

# Good Sportsmanship

by Donald DeMarco



Courtesy of Pugilistica.com Boxing Memorabilia

Max Schmeling vs. Joe Louis, 1938

“HeartBeats” is a regular column on the virtues by popular *Lay Witness* contributor Donald DeMarco. Dr. DeMarco is professor emeritus of philosophy at St. Jerome’s University in Waterloo, Ontario. He also teaches at Holy Apostles College and Seminary in Cromwell, Connecticut, and continues to work as a corresponding member of the Pontifical Academy for Life.

His newest book, *Architects of the Culture of Death* was released in April 2004. He is also the author of *The Many Faces of Virtue*, which is a collection of favorite “Heartbeats” columns.

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We are all aware of the fact that media images and reality do not always coincide. In fact, the image that the media presents to us can be the polar opposite of the reality it replaces. Consumers of media culture are easily duped into believing that the image, fascinating and arousing as it can be, *is* reality. “We are haunted,” writes historian Daniel J. Boorstin, in his celebrated study, *The Image*, “not by reality, but by those images we have put in place of reality.”

In the world of sports, we would be hard-pressed to find an image of an athlete that is more at variance with his reality as a human being than the one concocted by the media for the German boxer Max Schmeling. The image was that of a Nazi tyrant; the reality was someone who personified the virtue of good sportsmanship as well as anyone who ever played professional sports.

When Schmeling, a 10-1 underdog at the time, knocked out American Joe Louis on June 19, 1936, in the 12th round, the Nazi propaganda machine hailed him as a symbol of Aryan supremacy. By the time of the rematch two years later on June 22, when the Second World War was clearly looming on the horizon, Americans themselves had come to accept the fictitious image that the Nazis had fabricated.

The fight, in which Louis demolished Schmeling in the first round,

was billed as a titanic struggle between good and evil. According to American pre-fight publicity, Schmeling was the Nazi warrior, Louis, the defender of American ideals. It was one of the most politically charged and highly publicized sporting events ever staged. President Franklin D. Roosevelt had summoned Louis to the White House prior to the fight to exhort him to defeat Schmeling.

When Louis knocked Schmeling to the canvas for the first time in round one, Adolf Hitler ordered the broadcast of the fight to Germany to be cut off. He took the defeat as an embarrassment to his country, just as he had when Jesse Owens won four gold medals in the 1936 Summer Olympiad in Berlin.

Reflecting on his defeat, Schmeling stated in a 1975 interview, “Looking back, I’m almost happy I lost that fight. Just imagine if I would have come back to Germany with a victory. I had nothing to do with the Nazis, but they would have given me a medal. After the war, I might have been considered a war criminal.”

Indeed, Schmeling was not a Nazi. He staunchly refused to join the Nazi party, an act of defiance that angered Hitler, who responded by drafting him into the paratroopers and sending him on a suicide mission. Schmeling was severely wounded during the mission and hospitalized for months before he recovered. He also refused the man-

date to divorce his Czech wife, Ondra, and discharge his Jewish-American manager, Joe Jacobs.

But it was in his relationship with the man who had sent him to the canvas four times and knocked him out in two minutes and four seconds of the first round that he showed how exceptional a sportsman he was. He befriended his conqueror. And when he learned that Joe Louis was down and out financially, he sent him gifts of money and paid his medical bills. When Louis died in 1981, Schmeling paid for the funeral and served as one of the pallbearers.

In 1989, Henry Lewin, owner of the Sands Hotel in Las Vegas, invited Max Schmeling to a party in the former heavyweight champion's honor. During the festivities, Lewin showed some of Schmeling's old fights, concluding with his 1936 victory over Joe Louis. "To be fair," Schmeling objected mildly, "I think we should now see the one that I lost."

Lewin then made a revelation that none of the attendees will ever forget. In case anyone present was wondering

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why Lewin, a German Jew who had lost most of his family in the Holocaust, had been a lifelong friend of a man reputed to be a Nazi, Lewin provided his dramatic and unforgettable explanation. "I have never told this before," said Lewin, "but on *Kristallnacht*, when they [the Nazis] came for the Jews, I was hidden in Max Schmeling's house for seven days, until I could leave the country."

Schmeling had hidden both Henry and his brother Werner Lewin at great risk to himself. Yet Schmeling had never publicly revealed this courageous act. He had also extracted from Hitler a promise that all U.S. athletes who performed in the Berlin Olympics in 1936 would be protected.

After his boxing career ended, Schmeling made a considerable amount of money from a Coca-Cola

franchise that he had purchased. He established the Max Schmeling Foundation and gave away hundreds of thousands of dollars to help the elderly and the poor. In 1993, he confessed his one anxiety: "I don't want anyone to say I was a good athlete, but worth nothing as a human being—I couldn't bear that."

Schmeling passed away on February 2, 2005, at his home in Hollenstadt, Germany, seven months shy of achieving the century mark. He was a great athlete, a good sportsman, and a generous humanitarian. Of him, these words of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow could be justly applied:

So when a great man dies,  
For years beyond our ken,  
The light he leaves behind him lies  
Upon the paths of men. ■

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