

The Fight That Made Havana Famous

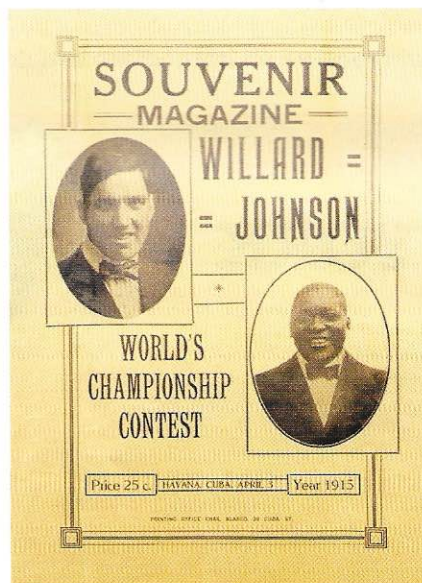
JACK JOHNSON DOMINATED FOES IN THE RING, STIRRED UP TROUBLE OUTSIDE IT AND BROUGHT THE WORLD TO CUBA • BY F. DANIEL SOMRACK

One hundred years ago, the baddest man on the planet was Jack Johnson. And for a fleeting moment in April of 1915, he would make Havana, Cuba, the center of the sports world.

Not only was Johnson the reigning world heavyweight-boxing champion, but as the first African-American to hold that title he was also a perceived threat to much of white America. Such was the enmity for this man that when it was announced he would defend his crown against Jess Willard, the last of the “Great White Hopes” on the island nation 90 miles south of Key West, the boxing world came to him. Just as Muhammad Ali brought global attention to Kinshasa, Zaire (the Rumble in the Jungle), and Manila, Philippines (the Thrilla in Manila) Jack Johnson drew legions of fight fans, sportswriters and celebrities to an unlikely venue with his own irresistible personal drama and brash charisma.

Johnson had been living on the lam in Paris, a fugitive from U.S. justice. Convicted in 1913 of violating the Mann Act, he had jumped bail and fled to Paris via Montreal in June, where he depleted his fortune on wine, women and a luxurious lifestyle. Desperate for cash, he accepted an offer from promoter Jack Curly for \$30,000 to fight another “White Hope.” If Curly could guarantee the money and arrange the contest close enough to the U.S. to attract ticket buyers, they had a deal. Mexico was an option, but Johnson feared kidnapping by Texas Rangers. Havana was settled on.

Johnson arrived in Havana in December 1914 with his beautiful caucasian wife, Lucille Cameron, at the height of the Jim Crow era. Defiant



of racial stereotyping, Johnson said, “I have the right to choose who my mate should be.” As Muhammad Ali said, “Back...when you got lynched for looking at a white woman, he married a white woman.”

The champion fell in love with Cuba. A South American tour had exposed him to Spanish culture, as well as his lifelong passion for cigars. Driving through the city in a sports car, wearing goggles and auto duster, he preferred an easily manageable corona size stogie. In the cafés, he enjoyed a figurado.

Johnson strolled the Prado, hand-in-hand with the stylish Lucille, every bit the “Gibson girl,” one of the emancipated women of the Edwardian age. Complementing her dapper husband, she dressed in the latest fashions, brilliantly colored silk dresses over tight corsets, her hair worn high in a pompadour.

Jack traveled the world with as many as 14 trunks of tailored clothes. His Havana attire was an ensemble of beige or bleached white three-piece suits, cotton shirts with winged collars, silk neckties and a Stetson or white panama hat. Strolling in two-toned spats or patent-leather oxfords, swinging his black walking stick with its silver head, waving at fans, Johnson had come a long way.

Born John “Jack” Arthur Johnson in Galveston, Texas, March 31, 1878, he was the child of emancipated slaves. He left school after five years to work as a laborer. Nicknamed the “Galveston Giant,” he started boxing at 13 and recorded his first professional fight in 1897. He won the World Colored Heavyweight Championship February 5, 1903.

After defeating all comers, Johnson was the next logical opponent for the heavyweight title and issued a public challenge to world champion James