A match that pitted a native-born American butcher against an Irish day laborer underscored undeniable American inter-ethnic and working-class rivalries. This mid-century popularity of bare-knuckle boxing reached its pinnacle on the eve of the Civil War when American champion John C. “Benicia Boy” Heenan traveled to England to battle the British champion Tom Sayers (Gorn, 1986).

The Heenan-Sayers fight occupied the attention of English speaking people on both sides of the Atlantic. Currier and Ives made a lithograph of the fighters, sporting magazines offered sage opinions about the combatants, and newspapers documented virtually every drop of sweat the fighters shed during training. “If you go to the market,” a reporter commented,

the odds are your butcher asks you which man you fancy, and if you want to bet on it. Your newsman smiles as he hands you your daily paper, and informs you that ‘there is something new about the great fight in it this morning.’ If you drop into Bryant’s or Christy’s in an evening, you are certain to hear some allusion to the Benicia Boy or Sir Thomas de Sayers that never fails to bring down the house” (Gorn, 1986, 152).

The fight ended in a forty-two round draw. Not long after the bout the Civil War began; Americans no longer needed prize fighting to satisfy their demand for violent action.

Prize fighting fell on hard times after the Heenan-Sayers match. Where once it was a working-class sport, now it became a criminal-class activity. Fixed fights, gang violence, and unruly spectacles were so much the order of the day that even the penny press lost interest. With the likes of fugitives Jesse James and Billy the Kid to report on, journalists saw no reason to follow an arcane, dying sport in which the new golden rule was that the person with a Colt revolver makes the rules. When journalists did write about boxing, they generally waxed eloquently about the golden age of the ring—a time different and infinitely better than their own ragged, corrupt era. For many Americans, prize fighting was a “relic of barbarism,” an activity that smacked of bearbaiting and bullbaiting, and which had no place in a civilized society (Gorn, 1986, 222, 224).

Then in the 1880s John L. Sullivan, “The Boston Strong Boy,” swaggered onto the pugilistic stage, changing suddenly and dramatically the fortunes of the sport. A son of Irish potato-famine immigrants, Sullivan was born in 1856 in the Boston suburb of Roxbury. His father was a day laborer, and John L. appeared set to follow in his father's muddy shoes, scraping a living by performing back-breaking manual labor during the
day, then getting into fights at night. It soon became apparent that he was a better fighter than worker, though in the late 1870s, when Sullivan began fighting for stakes, there was not much money to be made in either endeavor. Still, as a prizefighter he was showered with the cheers and respect of his peers, rewarded in ways that satisfied his enormous ego and diffused his restless, violent energy (Gorn, 1986).

By 1880, the year of Sullivan’s first important fight, prize fighting was in a state of transition. The bare-knuckle, fight-to-the-finish London Prize Ring Rules were being replaced by the Queensberry Rules, written by the Welshman John Graham Chambers and named after their Scottish endorser John Sholto Douglas, the ninth Marquis of Queensberry. Written in 1865 and published in 1867, the Queensberry Rules mandated three-minute rounds with a minute rest period between rounds, and a knock out if a felled fighter could not regain his feet in ten seconds. The rules required fighters to wear padded gloves and they barred all wrestling, grappling, and throwing maneuvers, and permitted matches to be contested as fights to the finish or for a pre-determined number of rounds. Essentially the same rules that are in effect today, the Queensberry Rules appeared, at least on the surface, to be less violent, and certainly less bloody, than traditional bare-knuckle prize fighting (Brailsford, 1988, 152-3; Sheard 2004, 17).

Sullivan preferred the new code, but on rare, important occasions he fought under the old London Prize Ring Rules. That was exactly what he did on February 7, 1882, when he battled Paddy Ryan for the heavyweight championship. In a short, brutal, nine-round battle, Sullivan pounded Ryan into submission. After the fight, Ryan confessed, “I never faced a man who could hit as hard. I don’t believe there is another man like him in the country ... [A]ny man that Sullivan can hit, he can whip” (quoted in Pollack, 2006, 40). Trying to give reporters a sense of Sullivan’s hitting power, he claimed, “When Sullivan struck me, I thought that a telegraph pole had been shoved against me endways” (quoted in Gorn, 1986, 215). The fight was sponsored by Richard Kyle Fox’s National Police Gazette, the leading prize fighting periodical, and it was billed as “the championship of the world,” the first use of that designation in boxing. That title suited Sullivan just fine, and he immediately proceeded to transform it into a cash cow (Gorn, 1986).

John L took the title on the road. During his Grand Tour of 1883-84, he visited twenty-six (of thirty-eight) states, five territories, the District of Columbia, and British Columbia. Travelling to major cities and smaller hamlets, his band of boxers staged demonstrations of the “manly art of self-defense.” To prove his own superiority, Sullivan offered a handsome reward to any man who lasted four rounds with him. Few tried, none succeeded. For millions of Americans, Sullivan was Homeric—a cross between Hercules and Paul Bunyan. He was personable and friendly when he was not drunk, and often times frightful and awe-inspiring when he was. But drunk or sober, he was always “the Great John L!” (Pollack, 2006).

Sullivan made a small fortune on his Grand Tour, certainly near or more than $90,000 (perhaps as much as several million dollars by the standards of 2010). As a point of comparison, the president of the United States made $25,000 a year, a successful New York City lawyer $50,000, and a university professor $2,500. No American professional athlete of the era made anywhere near Sullivan’s income. His biographer accurately claimed that “His name, his face, and his deeds were now known throughout the land” (Isenberg, 1988, 206). Saloon keepers placed his picture above their bars, journalists wrote hundreds of lurid stories about his exploits, and his image regularly appeared on the cover or in the pages of the National Police Gazette. He was America’s public bad boy—a frequently drunken, brawling spectacle who, nonetheless, captured the hearts of millions of his fellow citizens. Even his standard bar room boast—“My name’s John L. Sullivan and I can lick any son-of-a-bitch alive”—seemed more a touching affectation than anything sinister. Such popular songs as “Let Me Shake the Hand that Shook the Hand of Sullivan” attested to his grip on the public’s imagination (Isenberg, 1988).

In late 1887 Sullivan took his traveling boxing tour to Great Britain, where he was greeted with the same enthusiasm as in the United States.
He conformed to British stereotypes of the American—big, boisterous, and as open as the American continent—and was an astonishing success. On one cold, foggy December day, he even breakfasted with the elite Scots Guards, followed by an audience with Edward, Prince of Wales. Edward quizzed Sullivan about several of his fights, and the son of Irish-Catholic immigrants asked the future king of England when was the last time he had a fistic go. The two exchanged views on one thing or another, and then the American fighter put on an exhibition of his craft. According to some accounts, when the two exchanged their goodbyes, Sullivan added, “If you ever come to Boston, be sure to look me up. I’ll see that you’re treated right” (n.a., 1918, 60; Isenberg, 1988, 244). The story might be apocryphal, but given the fighter’s casual, egalitarian nature, it might just be true. King or commoner, Sullivan treated every man as an equal, none as a superior.

