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Journal of Sport History, Volume 39, Number 1, Spring 2012, pp. 63-80 (Article)

Published by University of Illinois Press



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Harry Wills and the Image of the Black Boxer from Jack Johnson to Joe Louis

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The African-American press created images of Harry Wills that were intended to restore the image of the black boxer after Jack Johnson and to use these positive representations as effective tools in the fight against inequality. Newspapers highlighted Wills's moral character in contrast to Johnson's questionable reputation. Articles, editorials, and cartoons presented Wills as a representative of all Americans regardless of race and appealed to notions of sportsmanship based on equal opportunity in support of the fighter's efforts to gain a chance at the title. The representations also characterized Wills as a race man whose struggle against boxing's color line was connected to the larger challenges facing all African Americans. The linking of a sports figure to the broader cause of civil rights would only intensify during the 1930s as figures such as Joe Louis became even more effective weapons in the fight against Jim Crow segregation.

[†]The author is grateful to Jennifer Fronc, John Higginson, and Christopher Rivers for their thoughtful comments on various drafts of this essay. He also wishes to thank Steven A. Riess, Lew Erenberg, and Jerry Gems who contributed to a North American Society for Sport History (NASSH) conference panel where much of this material was first presented. Correspondence to bunk@history.umass.edu.

IN WHAT WAS PROBABLY THE MOST IMPORTANT mixed race heavyweight bout since Jim Jeffries met Jack Johnson, Luis Firpo and Harry Wills fought on September 11, 1924, at Boyle's Thirty Acres in Jersey City, New Jersey.¹ Despite the potential attraction of the fight, the match never lived up to the advanced billing in part because Firpo came into it overweight and out of shape, with some commentators pointing out the roll of fat spilling over his trunks. The crowd saw only one knockdown, of Firpo in the second round, and the fight degenerated into a clutch and grab session. Wills eventually captured the newspaper decision after twelve desultory rounds. Nevertheless, the *Pittsburgh Courier* hailed the win, declaring that Wills "slipped a ring through the Wild Bull's nose and led him into the barn of hard blows like a fat and elderly cow."²

Wills's victory over Firpo was perhaps the crowning achievement of his long career. He was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1889 and after working as a longshoreman had his first professional fight in 1910. Although much of his time in the ring was spent battling other top African-American fighters including Joe Jeannette, Sam McVea, and Sam Langford, a 1920 victory over Fred Fulton made Wills one of the top contenders for the heavyweight championship then held by Jack Dempsey.³ The defeat of Firpo appeared to be an important milestone in challenging the color line that had prevented black boxers from competing for the heavyweight championship, and many believed that Wills would now be given a shot at the title. For years he doggedly pursued a championship bout and repeatedly sought remedy in the legal system, but ultimately Wills failed in his quest to fight for the crown.⁴ The persistence of the color line throughout his career may be one reason that Wills has primarily been defined by his quixotic pursuit of Dempsey and later Gene Tunney. During the 1920s, however, when Wills had his greatest success, he was the most prominent black fighter in the sport's most prestigious weight class and was considered the leading contender for much of the period.⁵ He was undoubtedly one of the most popular and famous African-American athletes at the time when sports began to play an increasingly important role in American popular culture both black and white. The African-American press created images of Harry Wills that were intended to restore the image of the black boxer and to use these positive representations as effective tools in the fight against inequality.

Newspapers recast the image of the black fighter by highlighting Wills's moral character in contrast to former champion Jack Johnson's questionable reputation.⁶ Articles, editorials, and cartoons presented Wills as a representative of all Americans regardless of race and appealed to notions of sportsmanship based on equal opportunity in support of the fighter's efforts to gain a chance at the title. The imagery characterized Wills as a race man and linked his struggle against boxing's color line to the larger challenges facing all African Americans. By doing so the press constructed an image of the black boxer that stood for Americans of all races: dedicated, moral individuals who asked only that the nation live up to its ideals and provide all citizens with the opportunities earned by their skill and hard work. The decision of the press to use sports stars as a means of highlighting black achievement while at the same time battling social inequality would be employed to even greater effect in the 1930s during the rise of Joe Louis and other athletic idols such as Jesse Owens.⁷

Restoring the Image of the Black Boxer

During his reign as world champion Jack Johnson was a controversial figure who invoked mixed feelings among both the public and the press. Johnson's athletic achievements seemed to offer the possibility that his success would inevitably benefit all African Americans. The boxer's activities outside the ring, however, led many to doubt his suitability as a race hero. When Johnson's trial and eventual conviction under the Mann Act highlighted his moral failings and his penchant for sex, alcohol, and gambling he ceased to bring hope and instead became "a heavy burden to the race."⁸ After 1920 the African-American papers used Wills's success to contrast his image as a virtuous man and successful fighter with the debauched life of Johnson and to present Wills as the personification of American values.

