

## Joe Louis, A Great Boxer

Written by Frank Lotierzo  
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Joe Louis was a World War II patriot who donated two of his boxing purses to military relief funds. He lifted a nation when he declared, "The U.S. "will win the war because we're on God's side." In observance of Memorial Day I'm acknowledging him from a boxing vantage point in which he seldom is given his just due.

This past May 13th represented 95 years since the birth of Joe Louis. Louis was often referred to as the "Brown Bomber" during his 12 year reign as undisputed heavyweight champion. In March of 2005 the International Boxing Research Organization (IBRO) voted Louis the greatest heavyweight champion in history, an honor that's easily supported by his brilliant career and overall ability as a fighter.

Joe Louis is without question among the top five greatest punchers in heavyweight history, something that no fight aficionados need to be told. What separates Louis from other big punchers was his ability to consistently deliver his power with precision, accuracy and speed. What many fail to appreciate about Louis and often miss about him is, he was among the best "boxers" the division has ever seen. It can be said that Louis exploited the myth that if you're a puncher, you can't be a great boxer.

Fundamentally, Joe was utterly faultless and did everything letter perfect. If Louis's style isn't considered to be that of a boxer-puncher, then the term should be dropped from boxing lexicon. The fact is, Joe Louis was the consummate boxer-puncher. Think about what the phrase boxer-puncher suggest. I know when I hear it, I imagine a fighter who could win versus elite opposition via out-boxing them or by out-slugging and punching them. That's who Louis was.

One of the things that distorts the perception of Louis as a "boxer" was his picturesque knockouts when viewing films of his fights. Another factor that keeps Louis from garnering high praise for being the terrific "boxer" he was is that Muhammad Ali distorted the perception of what a boxer should look and fight like. No, Louis didn't use his legs and circle the ring up on his toes like Ali or Larry Holmes often did. He also didn't make the same fundamental Boxing 101 mistakes as either of them. Past greats Jack Johnson, Muhammad Ali and Larry Holmes boxed to keep their opponent away and off of them so they could score from outside. Louis boxed his way in to get close so he could take his opponent's head off and knock them out.

Louis's trainer Jack Blackburn molded him in the form of the "Old Master" Joe Gans, one of the greatest lightweight champions in boxing history. Blackburn embedded it into Joe's head that he could hit his opponent harder by drawing them into him instead of reaching for them. When I hear it mentioned that Louis had poor footwork, I think to myself that that thought comes from hearing Muhammad Ali say it repeatedly during the sixties and seventies, or a gap in knowledge on behalf of the party who believes it. Actually, Louis had perfect balance and was always in position to punch. There's an instance in his fight with Max Baer where Louis actually comes off his feet and misses with his left hook, then lands in perfect position and lands three consecutive left hooks to Max's chin.

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Louis was terrific at cutting the ring off. No, he couldn't do it like Joe Frazier, but he applied pressure in a subtle way that deliberately led his opponents into lunging at him and making mistakes. Over the years it's been repeatedly said that Billy Conn lost his first fight with Louis because he became cocky and tried to trade with the "Brown Bomber," looking to win by knockout. That's not completely true. The fact is Joe, who never came out of himself or changed his style, stepped it up versus Conn when he saw the fight was slipping away. It wasn't completely Conn's fault that he lost his head. Even an all-time great like Billy Conn was lured into purposely fighting Louis and it cost him the fight.

Regarding Louis being bothered by Conn's movement...that's a fair point. However, Conn's small stature and abundance of foot-speed was a big part of it. Even Ali would've been troubled and had a fit trying to catch a great fighter like Conn, who weighed 174 pounds. Like Ali, Louis was sometimes bothered by smaller and quick handed fighters. For this reason Ali had more trouble with Doug Jones and Jimmy Young than he did Sonny Liston and Earnie Shavers.

Joe Louis was a boxing textbook. If you want to see how it's supposed to be done right from A-Z, watch films of Louis, not Johnson, Ali or Holmes. Joe held his hands high with his elbows in while keeping his chin down. He wasted no movement or punches, but could throw every punch in the book perfectly with concussive power. Joe also mastered the art of keeping his opponents guessing as to what punch was coming next, something that can only be said about a handful of greats. His ability to pick off and parry punches, especially jabs, is overlooked. Louis was great at parrying his opponents jab and answering back with his as he inched his way in. Louis also employed various head and hand feints to create openings that weren't there, or to slip and counter his opponent off their miss.

Louis was so efficient and calculating that it was suicide to a degree to punch at or with him, and it escalated the probability of defeat by not throwing at him. He caused many of his opponents to reach, or over- commit themselves when he was right there in front of them (or so they thought) due to his upper body positioning and spacing. And forget about trying to bring the fight to him because that would expose a fighter to getting hit full force by Louis's blistering and deadly accurate combinations. Combination punching is what Louis did better than any heavyweight champion who has yet lived. Joe put five and six punches together with accuracy, power and speed unlike any heavyweight before or after him.

Due to his power and his knockout record, Louis's ability, boxing brains and boxing skill is missed and often overlooked. The brutality of his knockouts overshadows the set-up and delivery he employed in registering them. Louis was dangerous fighting outside and was deadly inside. Once he was inside he was a genius at tearing his opponents body up and causing them to lower their hands. Once he had an opponent hurt or in trouble, nobody finished them off and put them away like Joe Louis did. When he saw or sensed his man hurt or slightly incapacitated he was like a shark sensing blood in the water.

Not only was Joe Louis one of the top five greatest punchers in heavyweight history, he very well may have been one of the top five "boxers" too. Certainly no one combined the depth of boxing skill and punching ability as did Louis.