By the end of his British tour the Sullivan legend seemed complete. And so it would have been for the run-of-the-mill icon, but there was never anything ordinary about John L. Overweight, out-of-shape, road-weary, and drunk much of the time, he was ready to take on another challenge. Fox’s National Police Gazette considered Sullivan ancient history and had begun touting Jake Kilrain as the new “champion of the world.” Sullivan took umbrage. A large panel in the center of his championship belt, given to him by his Boston backers and supporters, bore the legend “Presented to the Champion of Champions, John L. Sullivan, by the Citizens of the United States,” and that was how he regarded himself. He was America’s champion, the citizen’s champion, something akin to the president of pugilism, the first among equals. Even more exaltedly, he was the Emperor of Masculinity. He had a word for Fox’s champion, and it was not suitable for the era of the genteel literary tradition. Even in his condition, he was ready once again to toe the line (Isenberg, 1988). An epic battle followed, one that poet Vachel Lindsay appropriated to frame his poem about fin de siècle America:

When I was nine years old, in 1889,
I sent my love a lacy Valentine.
Suffering boys were dressed like Fauntleroys,
While Judge and Puck in giant humor vied.
The Gibson Girl came shining like a bride
To spoil the cult of Tennyson’s Elaine.
Louisa Alcott was my gentle guide ... Then ...
I heard a battle trumpet sound.
Nigh New Orleans
Upon an emerald plain
John L. Sullivan
The strong boy
Of Boston
Fought seventy-five rounds with Jake Kilrain
(Lindsay, 1919, 357-58)

And what a seventy-five rounds it was! Because bare-knuckle prize fighting was illegal in every state in the Union, promoters arranged to hold the contest on a rural patch of turf in Mississippi owned by Charles Rich, a local timber baron. Participants and spectators made the hundred-mile trip from New Orleans to Richburg in trains, and at 10:13, on the morning of July 8, with the sun already hot in the sky, Sullivan and Kilrain toed the line for what would turn out to be the last bare-knuckle world heavyweight championship fight in history (Pollack, 2006, 170-98; Isenberg, 1988, 257-80).

Kilrain ended the first round in fifteen seconds when he threw Sullivan to the turf, landing hard on his opponent. He also scored first blood—always a major betting point—in the sixth with a right to the champion’s ear. With blood streaming down his neck, Sullivan “grinned savagely,” then quickly responded, dazing and flooring Kilrain with a hard shot (Pollack, 2006, 176). The fight was now barely twenty minutes old, but
Kilrain was hurt and in danger of losing. He responded by going on the defensive, circling away from Sullivan’s powerful right, often going down without being hit or thrown, and trying to prolong the fight. Sullivan had trained hard for the match, and he looked in peak condition, but as the temperature rose to over one hundred degrees and humidity rolled in like waves from the Gulf Coast, no one knew how long he could last under the scorching Mississippi sun. And so the fight dragged on, round after round. In the stands, freshly built of pine wood from Rich’s sawmill, spectators’ pants stuck to the bubbling pitch. The backs and chests of both Irish-American fighters burned and blistered. Everyone sucked in hot mouthfuls of air that seemed filtered through a blast furnace. Against all odds the combatants continued, two determined athletes locked in a fight to the finish, one hurt but patient, the other pressing the attack but impatient (Pollack, 2006, 170-98; Isenberg, 1988, 257-80).


By the fortieth round, Kilrain’s seconds had to lift him out of his corner stool and help him to the scratch. He was fighting on guts and hope. Then, in the forty-fourth round, Sullivan began to vomit uncontrollably. Some people in the crowd believed he had been drinking an elixir of alcohol and tea to bolster his strength, and a wag commented, “Don’t worry, John L. is just getting rid of the tea.” Seeing an opening, Mike Donovan in Kilrain’s corner implored his man to attack, but the fighter refused, saying, “No, I won’t, Mike; no I won’t ... John, I won’t hit you while you are vomiting.” Instead he asked the champion, “Will you draw the fight?” “No, you loafer,” Sullivan yelled back, and rushed his opponent (Pollack, 2006, 185).

Sullivan recovered. Kilrain lingered. Fifty rounds, fifty-five, sixty, sixty-five, seventy. Blood, mud, sweat, and blisters from the sun covered both men. Kilrain could not outfight Sullivan, and it was now clear that he could not outlast him either. In the seventy-fifth round Sullivan punched Kilrain at will, knocking him down, and sending him wandering dazed along the ropes. One of the challenger’s corner men asked Sullivan if he would give Jake a thousand dollars to give up. Although the fight was strictly winner-take-all, Sullivan agreed. But his backers overruled his generosity. “That settles it then,” the champion said, “we’ll fight.” But Mike Donovan, Kilrain’s manager, threw in the sponge: “I will not be a party to manslaughter,” he said (Pollack, 2006, 191-92). The fight was over—a fight that set a standard for tenacity and fortitude.

Spectators at the match knew with a certainty absolute that they had witnessed an epic moment. Greedily grabbing anything that might by even the most lenient definition be considered a souvenir, they bought what they could and scavenged everything else. The soft hat that Sullivan ritualistically threw into the ring at the start of the proceedings went for fifty dollars, the buckets that held ice water twenty-five dollars. Slivers of the pine ring post that had once flown Sullivan’s colors sold for five dollars each. They were the fistic equivalent to pieces of the True Cross (Pollack, 2006).

Across the country, the press treated the fight like an American version of the set-to between Achilles and Hector outside the walls of Troy. The “rage of Achilles,” his mixture of bluster, pride, and boyishness, was not a far stretch from the Great John L.’s. Reporters covering the White House received requests from the inside for news of the fight. Thousands of curious people in cities across the country crowded outside telegraph offices waiting for bulletins of the outcome. Even the New York Times, the voice of bourgeois sensibility, gave the fight front page coverage under the headline “THE BIGGER BRUTE WON.” (New York Times, July 9, 1889).
Sullivan was now the unrivaled emperor of American popular culture. In the ring, on tours, and on the stage, he was cheered, admired, and adored. It did not matter that he put on weight or made drunken spectacles of himself. With no worlds left to conquer, he accepted a champion’s final act. On September 7, 1892, a decade after defeating Paddy Ryan for the title, he lost the belt in New Orleans to James J. Corbett, a younger, faster, better-conditioned, and immensely talented fighter. It was a legally staged fight, contested under the Marquis of Queensberry rules. Years of steady drinking and overeating had left John L. in no condition to fight at a championship caliber. It was clear from the start that he would lose. The end came in the twenty-first round of the contest. Sullivan, fighting as he always did by pressing forward, was powerless to catch Corbett and defenseless against his opponent’s punishing punches. Finally, Corbett trapped Sullivan in a corner, feinted, and landed a perfectly timed right to the jaw. Sullivan dropped to his knees, but slowly pulled himself up to his feet and stood proud, defenseless, and doomed. Corbett moved in, took aim, and ended Sullivan’s reign as champion. Then the unexpected happened. The fight was over, the referee had counted John L. out, and his corner men had revived him as best they could. But instead of staying put in his corner, he stumbled to the ropes and gripped a ring post, holding up his right hand and signaling the spectators to quiet down. “Gentlemen—gentlemen,” he began, speaking in exhausted, halting breaths. “I have something to say. All I have to say is that I came into the ring once too often—and if I had to get licked I’m glad I was licked by an American. I remain your warm and personal friend, John L. Sullivan” (quoted in Isenberg, 2006, 318).