Cartoonist and sportswriter Ted Carrol's drawing "Wills vs. Firpo" from the *Pittsburgh Courier* showed realistic depictions of the two fighters along with Bill Tate, Firpo's African-American sparring partner. One small section also showed a tall black man identified as "prominent colored citizen" Jack Johnson dressed in a gaudy suit and carrying a cane. He speaks in the stereotyped "Sambo" dialect traditionally used to represent African-American speech—"I c'n lick 'em both."⁹ The contrast between a respectable black fighter like Wills and the disreputable Johnson with his flamboyant clothes and loud boasts could not be clearer. Other writers also sought to distance Wills from the legacy of Johnson stating that all black boxers should not be judged "by the conduct of one lone illiterate, ignorant and egotistical fighter."¹⁰

The 1920s witnessed the enormous growth of the black press, especially in terms of circulation. Several publications, including the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*, developed substantial national audiences. By one estimate the *Defender* alone had a circulation of around 230,000 in 1920, and it has been claimed that each copy of the paper was read by as many as five people.¹¹ Coverage of sports in the black press, especially boxing, baseball, and football, grew rapidly during the period. From its founding in 1910, the *Pittsburgh Courier* had reported on athletics and supported black fighters, but as late as 1920 it had no regular sports section. Within a few years, however, the sports page grew until it often comprised up to 40 percent of each issue.¹² The widespread distribution of popular newspapers and the founding of a syndicate service called the Associated Negro Press meant that for the first time "it was possible for blacks to conduct a national debate regarding their emerging celebrities."¹³ Sporting figures quickly became a part of this dialogue as the editors of the major black newspapers seized on Wills as a potential vehicle for promoting racial uplift while also selling papers.

Reporters and columnists showed that Wills would be a worthy champion because of his skills within the squared circle and because of his commendable life outside the ring. Wills's triumph over Firpo demonstrated that he had the physical abilities to match up with some of the sport's toughest competitors. Equally, if not more important, the black press employed his victory to show that Wills had the moral character needed to become a point of pride for Americans of all races.

When Wills fought Firpo, one of the recurring subjects of newspaper coverage was an emphasis on Wills's modest lifestyle and happy marriage to an African-American woman.¹⁴

Wills was constantly praised for his “clean life [and] gentlemanly conduct both in and out of the ring.” One story declared, in what seemed to be a direct repudiation of Johnson, that Wills was a “clean liver” who “doesn’t drink or dissipate and is a great lover of home life.”¹⁵ Newspapers often featured stories describing the integral role that Sarah Wills played in her husband’s preparations for the fight. She did everything from collecting entry fees at his training sessions to keeping him calm.¹⁶ Unlike most of the women in Johnson’s life who were associated with nightclubs and brothels, the articles about Mrs. Wills depicted her completing a domestic role and represented the couple as an ideal marital unit. One story from the *Baltimore Afro-American* called her a vital part of Wills’s training team since she cooked his meals and generally took care of him “with frank and motherly care.” Other accounts, such as a 1924 article in the *Chicago Defender*, described the family-like atmosphere of Wills’s training camp and characterized his wife as a bright woman who could intelligently discuss a wide variety of historical subjects.¹⁷ The descriptions presented Wills as a dedicated and responsible family man whose lifestyle contrasted sharply, not only to the actions of former champion Johnson, but also to current titleholder Jack Dempsey whose personal life was filled with salacious rumor and gossip.

