



A proud, outspoken black man of the Jim Crow era, Johnson was a lightning rod for racial hatred as he (counterclockwise from left), indulged in fine clothes and cigars, sped in race cars, cut a defiant figure, and in a time when, as Muhammad Ali said, “you got lynched for looking at a white woman,” he married one.

in Jess Willard. Born in Pottawatomie County, Kansas, he worked as a horse wrangler before his boxing career. Called the “Pottawatomie Giant,” Jess stood six-feet-six, weighed 250-pounds and had an 84-inch reach. His contract was \$5,000 and a third of the motion-picture rights but, as Curly pointed out, his earning potential was unlimited should he win the fight, scheduled for 45 rounds.

When the fight neared, *Chicago Tribune* called Havana the “Mecca” of the sporting world. “Celebrities of the ring, racetrack and every branch of the sporting world [are] here.” Despite gale conditions intrepid fight fans continued to sail down from Key West. American papers dished up gossip to an eager public: The champ’s apartment had breezes, beautiful furnishings and a good view; the challenger stayed in a suite of rooms in Havana’s best hotel; Johnson announced he had bet \$10,000 on himself, while Cuba’s president denied making a wager. Only two days before the fight, Johnson held an exhibition bout. The next day he would throw out the first ball at an exhibition baseball game, take in a bull-tossing demonstration and dine on three chickens at lunch, amid rumors that his weight was ballooning. Through it all, “wine flowed like water and prices soared skyward.” One correspondent gushed that Cuba was “fight mad.”

The venue was the recently opened Oriental Park Racetrack, six miles from the city in Mariano. The park was a horse-racing facility that Meyer Lansky would later control. At 12-noon, the president, General Mario García Menocal, arrived and was given 14-karat-gold tickets. Seated near his shaded box was the governor of Havana, Pedro Bustillo, who had declared the day of the fight an officially recognized holiday.

By the time the 37-year-old champion entered the stadium, it was 103 degrees. He was greeted with thunderous applause from the crowd as he navigated a sea of bobbing white hats to the prize ring built directly on the track. He was wearing a heavy, embroidered robe over beltless, blue trunks.

When Willard came into view, 32,000 spectators rose to their feet and waved small white flags to show their racial support. The Kansas cowboy was wearing a heavy red sweater and black sombrero over dark blue trunks with an American flag belt. The announcer introduced the fighters with a bullhorn, and then they were weighed in the ring. Willard was a lean 238 and Johnson, a paunchy—for his height—225.

The opening bell sounded at 1 o’clock, and the early rounds favored Johnson, whose superior speed, punching power and fluid movement made Willard look awkward and clumsy. When Willard