



The world came to Havana in April of 1915 to see Jack Johnson, the first African-American heavyweight champion, defend his title against the “Great White Hope,” Jess Willard. As Johnson was a fugitive from American justice, the match was held offshore. A souvenir program (opposite page) touted the event.

Jeffries. Like John L. Sullivan before him, Jeffries refused to defend against black opponents. When champion Jeffries retired in 1904, Marvin Hart, then Tommy Burns succeeded him. Burns “drew the color line” as well, but Jack would not be denied. He taunted Burns in the press until finally the flamboyant Australian promoter, Hugh “Huge Deal” Macintosh offered Burns a stunning \$30,000 to clash with him.

Johnson’s date with destiny came on December 26, 1908 outside Sydney, Australia. At six-foot-two, Johnson was five inches taller than Burns, and 24 pounds heavier. Overwhelmed and outclassed by the stronger, faster Johnson, Burns was knocked down in the first two rounds but survived until the police intervened in the 14th round to save his life. Celebrity writer Jack London, reporting from ringside for *The New York Herald*, issued this racist decree: “But one thing now remains,” wrote London. “Jim Jeffries must emerge from his alfalfa farm and remove the golden smile from Jack Johnson’s face. Jeff, it’s up to you,” he implored. “The white race must be rescued.”

The search was on for “The Great White Hope.” It took the unprecedented sum of \$101,000 and a piece of the film rights to lure Jeffries off his California farm. The two met in “The Fight of the Century” in a specially built stadium in the pioneer town of Reno, Nevada on July 4, 1908.

In scorching, 110-degree heat, 16,528 fans jammed the arena to watch the 35-year-old ex-champion suffer the first defeat of his career. Even while drained down to a fit 227-pounds from 300, Jeffries lacked the speed to catch the champion with any of his bone-crushing punches. Johnson, with one of the best uppercuts in the game, was able to land at will. By round 15,

Johnson moved in for the kill. He staggered Jeffries with an uppercut, and a flurry of left hooks put Jeffries down for the first time in his career.

The ex-champ rose, but was knocked through the ropes and then decked again. His corner threw in the towel. Jeffries later conceded to a reporter, “I couldn’t have beat Johnson at my best.”

Johnson returned to Chicago with \$120,000 (a fortune at the time). He opened a black-and-tan saloon and wine bar called Café de Champion. He was seen there nightly with different women, smoking cigars and sipping Champagne. But the champion’s personal life started to unravel.

In September, his first wife, Etta Duryea, committed suicide. Then an affair with a singer brought a \$25,000 alienation-of-affection suit from her husband. Next the city closed the Café de Champion, declaring Johnson an “undesirable person and of bad character.” In October 1912, Johnson was arrested under the Mann Act for transporting a 19-year prostitute, Lucille Cameron, across state lines for sex. When Cameron married Jack to avoid testifying, it touched off a wave of racial hatred and bigotry.

Within weeks, he was indicated for the same offense. Belle Schreiber, who had traveled with Johnson several years earlier, cooperated with prosecutors. In May 1913, it took an all-white Chicago jury less than two hours to find Johnson guilty on all counts, even while the violation had happened before the Mann Act was instituted. He was given the maximum sentence of a year in federal prison. While on appeal, he fled and spent the next seven years bouncing around Europe and elsewhere.

When Jack Curly met Johnson, the champ was in need of the big payday and only a legitimate challenger could guarantee. They found him