

## Ten-Count for Max Schmeling and Coley Wallace

Written by Robert Cassidy Jr.  
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Heavyweights Max Schmeling and Coley Wallace died within days of each other. At the times of their death, they were separated by an ocean. In life, the distance between them was even greater than the Atlantic.

One was a champion, the other a journeyman. One died a rich man, the other in modest surroundings. One was a nation's hero, the other a Hollywood footnote.

The common bond they shared was Joe Louis. Schmeling fought him and Wallace portrayed him on the big screen.

Wallace died in New York City on January 30 at the age of 77. Perhaps the biggest accomplishment of his career was beating Rocky Marciano in a Golden Gloves bout in 1948 at the Ridgewood Grove Arena. Marciano would never lose another fight.

Schmeling died in Germany on February 2 at the age of 99. He won the vacant heavyweight title on a foul when Jack Sharkey was disqualified for low blows in their 1930 bout at Yankee Stadium.

Although their careers did not overlap, they competed when the title of heavyweight champion was still the most prestigious in sports. Yet for all their strength and stature, these two heavyweights were victims, pawns manipulated by powerful men: Schmeling by Adolf Hitler and Wallace by the gangster Blinky Palermo.

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AT THE TIME of his death, Schmeling remained one of the most celebrated sports figures in Germany. As the news of his passing spread, German President Horst Koehler and heavyweight champion Vitali Klitschko, based in Hamburg, near Schmeling's home, issued statements to mark the passing of a champion.

When the news arrived in the United States, Franz Szuzina was heartbroken. The former middleweight contender was born in Bremen, Germany, and like most young Germans he idolized Schmeling.

"I saw him fight Walter Neusel," said Szuzina. "I was 16 or 17 and me and my friend from the gym took the train down to Hamburg and watched the fight. It was after the war. He lost that fight. Max was past his prime."

Szuzina, who is 74, beat Willi Besmanoff and Randy Sandy and lost a majority decision to Joey Giardello in a career that spanned 1950-61. He also beat Virgil Akins in 1957 and three fights later Akins won a version of the welterweight title. Szuzina left Germany to further his boxing career in 1956. The last time he saw Schmeling was during a boxing card at the Nassau

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Coliseum in the 1970s.

"I hadn't seen him for many years until that night," said Szuzina. "I was walking through the Coliseum - and all of a sudden there was Max Schmeling. He came over to me and said "Hey. What are you doing here?' That's the way he always was. He was very friendly."

By then, Schmeling was a rich man. He invested some of his ring earnings and purchased the rights to distribute Coca Cola to all of Germany.

"He never acted like he had money," said Szuzina. "He was down-to-earth. He was terrific. He never forgot where he came from."

Apparently, he never also forgot his opponents. Schmeling's generosity toward Joe Louis has been well documented. He reportedly sent Louis money over the years and paid for his funeral in 1981. With much less fanfare, he did the same for the great Mickey Walker, who he knocked out in 1932.

"When Mickey Walker was in my hospital, Schmeling sent me \$500 a month to take care of him," said Dr. Charlie Gellman, a one-time bootleg boxer who later became a hospital administrator. "He sent pajamas for Mickey Walker. He never forgot him. Max Schmeling was a gentleman."

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AT THE TIME of his death, Wallace was not hailed by politicians or dignitaries, but he was remembered fondly by the New York fight crowd. At the monthly meeting of Ring 8, New York's Veteran Boxers Association, Wallace was given an honorary 10-count salute by his pugilistic brethren.

"I saw him once or twice a month," said Tom Hoover, the former New York Knicks center who was active in Ring 8. "The thing that I will always remember about him was that infectious smile. He was a great human being."

Wallace was a longtime Ring 8 member, although his participation declined in recent years as his health worsened. Whenever he did attend a meeting, he usually sat with former middleweight Bill Tate and fellow heavyweights Keene Simmons and Doug Jones. A lineage of champions ran through their careers and the thread of great heavyweights united the men. Wallace fought Marciano and Ezzard Charles, Simmons fought Marciano, and Jones fought Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier. It was not often that you could find a group of men sitting together and two of them fought Marciano while the third fought Ali, but they were there, pleasant and polite and always ready to reminisce.