To be sure, Sullivan was a reflection of the swaggering, clanging, combative late-nineteenth century. He was all of its strengths and contradictions. “He was a hero and a brute,” wrote Elliott Gorn, “a bon vivant and a drunk, a lover of life and a reckless barbarian ... He cut through all restraints, acted rather than contemplated, and paid little regard to the morality or immorality of his behavior. He was totally self-indulgent, even in acts of generosity, totally a hedonist consuming the good things around him and beckoning others to do the same” (Gorn, 1986, 227).

For the sport of boxing, Sullivan was the critical transitional fighter. But his cultural orbit reached well beyond his own sport. For men of his times and later, he was an irresistible icon of strength and masculinity. When Theodore Dreiser was a young journalist he met Sullivan, and the image stuck with him the remainder of his life.

And then John L. Sullivan, raw, red-faced, big-fisted, broad-shouldered, drunken, with gaudy waistcoat and tie, and rings and pins set with enormous diamonds and rubies—what an impression he made! Surrounded by local sports and politicians of the most rubicund and degraded character ... Cigar boxes, champagne buckets, decanters, beer bottles, overcoats, collars and shirts littered the floor, and lolling back in the midst of it all in ease and splendor his very great self, a sort of prize-fighting J.P. Morgan. (Dreiser, 1922, 150-51).

Dreiser’s attempt to interview Sullivan about such subjects as his plans and the value of exercise drew only rich, friendly laughs from the former champion. “Write any damned thing yuh please, young fella, and say that John L. Sullivan said so. That’s good enough for me. If they don’t believe it, bring it back here and I’ll sign it for yuh. But I know it’ll be all right, and I won’t stop to read it neither.” That was enough for Dreiser, who said he “would have written anything [Sullivan] asked me to write.” “I adored him,” he concluded (Dreiser, 1922, 150-51). Millions of Americans felt the same way as Theodore Dreiser. For American popular culture, Sullivan pioneered the landscape of twentieth-century celebrity culture. For men of his time, he was a flag-waver, a champion of the common man, and the very expression of what an American was. He was all that—and more.

Sullivan was always Sullivan, of course, but his overgrown personality still does not explain why he became the central male icon of the late-nineteenth century. What was it about America that was so receptive to John L.’s charms, such as they were, and was not at all receptive to Paddy
Ryan or Joe Goss, the man Ryan knocked out for the title? Americans’ notice of Sullivan did not take place in a cultural vacuum. Throughout the country a more spirited and violent popular culture was taking shape. Americans could hear it in the marches of John Philip Sousa, see it in the violent clash of bodies on college gridirons, and read it the sudden explosion of books about Napoleon. Sullivan fought during a national moment that Theodore Roosevelt labeled the “strenuous age,” a period of history that witnessed the swelling of Anglo-Saxon chauvinism, deadly confrontations between labor and management, and, at the end of the 1890s, war between the United States and Spain. The entire mise-en-scene of the age helps to explain the importance of Sullivan.

But most of the outward manifestations of cultural change—and this included John L. Sullivan—originated in a seismic shift in what it meant to be a white man. Put simply, notions of masculinity were being reformulated. Although sex was biologically determined, gender was a complex social construction. Ideas of “manliness” and “masculinity” are never fixed absolutes, rather fluid and changing. During the eighteenth century, for example, a man’s identity was inseparable from his place in society. He was the head of a household and a part of a community, expected to act with decorum and restraint, interacting with his peers in a mild-mannered, soft-spoken, courteous, and pleasant manner. That behavior, so well enshrined in the character and actions of George Washington or Thomas Jefferson, was the outward expression of white manliness (Rotundo, 1993).

In the nineteenth century, as a new construction separated the public and private spheres of men and women, manliness took a slightly different shape. A man was more defined by his position in the workplace. To a large extent, a “man” was defined as being the opposite of a “boy.” Boys were wild and careless, and “primitive spirits” full of “animal spirits.” They were immature, impulsive, and undependable. Men were different; they controlled their baser urges and met their responsibilities. The ideal mid-Victorian man had a certain softness, a willingness to sentimentally express his deepest feelings, and a firm commitment to his religious faith. He was not a bragger and a bruiser, a swaggerer and boozer who stood ready to out-drink and out-fight the man standing next to him at the bar of a saloon. He was the man who could write to another man confessing his brotherly love, play an active role in a religiously-based reform society, and read to his children each night as they sat in the parlor. (Putney, 2001).

Toward the end of the nineteenth century there was a growing sense—dimly felt at first but gaining strength with each year—that something was dreadfully wrong with American men. They had grown weak and dispirited. Reports of male “neurasthenia,” the weakening or loss of the essential “nerve force,” and nervous collapse filled countless newspaper and magazine articles. The weekly attendance at local reform societies’ meetings, various charitable groups, and church service; the constant reading of social-improvement pamphlets and religious tracts; the talk, talk, talk of a better world and a better mankind and “What would Jesus do?”—it all seemed to be culminating with the feminization of men. The generation of bold, adventurous, brave, virile, white pioneers who had cleared the pass West had been replaced by new generation of men, flat-chested, thin-armed, and pencil-necked (Putney, 2001).

What American men needed was a massive blood transfusion of strength and force. In his influential essay “The Strenuous Life,” Theodore Roosevelt decried “the soft spirit of the cloistered life” and challenged American men to “boldly face the life of strife ... for it is only through strife, through hard and dangerous endeavor, that we shall ultimately win the goal of true national greatness” (Roosevelt, 2009 [1900], 8, 20-1. See also Roberts, 1970; Higham, 1972, 78, 84). Roosevelt’s sentiment was echoed by bodybuilder Bernarr Macfadden, who in the first issue of his magazine Physical Culture (1899) proclaimed the slogan: “Weakness Is A Crime” (Wood, 2003, 93).

