As we get older, some of us curmudgeons have a tendency to look back in time and come to the stubborn conclusion that the old times were the best of times. Forty or 50 years ago, we had better music, better movies, better cars and better politicians. Some of us old guys even think we had better fighters. Or at least fighters with better behavior.

Syndicated columnist Thomas Sowell thinks so. In a recent column, he took a hearty swing at today's athletes and their lack of class and sportsmanship. It was a clean, well-thrown punch, but I'm not sure it scored a knockout.

Sowell wrote that he had been watching old boxing matches on DVD and he noticed there wasn't a lot of trash talking going on between fighters. No one made obscene gestures or strutted in front of his opponent shaking his fist in the air. No one rode an elephant on his way into the ring.

What he noticed was that boxers from the early '30s into the '50s all wore regulation boxing trunks, were tattoo free and they did very little showboating. No clown outfits or free advertising on the seat of their trunks.

Of course, one of the fighters he was watching was Joe Louis, which makes his findings a little suspect. It's hard to get an objective view of the dark ages when you start with a guy like Louis. Next to the Brown Bomber, Miss Manners was a hooligan.

The thing about Louis is, he used to knock guys out, then reach down and help them back to their feet. He'd dust off their trunks, ask if they were all right and then inquire how their family was. Louis wasn't just a great fighter, he was a great guy.

Someone once called Louis a "credit to his race." Sportswriter Jimmy Cannon overheard the guy and set him straight. "Yeah," Cannon said. "Louis is a credit to his race -- the human race."

Along with Louis, Sowell also pointed out the class shown by former heavyweight champ Max Schmeling, who, despite being from Germany and fighting during the rise of the Nazi regime, helped Louis to his feet after knocking him down in their first fight in 1936.

In their rematch two years later in front of a crowd of 80,000 at Yankee Stadium, Schmeling walked over to Louis' corner to shake his hand before the opening bell. Tell me that didn't raise a little ruckus back in the Fatherland.

Of course, Louis stopped Schmeling in the first round of their rematch. Being a good sport doesn't mean you know how to slip a punch.

Louis and Schmeling were the best of the class back then, the cover boys for sportsmanship. But not everyone followed their lead.

Sowell might want to slip in a DVD of Jake LaMotta at work. Or just watch a tape of the movie "Raging Bull." LaMotta wore regulation trunks, didn't have a lot of tattoos, and did about as much showboating as a hit man. He didn't knock you down, then help you up and ask you how your family was. He'd just knock you down again. He was a mean, tough SOB who wasn't worried about showing class or being polite.

That said, I agree with a lot of what Sowell writes. There was a simplicity about the fight game back then. Fighters usually wore black or white trunks, they seldom taunted their opponent, and they won or lost fights with a certain grace.

Sowell writes: "The Loutish, loudmouth and childish displays that have become all too common today in boxing, as well as in other sports, began in the 1960s, like so many other signs of degeneration."

I'm not sure it's all that bad. Sometimes, it's important to remind ourselves that every generation has good times and bad times, good guys and bad guys. The '50s didn't have a monopoly on good behavior in or out of the ring.

Today, while strutting seems to have replaced walking in the fight game, there are still a lot of fighters out there with the kind of class and sportsmanship Sowell is writing about.

You can start again with the heavyweight division. Say what you want about their abilities, heavyweight champs Vitali and Vladimir Klitschko have always shown sportsmanship inside and outside the ring.

You seldom hear Kelly Pavlik call anyone names. Manny Pacquiao doesn't trash talk.

If Sowell has the time, he should watch some of our more recent fights. Instead of Louis and Schmeling, he should look for the names Micky Ward and Arturo Gatti.

He might be pleasantly surprised.