"Just the fact that you have these four beautiful people coming together at these meetings was one thing," said Hoover. "But you had these four guys and they fought everyone. That's something special."

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They said the cause of death for Wallace was heart failure. On the outside, he appeared to age gracefully. He was tall and regal and a sharp dresser until the end. In words and manners, he embodied class.

“He was a boxing gentleman, that’s the best way to describe him” said Tony Mazarrella, a longtime Ring 8 officer who attended Wallace’s wake. “He was such a nice man. I never knew him to really talk about himself. He didn’t brag. He didn’t walk around saying ‘I beat Marciano.’ He was a humble man.”

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THE CAREER OF Coley Wallace was one of broken promises. He never lived up to the expectations that came with two New York Golden Gloves titles and a win over Marciano.

“When we fought, Rocky was just a beginner,” he told the author in one of many conversations at Ring 8 over the years. “He was more like a street fighter. All he knew how to do was swing wild. He didn’t hit very hard then. I don’t think he hit me hard the entire fight. It wasn’t a tough fight for me at all. But even then you could tell he was tough and determined.”

Wallace lived in Harlem and when he turned pro he was supposed to be the next Joe Louis. He was tall and lean and shared the same mocha complexion as the Brown Bomber. He looked like Louis and shadowboxed like him, but unfortunately he couldn’t punch like him.

The similarities stopped short in the ring but they paid off when movie producers selected Wallace to play the title role in the 1953 film “The Joe Louis Story.” Many years later, in a clever nod toward boxing and film history, director Martin Scorsese cast Wallace in the role of Louis for the 1980 classic “Raging Bull.”

If Wallace encountered trouble maturing into the fighter some projected, he had little help from his manager Blinky Palermo.

Palermo was a Philadelphia-based gangster who was notorious for skimming purses, fixing fights and relying on intimidation as a means to an end. Palermo was a major figure in boxing when the sport was run by Organized Crime. Among the fighters he controlled were Wallace, Billy Fox, Gil Turner, world champions Ike Williams and Johnny Saxton, and later Sonny Liston.

“The fact that Coley got hooked up with a manager whose only concern was what he could get out of the fighter is a tragedy,” said Hoover. “But you also have to remember those times. I think Coley was just looking to fight and survive, so he did what he had to do.”

When Wallace was once asked about his relationship with Palermo, he responded emotionally. “I get angry when I think about Blinky Palermo,” he said. “He could have done better by me. He ruined boxing for me.”

Wallace said that Palermo robbed him of his entire purse from a September 1953 bout against Bill Gilliam and paid him just \$3,000 from a \$20,000 purse for a bout against Ezzard Charles

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three months later. He also always maintained that he was drugged in the Charles fight and that led to his 10th round stoppage.

But Wallace was not prone to bitterness. He rarely complained about his career. His only lament was that he never got a return match with Marciano in the pro ranks.

"I wish we could have fought as pros but we never did," he said. "I always wanted to fight him again. You could see he had potential even when we fought. Still, I wanted to fight him again because I always thought I could do the same thing again."

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THE CAREER OF Max Schmeling is identified simply by his fights against Joe Louis. The first was an upset victory by Max and the second was known as "The undercard to World War II." Yes, Schmeling defeated Jack Sharkey and Young Stribling and Mickey Walker, but his fights with Louis were classics.

Schmeling appeared to be nothing more than a steppingstone for Louis when he was summoned from Germany in 1936 to meet the future champion at Yankee Stadium. Schmeling was always dangerous with the right hand but came into the fight a 10-1 underdog. What the Louis camp underestimated was his ring intelligence. When Schmeling arrived for the bout, he announced to the New York press: "I zee something."

What Schmeling noticed was that Louis dropped his left hand after throwing a jab, the perfect opening for his right hand. The German banger exploited the mistake and stopped the previously unbeaten Louis in the 12th round.

