On December 26, 1908 Jack Johnson defeated Tommy Burns to become the first African American heavyweight champion of the world. Even though Johnson was the obvious contender to fight Burns for the title, he was constantly denied his chance to fight because of his race. Johnson, who was affectionately known as Lil' Arthur, literally followed Burns around the world, taunting him at ringside until finally in Sydney, Australia Burns agreed to give Johnson his chance for the heavyweight championship.

Promoter Snowy Baker guaranteed Burns $30,000 to fight Johnson at Rushcutter's Bay, in Sydney. The sum of money Baker offered Burns to fight was the largest offered to any fighter up to that time. Johnson gave Burns a shellacking that day in Australia. Finally after fourteen rounds, the police stepped in and stopped the bout. From that day on Johnson became a wanted man, as promoter's world-wide looked for the "Great White Hope" to de-thrown the new black heavyweight champion of the world.

Jack Johnson's fight with Burns marked his sixty-seventh professional fight. Born in Galveston, Texas to a former slave on March 31, 1878, it marked a time in U.S. history when it was illegal for blacks to walk down the same side of the street as white people. All odds seemed to be stacked against Johnson. It was also a time when black athletes were forbidden to compete with white athletes.

Johnson had remarkable ring skills—he learned in part by fighting in "Battle Royals" in which several black men were thrown in a ring to fight with the last man standing declared the winner. Having gone unbeaten the first few years of his career, the first fight Johnson lost was a 3rd round knockout by west coast champion Joe, "The California Terror" Choynski. Since boxing was illegal at the time, both men were jailed. While in jail Choynski showed Johnson the finer points of boxing: ring stance, balance, combination punching and the art of feinting.

From that point on, Jack Johnson, now known as the "Galveston Giant," seemed unstoppable. Following his victory in Australia, the now legendary black heavyweight fought Victor McLaglen the movie actor, Philadelphia Jack O' Brien and Al Kaufman, winning each of those fights easily followed by a second round knockout of the legendary Bob Fitzsimmons. Than came the historic fight with middleweight champion Stanley Ketchel in Colma, California.

Before the fight a deal was agreed on by both fighters whereby there would be no knockdowns in the fight. At the start of round twelve, Ketchel saw an opening and landed a shot, dropping the unsuspecting heavyweight. Johnson, clearly angry about the incident, quickly jumped up and landed a left uppercut to the jaw of Ketchel, sending him to the canvas for the count.

Following that fight, promoters began searching the world for a Caucasian to de-thrown the black heavyweight. Johnson's escapades and marriages to white woman turned the public in this country against him. It wasn't long until Johnson was charged with violating the Mann Act—a law prohibiting black men from transporting white women across state lines. The

conviction landed Johnson in Leavenworth Prison for one year. Upon release from prison, Johnson decided to call Europe home and later South America. Promoters continued searching for a Caucasian fighter to stop Johnson's reign as the heavyweight champion.

It took a lot of persuading on the part of several friends, including the famous author Jack London, but retired former heavyweight champion Jim Jefferies was talked into returning to the ring to de-thrown heavyweight champion Jack Johnson.

Having been retired for six years, the undefeated former heavyweight champion had ballooned up in weight to 314 pounds. He clearly had his work cut out for him, but Jefferies stuck to a strict regiment of training and lost 110 pounds to get ready for the fight.

Jefferies even sparred with Joe Choynski in preparation for the fight. Choynski showed Jefferies some of the moves he used to knockout Johnson in three rounds and hold the undefeated Jefferies to a 20 round draw. Several people showed up right before the fight to help encourage Jefferies in his quest to de-thrown the heavyweight champ.

Well wishers included James J. Corbett and John L. Sullivan ending an eighteen year feud between Sullivan and Jefferies as they posed for pre-fight photos together.
Promoter Tex Rickard had an arena specially built for the occasion in Reno, Nevada. It was the first time in pugilistic history an arena was built specifically for a prize fight. The fight took place on July the 4th 1910 with more than an astounding 16,000 people in attendance. During the fight some 1500 die-hard fight fans crashed the gate to see the fight.

Unable to find a referee for the fight, Rickard even asked President William Taft to referee the fight. When Taft declined, Rickard took on the task of referee for the first time in his life.

Many rumors circulated throughout the crowd, among them were reports that a sniper was in the crowd and if Jefferies didn't take out the champ the sniper would.

As the 45 round fight began, the temperature in the ring was a suffocating 110 degrees.

Right before the fight Johnson was told Jefferies was too strong to hold or tie into a clinch. Johnson not only tied Jefferies up during the fight, he also pinned the former champion's arms behind his back to wear him down. The heat took its toll on both men. Finally in the 15th round Jefferies was knocked down for the first time in his career. By the third knockdown in the round, Rickard stopped the fight, with Johnson winning his second title defense.

Johnson made an astonishing $60,000 for the fight and a total of $120,000 with money from the filming of the fight. Jim Jefferies made $40,000 for the fight and an amazing $70,000 for signing with Rickard. Later the film of the fight was banned in the U.S., having caused race riots. 37 deaths were attributed to those riots.

The fight would mark the end of Jefferies boxing career for good.

Johnson went on to defend his title for a third time against Jim Flynn exactly two years later,

on July 4th, 1912. Jack Johnson won the fight with a 9th round knockout of Flynn, but his legal battles were far from over. Johnson was once again arrested, this time for violating the “White Slave Traffic Act.” He was convicted and sentenced the following year to a term of one year and one day in prison and ordered to pay a fine of $1000.

While he was still out on an appeal, Johnson fled the U.S. to live in Europe, South America and Mexico. Johnson managed to hold on to his championship with a title defense in Paris. Finally losing his title to Jess Willard in Havana, Johnson returned to the U.S. in 1920. Turning himself in to authorities, Johnson served out his time in prison and went on fighting exhibitions until retiring from boxing in 1945.