The new manliness not only rejected the soft, comfortable life, it also jettisoned anything that smacked of femininity. Temperance reform movements, domesticity, Christianity, women, and language itself had a
much circumscribed place in the new realm of masculinity. A new ideal type, epitomized by the emerging protagonist of western novels, was a man unencumbered—no home, no wife, no church, just a gun and a horse (Carnes and Griffen, 1990). Unlike a lawyer or a politician, his power came not from the manipulation of language, but from the absence of language. He spoke, what Norman Mailer dubbed “the language of men” (Lennon, 1988, 18), the sparse vocabulary of Jack London and Ernest Hemingway. He was silent, strong, independent, and deadly, familiar with saloons, prostitutes, animals, and firearms, but a world away from sentimental expressions of love or abstract debates. What mattered was what he did. Like Sullivan, he was defined by his physical feats.

It was to this new sensibility that John L. Sullivan and prize fighting appealed. Charles Dana of the New York Sun had only to look at Sullivan to realize that the future of American manhood was safe. “A wonderful specimen is this Sullivan,” he bumbled. “He dines like Gargantua. He drinks like Gambrinus. He has the strength of Samson, and the fighting talent of Achilles. When he moves it is with a child’s ease, and he hits with a giant’s force... If any one thinks that the physique of the human race is degenerating, let him consider the great John L. He should be reassured” (quoted in Isenberg, 1988, 276).

Unintentionally, Dana captured part of Sullivan’s attraction. The fighter was childlike. Modern masculinity worshipped the boy’s “animal spirit” and impulsive behavior. As Roosevelt wrote in an article for Outlook, “Powerful, vigorous men of strong animal development must have some way in which their animal spirits can find vent” (Roosevelt, 1913, 42). A man was no longer the opposite of a boy; he needed to release the elemental boy inside of him. Here, again, Sullivan was the cultural yardstick. He was “the Boston Strong Boy,” “the Boston Boy,” or just “the Boy.” To be a boy in a man’s body, to be in the prize ring with John L. Sullivan, or perhaps alone on an Arizona mesa, riding on the frontier of bare-chested American masculinity—that’s what it meant to be a man in the age of TR and John L. Explaining why a man of fifty-five years, a former president of the United States, and a father of six children, would want to shuck it all and risk his life on a dangerous jungle trip to trace the River of Doubt’s route to the Amazon. Roosevelt wrote, “I had to go. It was my last chance to be a boy” (Ornig, 1994, 3). Roosevelt admired the qualities that made a great boxer, football player, cowboy, and soldier. He had tried his hand at each. But always, he just wanted to be “one of the boys.” His friend John L. Sullivan would have understood—and so would millions of other American men—whatever their race or ethnicity.

Under the reign of Sullivan, then, the heavyweight championship became the symbol of the toughest man/boy in the world, a symbol that rested comfortably on the brow of a white American. At a moment when Social Darwinism was the final word of the pecking order of ethnic and racial groups, when such phrases as “survival of the fittest” and “the struggle for survival” were attached to just about every aspect of life, this was a significant achievement. Early in Sullivan’s career an editor for the jingoistic New York Sun labeled him “the most phenomenal production of the prize ring that has been evolved during the nineteenth century” (quoted in Somers, 1972, 160. See also Roberts, 1981, 31). And during his years as champion a rough syllogism took shape: Sullivan is the greatest fighter in the world; Sullivan is an American; ergo, American is the greatest country in the world. Nor did this notion die with the end of Sullivan’s reign. In the late 1960s, Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver wrote, “The boxing ring is the ultimate focus of masculinity in America, the two-fisted testing ground of manhood, and the heavyweight champion, as a symbol, is the real Mr. America” (quoted in Cleaver, 1968, 85).

Freighting the title with such cultural weight, however, created problems. As long as the heavyweight champion was an American—a white American—the syllogism provided endless opportunities for international and racial bragging rights. But what if a non-Anglo Celtic foreigner captured the crown? Or even worse for millions of race-conscious white Americans, what if a black American won the title? During Sullivan’s years as champion there were several outstanding black heavyweight boxers,
including the great West-Indian born, Australian champion Peter Jackson, who had once fought a sixty-one round draw with Jim Corbett. Sullivan, in his usual fashion, attacked the issue head-on. In 1892 he issued a general challenge to fight for a purse of $25,000 and a side bet of $10,000. He preferred to fight a foreign opponent, he said, “as I would rather whip them than any of my own countrymen.” But he made one exception: “[T]here is no exception—first come, first served—who are white, I will not fight a negro. I never have and never shall” (quoted in Isenberg, 1988, 301).

In one stroke, Sullivan banned black boxers from the empire of American masculinity. He set a precedent—Jim Crowing the most important athletic title at a time when “separate but equal” was becoming the law of the land. The heavyweight crown was too valuable a cultural artifact to risk losing in an interracial bout. The champions who followed Sullivan reinforced the same barrier—James J. Corbett, Robert Fitzsimmons, James J. Jeffries, Marvin Hart. Each, even if they had fought blacks before they won the title, drew the color line once they were champion. The very best black boxers of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries—such as Peter Jackson, Joe Jeannette, Sam McVey, and especially Sam Langford—were simply erased from the title picture. They were the invisible fighters, there but not seen when it mattered, more often than not forced to fight each other because they could not get a decent payday against a white heavyweight (Wiggins, 1985). The legendary black Canadian boxer Sam Langford, for instance, spent much of his brilliant career battling other black fighters for small purses. He fought Jeff Clark eleven times, Jim Barry twelve times, Joe Jeannette fourteen times, Sam McVey fifteen times, and Harry Wills twenty-three times. He fought more than three hundred matches, but never saw a title shot. By the 1940s he was penniless and blind (Mulvaney, 2007).

The color line lasted until 1908, when title holder Tommy Burns concluded that it was worth less than $30,000. By then the crown had lost its luster. Even after the change from the London Prize Ring Rules to the Queensberry Rules, Americans had not universally embraced professional boxing. The heavyweight champion, to be sure, was a national icon whose exploits in and out of the ring made news. Millions of Americans admired and respected the champion, and the finest journalist of the day often covered important fights. But this said, professional boxing was still illegal in almost every state in the Union, and progressive reformers clamored to outlaw it everywhere. Oddly, many reformers decried the money in prize fighting more than the brutality of the sport. That an uneducated, semi-skilled man could make thousands of dollars by pummeling another man struck reformers as socially unhealthy. Even Teddy Roosevelt agreed. Although he advocated boxing for boys and young men, boxed regularly while in the White House, and counted a few prize fighters “among his friends,” he felt that the “enormous” amounts of money professionals fought for “are a potent source of demoralization in themselves, while they are often so arranged as either to be a premium on crookedness or else to reward nearly as amply the man who fails as the man who succeeds” (Roosevelt, 1910, 550-51). His professional friends were not losers, and the idea of rewarding losing offended his sense of competition.