In the two years that passed after the first fight, Louis had become heavyweight champion and Schmeling had become a propaganda tool for Nazi Germany. Adolf Hitler had risen to power and pointed to Schmeling's victory over Louis as proof of Aryan supremacy. Schmeling had become the party's poster boy. As the spring of 1938 turned to summer, Germany had already annexed Austria and began to consider moving on Czechoslovakia and Poland. As Hitler's empire grew, the United States inched closer toward World War II.

A few weeks before the rematch, Louis visited President Franklin Delano Roosevelt at the White House where the President of the free world told him, "Joe, we need muscles like yours to beat Germany." Meanwhile, as photos of Schmeling dining with Hitler circulated, protesters picketed the fighter's New York hotel, chanting, "Nazi, Nazi."

In his 1976 biography, Louis wrote, "I knew I had to get Schmeling good. I had my own personal reasons and the whole damned country was depending on me."

The rematch lasted 124 seconds but its outcome would endure forever. It remains one of the major sports events of the 20th century, not only because of what happened in the ring, but because of what Louis' victory represented. He knocked out the pride – at least symbolically – of Nazi Germany. It was a prelude to Armageddon.

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They came together on June 22, 1938 with 70,043 paying customers filing into Yankee Stadium. Millions more throughout the world heard the bout on radio. It was broadcast in four languages: English, German, Portuguese and Spanish.

At the opening bell, Louis forced Schmeling to the ropes. Suddenly a Louis right lifted Schmeling's right foot in the air and the German grabbed the top rope to steady himself. Schmeling extended only his left arm for protection. Louis then unloaded a barrage of punches, many landing against Schmeling's head. Schmeling turned away from the champion and a body shot seemed to leave him paralyzed.

With Schmeling pinned on the ropes, Louis launched a right hand that buckled his knees. Schmeling wobbled forward and another Louis right sent him down. The German gamely got to his feet but another Louis barrage dropped him again. Donovan had reached the count of five before Schmeling's corner threw in the towel.

It was over, but the fighting had really just begun.

Both men served in the military for their respective countries during World War II. At the age of 35, Schmeling was drafted into the German army as a paratrooper and was wounded in action in Crete in 1941. Louis, who spent four years in the U.S. Army during his career, did not see combat during the war. He often staged exhibitions for the troops and donated more than \$100,000 to the Army Relief Fund

In his autobiography, Schmeling wrote of his loss to Louis: "Every defeat has its good side. A victory over Joe Louis would perhaps have made me into the toast of the Third Reich."

Yet for many years Schmeling was considered a Nazi sympathizer. He was often criticized for not distancing himself from Hitler, even though he dangerously defied the Fuhrer by refusing to join the Nazi Party and by retaining the services of a Jewish-American manager, Joe Jacobs.

"Schmeling was not a Nazi. He was a good man," said Gellman. "His manager here was Joe Jacobs. When Hitler tried to get him a new manager, Schmeling refused. But sometimes Max had to sit back and take whatever was said or written about him because those were dangerous times."

In 1946, British military authorities cleared Schmeling of any complicity in war crimes.

Still, a cloud of suspicion hung over the former champion for decades. He wasn't allowed a visa back to the United States until 1954.

Then, in 1993, University of Rhode Island researchers finally dispelled the notion that Schmeling was a Nazi. Citing an interview from a Holocaust survivor, they produced evidence that Schmeling put himself at great risk by hiding two Jewish teenagers in his Berlin hotel room, protecting them during the infamous Kristallnacht, a pogrom where Nazis and their sympathizers set synagogues on fire.

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“Max Schmeling was never a Nazi,” said Szuzina. “If you got drafted then, during the time of Hitler, and you didn’t show up, then you disappeared. They’d show up at your front door and that was that. Hitler was a bastard. Remember Ali. He refused to be inducted into the Army. That didn’t happen in Germany.”

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Max Schmeling and Coley Wallace, a pair of heavyweights, died an ocean apart. After listening to the voices and reading the stories, it turns out that in death maybe they were more alike than their careers would suggest. They will be missed, not so much for what they did in the ring, but rather for how they carried themselves outside of it.