After his loss to Spanish heavyweight Paulino Uzcudun in July of 1927 Wills was no longer considered a serious contender for the heavyweight crown. Nevertheless, the black press continued to celebrate his career. The sportswriters and columnists praised Wills for elevating the social and cultural standing of African-American boxers. According to many writers, Wills helped undo the damage that Johnson had inflicted on the reputations of black fighters. W. Rollo Wilson of the *Pittsburgh Courier* wrote that it was Wills’s “respectability” that helped salvage the image of African-American boxers.¹⁸ Another article that ran in several newspapers declared that Wills never had as much talent as Johnson but was a great fighter nonetheless. He had strength and courage but above all it was his “PERSONAL CHARACTER” that helped make him a credit to his race. The essay continued by positively comparing Wills to all other fighters regardless of race, “no man of his profession, black or white, who was or is as clean and manly, as sober and sane a citizen, as is Harry Wills.”¹⁹

The press also drew attention to Wills’s financial successes and his determination to invest his earnings rather than wasting them on disreputable pursuits. A cartoon published in the *Baltimore Afro-American* entitled “Fighters Who Have Earned and Spent a Fortune” included images of Johnson and other boxers who had squandered their money. The artist drew Wills into the cartoon but only to note that he was poised to earn over \$250,000 for his fight with Firpo and a presumed future match-up with Dempsey.²⁰ Later, even as Wills was no longer a factor in the heavyweight title chase, the press continued to report on his financial transactions. Nearly all the major black newspapers ran stories documenting his purchase of an apartment building on St. Nicholas Place near the Polo Grounds in New York City for \$150,000. The acquisition of the property expanded Wills’s real estate holdings that reportedly included two homes in New York and a large farm in Petersberg, Virginia. One of the New York residences was part of the famous Strivers Row section of Harlem, home to many well-known African Americans.²¹

For the most part the portrait of Wills as a family man and property owner reproduced traditional visions of masculinity and contrasted sharply with the image of Jack

Johnson. Nevertheless, other descriptions reflected shifting visions of manliness and presented Wills as more than just a conservative reaction to the excesses of previous fighters. Depictions of Wills anticipated developing notions of contemporary masculinity by showing him as a moneyed consumer of modern products. Unlike Johnson, however, Wills's consumption took place within the confines of traditional domestic stability.²²

Black newspapers recognized the value and popularity of athletic heroes like Wills much earlier than prominent magazines such as the *Crisis* and *Opportunity*. The *Crisis* published its first sports item only in 1929, and Jesse Owens became the first athlete to grace its cover in 1936. In contrast, the results of the Wills-Fulton fight had been featured on the front page of the *New York Age* in July of 1920.²³ Although it lasted only just over one year, *Competitor* was an African-American magazine that promoted a modern vision of consumer manhood similar to mainstream white publications like *Athletic World* and *Sportlife*.²⁴ Published by *Pittsburgh Courier* owner Robert L. Vann, *Competitor* ran several stories on Wills and each time described him in terms reflective of the changing cultural norms. Several articles praised the boxer for his strength and power, his ring savvy and his "educated left hand." The authors of these stories felt Dempsey had faced little quality opposition and had shown few skills beyond an ability to rush forward and punch with power. Wills, they argued, would represent a true test for the champion, and they wondered how Dempsey would fair in "a battle of brain and science."²⁵ Newspaper stories also praised Wills's physical appearance in positive terms by referring to his "beautifully sinewy arms" and describing him as "a young colored man, a splendid athlete, a giant in physique, industrious and clean-living."²⁶ Such terms often became a part of the descriptions later used to characterize Louis.

The imagery of Wills reflected developing notions of masculinity and paralleled the treatment of athletes in mainstream white periodicals of the same period. At least one advertisement in *Competitor* also mirrored those in white magazines. Advertisements for "Nuga-Tone" appeared in the August/September and October 1920 issues of the magazine. The product featured a muscled man of indeterminate race and promised to build "rich red blood, strong, steady nerves, [and] vigorous men and women" in only twenty days or money would be refunded. Black periodicals experienced great difficulties convincing national corporations to purchase advertising space in their pages, and the lack of mainstream advertising also limited the opportunities for a popular figure like Wills to represent products on a national scale. Nevertheless, a New York store called Morris' Music Shop employed Wills to help sell radios and phonographs through the pages of the *New York Amsterdam News*. The advertisement copy presented Wills as the ideal image of the modern male consumer: "The BRUNSWICK RADIOLA we recently purchased from the Morris music Shop is giving us a great deal of pleasure. We regret that we could not take it along with us to Paris." It also reinforced the image of domestic tranquility associated with the boxer since the accompanying photograph showed Sarah and Harry Wills enjoying the radio in what was presumably their own tastefully appointed sitting room. Newspaper depictions of Wills's consumption of high status modern products such as automobiles and international travel distanced him from Johnson who was known as a reckless driver and whose later travels were done primarily to avoid jail time.²⁷