The money, the encouragement of gambling, and the association with drinking and prostitution—everything about prizefighting angered reformers. Where once the most important matches were staged in New Orleans and Coney Island, progressive legislation closed legal loopholes that permitted prizefighting. In the early years of the new century, however, prize fighting swept west to cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Colma in California; Reno and Goldfield in Nevada; and Las Vegas, New Mexico. It became a thoroughly western American sport, a dusty gold-town competition between mostly westerners for the amusement of cowboys, ranchers, miners, and assorted western sports, pimps, prostitutes, and gamblers. Eastern journalists began to lose interest, and after the popular James J. Jeffries retired as the undefeated heavyweight champion in 1904, westerners started to ignore the sport as well. The title passed in an elimination contest to Marvin Hart, a fighter who possessed only one
good eye and had difficulty even drawing yawns from the sporting public. When he lost the crown to Tommy Burns, it seemed that no one cared. To make any money at all—and that was not very much—Burns packed his bags and sailed the high seas, defending his title against mediocre boxers in London, Dublin, Paris, Sydney, and Melbourne. Americans back in the United States could not have cared less. The heavyweight crown had become a mere bagatelle (Roberts, 1983).

That is, to everyone except Jack Johnson, a magnificently talented black boxer who had followed Burns almost the entire circumference of the globe in effort to get a title match. Repeatedly Burns had drawn the color line, but finally in the heat of Australia he named his price: $30,000. For that sum, and not a penny less, he would give a black man a crack at becoming the emperor of masculinity. An enterprising Australian promoter, Hugh D. “Huge Deal” McIntosh, arranged the money, convinced Johnson to accept only $5,000, and set the match for Boxing Day, December 26, 1908 (Headon, 2009). The Great John L., old and fat but still opinionated, admonished Burns, sniffing, “Shame on the money-mad champion! Shame on the man who upsets good American precedents because there are Dollars, Dollars, Dollars in it” (quoted in Gilmore, 1975, 27). A journalist for the Australian Star was even more concerned, writing, “This battle may in the future be looked back upon as the first great battle of an inevitable race war” (quoted in Broome, 1979, 352-53).

The fight took place in Sydney’s Rushcutter’s Bay in a purpose-built arena freshly washed by a cool rain. In terms of a contest it wasn’t much of a fight. Johnson knocked Burns down in the first round and dominated completely until the referee—McIntosh himself—stopped the fight in the fourteenth. By then, Burns was a battered mess. His eyes were bleeding and swollen, his jaw grossly misshapen, and his mouth bloody inside and out. Johnson later wrote that he had “forgotten more about boxing than Burns ever knew,” and no one had reason to doubt his words (Ward, 2004, 123). Novelist Jack London, covering the fight for the New York Herald, reported: “The fight, there was no fight. No Armenian massacre could compare with the hopeless slaughter that took place in the Sydney stadium today.” For London, it was a contest between a “colossus and a toy automaton,” between a “playful Ethiopian and a small and futile white man,” between a “grown man and a naughty child” (San Francisco Call, December 27, 1908).

Something more than mere victory drove Johnson. He was a black man, lashing out at the thousands of racial insults and humiliations that he had absorbed, affirming his manhood and his superiority and, for want of a better word, his existence. He could have ended the fight earlier, but wanted to punish and humiliate Burns. Sometimes he hit his white opponent and physically prevented him from falling, holding him up so that he could continue the punishment. Constantly he taunted Burns. Speaking audibly but with a soft, high-pitched southern accent, he asked, “Poor little Tommy, who told you you were a fighter?” Or, “Poor, poor Tommy. Who taught you to hit? Your mother? You a woman?” Or, referring to Burns’ wife, “Poor little boy, Jewel won’t know you when she gets you back from the fight” (quoted in Roberts, 1983, 63). Always Burns was “little Tommy,” “little boy,” or “Tommy Boy.” Johnson repeatedly compared Burns to a woman, emasculating insults that carried as much sting as his blows. For a time Burns attempted to respond in kind, spitting out racial invectives with mouthfuls of his own blood. But as the fight wore on, Burns grew quiet, conserving his energy for survival.

When it ended, thousands of spectators—including many white sailors from the visiting American fleet—silently exited the stadium. A fight that had been consciously and purposefully promoted as a clash for racial supremacy had ended with the raising of a black man’s gloved fist. The crown worn by Sullivan, Corbett, and Jeffries was now on the head of Jack Johnson. Resorting to doggerel, a reporter for the Daily Telegraph concluded:

And yet for all we know and feel,
For Christ and Shakespeare, knowledge, love,
We watch a white man bleeding reel,
We cheer a black with bloodied glove
(quoted in Broome, 1979, 356)

But the cheers for Johnson were few. In a period when the White Australia Policy was federal government policy, and the masthead slogan of the national magazine The Bulletin was “Australia for the white man” any local reporters unsurprisingly portrayed Johnson as a black beast, a shave-headed serpent, or an apocalyptic anti-Christ extinguishing the light of civilization (Broome, 1979; Headon, 2009). Much of the racial heat was not felt—not yet, anyway—in the United States. But the American black press celebrated the news. “No event in forty years has given more satisfaction to the colored people of this country than has the signal victory of Jack Johnson,” wrote a reporter for the Richmond Planet (quoted in Gilmore, 1975, 32). The mainstream white press adopted a cautious, wait-and-see position. The general line was that Johnson had not defeated the “real” champion. Jim Jeffries, who in peaceful retirement had ballooned to 300 pounds, was still the “legitimate” title holder, and until Johnson defeated him he was not the true champion (Roberts, 1983).

Jack London undoubtedly spoke for millions of whites. After the match he asserted, “Personally, I was for Burns all the way. He was a white man and so am I. Naturally, I wanted to see the white man win” (Ward, 2004, 132). Watching the fight he witnessed Johnson’s superior performance, accepting fully that the best man won. But he was haunted by Johnson’s behavior in the ring, and especially the fighter’s gold tooth smile as he physically beat and verbally assaulted Burns. “But one thing remains,” London wrote from Sydney. “Jeffries must emerge from his alfalfa farm and remove that smile from Johnson’s face. Jeff, it’s up to you” (San Francisco Call, December 27, 1908).

Suddenly for a sport that Americans had forgotten, a down-on-its-luck, punch-drunk, left-for-dead, relic-of-barbarism sport, there was a swift revival of curiosity. Americans perked up their ears and manifested a keen interest in the new heavyweight champion. Jack Johnson had more than captured their attention; the black fighter had gotten under America’s skin. Why? What was it about this thirty-year-old, Texas-born, son of former slaves that caused such a ruckus? During the next seven years Johnson served as the national racial lightning rod, channeling white America’s fears, anxieties, and hatreds into his soul.

“Well, you see, Jack Johnson didn’t know his place,” a white southerner explained. A black northerner speculated, “See, Johnson was a pure individual. He did everything exactly the way he wanted to. I don’t think it ever crossed his mind that he should be anybody else’s version of Jack Johnson.” (quoted in Burns, 2005). What was the proper place of African Americans? That was at the nub of the public debate over Johnson. Americans were obsessed by the debate. It echoed in the editorials in northern and southern newspapers about the “race issue,” lingered in the halls of the Capitol where Congressmen railed about the “Negro problem,” and hung like strange fruit on the trees of the nation beside the hundreds of blacks who were lynched. Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois addressed it, as did Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. It was the eight hundred pound gorilla at the Fourth of July celebrations.

As heavyweight champion and thus the new emperor of masculinity, Johnson insisted on his rightful share of privileges. Like John L. Sullivan, he enjoyed the high life. He had his front teeth capped in gold, wore diamond rings and stickpins, drank champagne and brandy, traveled with fast company, and consortedit with scores of women—most of whom were white. He was a recognized and accepted “sport”—part of a fraternity that included certain athletes, gamblers, confidence men, pimps, and other assorted men open for some action and a romp. The sporting ideal involved living fast and walking slow, winning bets and staying out of jail. It was a tightrope life for most; for a black man it was more like a life on a razor’s edge. Especially where white women were concerned. Nothing—not the gold teeth, diamond rings, champagne, or even victories in the ring—engaged white Americans more than Johnson’s choice of female company. To be sure, most of his companions were prostitutes. Boxers had a long, rich
history of involvement with “working women.” It was considered natural. Fighters were a peripatetic breed, traveling about on the rails, living in shabby hotel rooms and dingy training camps, and existing outside the margins of acceptable society. A boxer and a prostitute were the two sides of the same coin. Emerging out of poverty, scraping a livelihood from their bodies, and ultimately arriving at sad ends, the arc of their lives was similar. Johnson, however, took more risks than most other African-American boxers and sportsmen. Just as he did in the ring, he crossed the color line (Roberts, 1983).

His choice was a bold assertion not simply of pride in his race, but also of his masculinity. As was the case with John L. Sullivan, evolving notions of manliness gave meaning to Johnson’s actions. It is not to say that they expressed masculinity in the same ways. Although both drank heavily, boasted frequently, and disdained marriage vows, they differed on other points. Sullivan’s and Roosevelt’s readiness to give expression to their “animal spirits” and embrace of the idea of being “one of the boys” were not part of the African-American sense of masculinity. For a people a generation removed from chattel slavery, and still regarded by many whites as some sort of “insipient species,” any talk of “animal spirits” was objectionable foolishness. And the mere word “boy”—a rebuke every black male heard thousands of times during his life—stung like the tip of a whip (Roberts, 1983).

Nor did the new guttural vocabulary of the inarticulate man hold the same attraction for Johnson as it did for many white fighters of the time. Although his formal education was meager, he took pride in his self-education. He read Milton and Shakespeare, frequently quoting a line or two during conversations with reporters; he enjoyed listening to opera, and if asked would accompany the music on the bass viol; he even applied for and was granted several patents, one for a specialized automobile wrench and the other a “theft preventing device for vehicles” (Ward, 2004, 409). When in the mood, Johnson was a delightful and voluble conversationalist who dotted his monologues with references to history, literature, music, art, and his own philosophy on life. Although differing dramatically on many points with Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, he agreed with the two prominent black spokesmen that education, intellectual growth, and verbal dexterity were essential to advancement (Roberts, 1983).

Even the folklore that mushroomed around Johnson’s life emphasized his Brer Rabbit ingenuity. One tale told of Johnson speeding in an expensive roadster through some backwater, dusty, red-clay section of the Jim Crow South. A local sheriff pulled him over and explained, “You know you were speeding, boy? Goin’ way too fast.” Johnson acknowledged the fact. “Well,” the sheriff said after glancing at the make of the car and the fighter’s fine, costly clothes, “That’s gonna cost you fifty dollars, boy.” Without looking up, Johnson pulled out from his pocket a thick, heavyweight champion’s roll of cash, peeled off a hundred dollar bill, and handed it to the sheriff. “I can’t change that big a bill,” he said. “Keep the change,” Johnson replies, “I’m coming back same way I went through.” In another tale Johnson attempted to check into a Jim Crow hotel located in some small, cracker town. Johnson asked for a room and the desk clerk, hardly raising his eyes, said, “We don’t serve your kind, boy.” Johnson asked again, and received the same answer. He asked a third time and the desk clerk angrily retorted, “You heard me, boy, we don’t serve your kind.” Johnson rolled back his head laughing and replied, “Oh, there’s a misunderstanding. The room isn’t for me. It’s for my wife. She’s one of your kind” (see Wiggins, 1971, 4-19).

These tales are not of heavyweight power, but of lightweight adaptability, featuring Johnson’s intelligence and verbal skills rather than his physical attributes. The stories underscore why white Americans considered the champion a threat. They express, implicitly, that this black man can dominate anyone physically and mentally. They showcase a man who was his own man, one who drove too fast, spoke his mind, and selected companions to suit his desires. “I am not a slave,” Johnson remarked, “and I have the right to choose who my mate shall be without the dictation
of any man. I have eyes and I have a heart, and when they fail to tell me who I shall have as mine, I want to be put in a lunatic asylum” (quoted in Burns, 2005).

The more that white Americans learned about Johnson the more they itched with discomfort. No sooner was he back in the United States than boxing managers and promoters began a search for a “White Hope” who could deliver the championship from his black hands. They scoured the country high and low. The journalist John Lardner wrote that “well-muscled white boys more than six feet two inches were not safe out of their mother’s sight” (Lardner, 1951, 27). Some carried their search across the Atlantic. Others ventured across the Pacific. Walter “Good-Time Charlie” Friedman, a resourceful talent scout, even hunted for a White Hope among Chinese peasants. And White Hopes they discovered. Some were giants—Jim Coffrey, the Roscommon Giant; Carl Morris, the Sapulpa Giant; Fred Fulton, the Giant of the North; and, eventually, Jess Willard, the Pottawatomie Giant. Others were smaller, but billed as terribly ferocious. However, in the early years of the search, while Johnson was still in his prime, none of the Hopes panned out. In 1909 the champion dispatched a series of them in short order (Roberts, 1983).

Johnson’s early victories occurred during white America’s “ace-in-the-hole” period. Out West, baling alfalfa—or whatever one did with alfalfa; most journalists were uncertain—was Jim Jeffries, the retired but still undefeated former champion, a big grizzly of a man, said to pack a punch harder than even the Great John L.’s, and the ability to withstand a whack from a poleax. Jack London had called on Jeffries to redeem his race, and so had thousands of other journalists and citizens who wrote about or penned letters to the retired fighter. At first Jeffries refused to budge from his retired status, but he turned out to be a poor businessman. He had opened a saloon and launched a fight club. Both went bust, leaving him with unpaid bills. Fighting, it turned out, was the only business he really knew (Roberts, 1983).

Promoter George Lewis “Tex” Rickard put together a package that Jeffries could not resist. He guaranteed the fighters $101,000 and two-thirds of the movie rights to meet in the ring on Independence Day, July 4, 1910. The winner would receive two-thirds, the loser one-third. It was a staggering amount of money, higher than had ever been offered to two athletes for a single contest. Although journalists chided over the money, Jeffries and Johnson quickly signed their contracts. The fight was set for San Francisco, but it aroused a firestorm of political protest in California, forcing Governor J.N. Gillett to push the match out of his state. Without missing a beat, Rickard moved the fight to Reno, Nevada, a town so soaked in sin anyway that the staging of a prize fight hardly seemed to make a difference. In fact, fighting appeared a fitting companion for the town’s divorce, gambling, and prostitution businesses (Roberts, 1983).

Rickard promoted the fight as a racial reckoning. And reporters covered it that way. It was a fight where people, white and black, felt invested. Whites worried about the implications of the fight. “If the black man wins,” a New York Times editorialist warned, “thousands and thousands of his ignorant brothers will misinterpret his victory as justifying claims to much more than mere physical equality with their white neighbors” (quoted in Roberts, 1983, 97). Even in Great Britain, where race and empire had long mingled uncomfortably, the idea of the fight sounded alarms. “It is not so much a matter of racial pride as one of racial existence which urges us so ardently to desire [Jeffries’] triumph,” commented an editor of a British boxing magazine. The writer knew that the “coloured races outnumber the whites,” and that Japan’s victory over Russia in 1905 and Johnson’s defeat of Burns in 1908 had sent out signals that the position of whites around the world was not secure. “Does anyone imagine for a moment that Johnson’s success is without political influence,” he continued, “an influence which has only been checked from having full vent by the personality of Jim Jeffries? He may smash Johnson when they meet ... and by so doing restore us to something like our old position. We shall never quite regain it, because the recollection of our temporary deposition will always remain to inspire the coloured peoples with hope. While if,
after all, Johnson should smash Jeffries—But the thought is too awful to contemplate” (quotes from Ward, 2004, 164-65).

An edgy anticipation marked the Fourth of July celebrations. America's attention leaned toward the sun-baked ring in Reno where thousands of spectators had crowded into a hastily-built arena. The sky was crystalline in the desert air, Reno a perfect jewel edged by mountains. Inside the arena a band played “Just Before the Battle, Mother,” “All Coons Look Alike to Me,” “America,” and “Dixie.” Like the music, the mood of the spectators was a cross between a traditional Independence Day festival and a Ku Klux Klan gathering. As flags fluttered and racial epithets flew, the fighters climbed between the ropes and prepared to settle the question foremost on everyone's mind (Roberts, 1983).

The fight started at 2:46pm and by 3:00pm or so it had already settled into a pattern. Perhaps, as Jeffries said later, “I couldn't come back” (Ward, 2004, 211). Perhaps he was too old, shed too much weight too quickly, and no longer had the reflexes to exploit openings and avoid danger. Perhaps he was just facing a better fighter, one whom he could not have beaten on his best day. Whatever the case, Jeffries could not sustain an offense or mount much of a defense. Patiently, Johnson wore him down, cutting and nearly closing his eyes, breaking his nose, and draining his energy. By round ten the thick pelt of hair that covered Jeffries' body was matted with his own blood. His corner man did not even attempt to wash it off. The ring was stained with blood, and the white shirts of spectators at ringside had red spots. In the fifteenth round, Johnson cut loose. Jeffries, who had never been knocked off his feet in his career, went down one, two, three times. Finally, to save the former champion from the humiliation of a knockout, his manager threw in the towel. The Battle of the Century, as it had been billed, was over. But the fighting over its significance wasn't (Ward, 2004).


Amaze an' Grace, how sweet it sounds,
Jack Johnson knocked Jim Jeffries down.
Jim Jeffries jumped up an' hit Jack on the chin,
An' then Jack knocked him down again.

The Yankees hold the play,
The White man pull the trigger;
But it makes no difference what the white man say:
The world champion's still a nigger.”
(quoted in Gilmore, 1975, 48).

Yes, for the most part the white man did hold the trigger, and even before evening became night they began to squeeze it. There was a long tradition of working-class drinking, gun play, and disorder on Independence Day, and the news of Johnson's victory added another combustible element to the mix. The results were predictable. In Uvalda, Georgia, a gang of whites attacked a camp of black construction workers, killing three and wounding five. In Houston, Texas, a black man openly celebrated Johnson's victory, enraging a white man who “slashed his throat from ear to ear.” In New York City a black shouted, “We blacks put one over on you whites, and we're going to do more.” A white mob stopped just short of lynching him for his bold exhibition of free speech. And so it continued until dawn. Whites killed two blacks in Little Rock, Arkansas; white
assailants killed three blacks in Shreveport, Louisiana; roving white sailors attacked scores of innocent blacks in Norfolk, Virginia; and thirty people were injured in a race riot in Pueblo, Colorado. In almost every section of the country, in big cities and rural hamlets, pitched battles occurred. Although a number of whites were injured, in far more cases blacks were shot, stabbed, and lynched. Interracial violence resulted in the deaths of at least twenty black Americans. In the reform magazine Independent, an editor wrote only July 7, 1910 that “Like the Hexenlehrling these apostles of savagery have unchained the demons of disorder whom they are powerless to lay” (Roberts, 1983, 110).

Never before had a sporting contest—or any other event—unleashed such powerful waves of hate and violence, and not until the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., would another such spontaneous outbreak reoccur. Nor was there any question, among either white or black Americans, over the cause of the civil disturbances. A black man had defeated a white man for what had become the greatest prize in American sports—the heavyweight boxing championship. It was an outcome that raised bile into the throats of thousands of whites, turning a handful into murderers. The burst of destructive energy frightened many middle-class blacks, threatening gains they had achieved. But several black commentators refused to diminish Johnson’s victory by saying that it was just a prize fight and did not mean anything. William Pickens, president of Talladega College, commented: “It was a good deal better for Johnson to win and a few Negroes be killed in body for it, than for Johnson to have lost and Negroes to have been killed in spirit by the preachments of inferiority from the combined white press” (quoted in Gilmore, 1975, 71).

In victory Johnson had probed the live nerve of American racism. And the Jeffries fight was only the beginning. White America’s violent reaction to the fight, and what white authorities interpreted as Johnson’s continued provocative behavior, prompted a virtual coup d’état against the emperor of masculinity. The first phase of the campaign attacked the most visible expressions of Johnson’s athletic superiority—the moving pictures of his victories. Throughout the early twentieth century, progressive reformers oozed anxiety about the evil influences of both prizefighting and films. Under certain circumstances, they argued, each encouraged vice, contributed to public disorder, and multiplied moral and social corruption. And combined, they had the power to foster incalculable harm.

In 1912, as Johnson prepared to defend his title against “Fireman” Jim Flynn in another Independence Day contest, Congress stirred into action. Four southerners on Capitol Hill—Thetus Sims (Tennessee) and Seaborn A. Roddenbery (Georgia) in the House, and Furnifold M. Simmons (North Carolina) and Augustus Bacon (Georgia) in the Senate—spearheaded a bill “to prohibit the exhibition of moving pictures of prizefights.” Roddenbery made no bones about his position on Johnson’s mixed-race fights: “No man descended from the old Saxon race can look upon that kind of a contest without abhorrence and disgust” (62nd Congress, 2nd sess., Congressional Record July 19, 1912, 9305; see also Streible, 2008, 245). On July 31, only weeks after Johnson’s victory over Flynn, President William Howard Taft signed the Sims bill into law. Although the law did not prohibit the filming of a fight or the exhibition of the motion pictures in the same state as the contest was staged, it did outlaw the interstate transport of the film. At a time when championship fights were contested in such sparsely populated locales as Nevada and New Mexico, the law effectively ended the profitability of prizefight films.

The Sims Law attacked Johnson indirectly by making it more difficult for him to make money (a standard championship contract gave the fighters a share in the film rights). It hit him in the pocketbook, and so might be considered as simply business. But the second phase of the government’s campaign against Johnson was personal, amounting to an all-out frontal assault against how he lived his life. As the boxer’s fame increased, his relationships with white women became an open, festering wound for many Americans. When he married Etta Terry Duryea in January, 1911, one of his relationships was sanctioned by the courts. Their stormy marriage ended in September, 1912, when Etta committed suicide by shooting
herself. Three months later in Chicago, Johnson married again, this time to Lucille Cameron, a white prostitute with whom he had been having an affair for four or five months (Roberts, 1983).

Criticisms, ominous and threatening, rained down on Johnson. A group of whites in Louisiana inquired whether the good citizens of Illinois knew what “seagrass ropes are made for.” The governor of New York called the marriage “a blot on our civilization.” Taking the logic one step further, the governor of South Carolina asked, “If we cannot protect our white women from black demons, where is our boasted civilization?” Not to be out-bigoted by any governor, Representative Seaborn A. Roddenbery cried out in indignation with indignation on the floor of the House, speculating on the history of race relations and lamenting his own times, “No brutality, no infamy, no degradation in all the years of Southern slavery, possessed such a villainous character and such atrocious qualities as the provisions of the laws of Illinois, New York, Massachusetts, and other states which allow the marriage between negro, Jack Johnson, to a woman of Caucasian strain.” With the applause of the gallery ringing in his ears, Roddenbery continued, “Intermarriage between whites and blacks is repulsive and averse to every sentiment of pure American spirit. It is abhorrent and repugnant to the very principles of a pure Saxon government. It is subversive to social peace. It is destructive to moral supremacy, and ultimately this slavery of white women to black beasts will bring this nation to a conflict as fatal and as bloody as ever reddened the soil of Virginia or crimsoned the mountain paths of Pennsylvania.” Concluding, he ranted, “Let us uproot and exterminate now this debasing, ultrademoralizing, un-American, and inhuman leprosy” (quotes from Roberts, 1983, 158-160; n.a. 1913, 123-24; and 62nd Congress, 3rd session, Congressional Record, January 30, 1913, 502-04).

Behind the scenes, agents of the Justice Department were feverishly compiling a case against Johnson for violating the White Slave Traffic Act (1910). That piece of Progressive legislation, popularly known as the Mann Act after its sponsor, prohibited the interstate transportation of women “for the purpose of prostitution or debauchery, or for any other immoral purposes.” It was clearly aimed at commercialized vice, not sexual relations between consenting adults. But its language was as broad as it was vague, leaving ample room for a creative interpretation of the law. To be sure, it could be used to harpoon a madam who was attempting to move some new recruits across country. But justice officials argued it could also be employed to criminalize any man who traveled across state lines with a female who was not his wife and incidentally engaged in sex. “Debauchery” and “immoral purposes” were like the legendary grandmother’s nightshirt that covered just about everything (Roberts, 1983).

Jack Johnson became the test case for the alternate interpretation of the Mann Act. In his line of work he traveled often, and he normally took along women. And almost as often he made love—or something close enough for government work—with them. The government’s hope to charge Johnson with a Mann Act violation with Lucille Cameron went up in smoke when she married the champion. But it was not difficult to find another companion of Johnson’s who was willing to support the government’s case. Belle Schreiber, a well-seasoned prostitute who had plied her trade in Chicago, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, and several other cities, stepped forward and asserted that she had gallivanting about the country with the champion and had sex with him many, many times. And in fact, she had (Ward, 2004).

Johnson was duly arrested, charged, tried, convicted, and sentenced. Judge George Carpenter noted that the boxer was “one of the best known men of his race” (quoted in Roberts, 1983, 179-80) and, therefore, in a manner of speaking, he decided to throw the book at him instead of just a fine, Carpenter ordered Johnson confined to prison for a year and a day and fined $1,000. Before the sentencing a Cleveland Daily News headline blared: “BLACK PUGILIST WILL BE MADE AN EXAMPLE” (quoted in Gilmore, 1975, 121). And he was. But what exactly was he an example of? Not of harming anyone, for he had harmed no one. Not of breaking the law, for he had broken no laws. What then? He had won the title, become
the emperor of masculinity, lived like the heavyweight champion of the world, and bedded and married white women. He had lived like a free man—and because he was black, he was now going to pay. The federal government, in its own way, had cut off his balls. It had symbolically lynched Jack Johnson.

W.E.B. Du Bois saw eye-to-eye with Johnson on very few matters, but he did understand the reason for the champion’s downfall. It was not just that Johnson “out sparred an Irishman,” or that he was unfaithful to his wife. “[W]e have yet to hear, in the case of white America, that marital troubles have disqualified prizefighters or ball players or even statesman.” No it was something deeper, an impulse almost primordial. It was the color of his skin, thought Du Bois. “It comes down, then, after all to this unforgivable blackness” (quoted in Ward, 2004, vii).

REFERENCES