When Wills and his spouse visited Europe in 1925 the *Baltimore Afro-American* published a photograph of them in fine travelling clothes waving goodbye from the deck of the ship and later ran an image of the couple at a resort in Carlsbad, Germany. The advertisement and the newspaper stories showed Wills as a financially secure consumer with modern tastes and interests who enjoyed contemporary products and pastimes within an appropriately domestic setting. Wills's story even became the subject of modern popular music when well-known jazz bandleader Perry Bradford recorded a song protesting Gene Tunney's refusal to fight Wills titled, "Harry, Though They Draw the Color Line, You're the Champion Just the Same."²⁸ The selection of a boxer to represent the affluent and modern lifestyle that African-American consumers should aspire to demonstrated his social and cultural standing. The techniques replicated developing social norms as admen generally aimed to represent a lifestyle that was "a step up" from readers. The imagery gave consumers a way to evaluate their own social status relative to the ideal lifestyles depicted in the advertisements and to mark their own advancement.²⁹ It also demonstrated that successful and wealthy black athletes could and did consume products according to middle-class ideals and not simply as hedonistic pleasure seekers like Johnson.

Fighting for the Nation and the Race

During World War I most periodicals followed a largely patriotic line, although the government warned some papers, including the *Chicago Defender* and *Baltimore Afro-American*, not to publish unpatriotic materials.³⁰ Following the end of the conflict, most continued a moderate tone, vigorously defending blacks but avoiding support for the most radical political solutions. While many papers including the *Pittsburgh Courier* opposed the violent actions of 1919, the *Chicago Defender* initially supported rioters within its home city. The *Defender's* editor Robert Abbott soon realized that such support jeopardized the paper's existence and quickly reversed course by urging calm. The newspaper faced severe rebuke from a commission formed to investigate the events, even though Abbott himself was one of the group's members. By 1921, the paper's stories became less focused on violence and crime and instead promoted stories of black achievement.³¹ In keeping with the political views and the broader goals of the editors, the black press used the success of Wills to promote the notion that African Americans deserved the same opportunities as other citizens.³² Newspaper representations of Wills distanced racial protest from political radicalism by arguing that the solution to the country's racial problems was not socio-economic revolution but equal opportunity. The stories presented him, in contrast to the internationalism attached to political radicalism, as a patriotic symbol of the entire nation rather than just the race.

In *Spectres of 1919*, literary scholar Barbara Foley notes that the cultural orientation of many African-American periodicals like the *Messenger* shifted during the 1920s from a politically radical tone to "one that eschewed anticapitalist critique while promoting racial pride, on the one hand, and American nationalism, on the other."³³ It was particularly important for black Americans to distinguish themselves from the waves of European immigrants who had arrived in the country, often from racially undesirable areas such as Southern and Eastern Europe. Writers such as James Weldon Johnson sometimes rejected the term "African-American" preferring "Aframerican" instead. For many Americans, both

black and white, hyphenated terms had become negatively associated with immigrants. All such efforts seemed part of a broader strategy aimed at using shared citizenship to promote racial equality.³⁴ In this context fights against foreign opponents like Firpo emerged as prime opportunities for the black press to emphasize the “American-ness” of black boxers while also demanding they be given the same opportunities as white boxers.

Once the outcome of the Firpo-Wills fight had been decided, the black press framed the contest as the victory of an American over a foreigner. By concentrating on his nationality rather than his race, the press hoped to generate support for an “all American” title fight between Dempsey and Wills. Such feeling had begun to multiply in light of the success of foreign heavyweights including Firpo, Frenchman Georges Carpentier, and a number of others. A front-page story in the *Pittsburgh Courier* disparaged Firpo as a “South American subpoena dodger” because of the fact that he was nearly deported prior to the fight. Even the *Messenger* literally put nationality before race stating, “Firpo is a foreigner though a white man.”³⁵ By using such language, the newspapers helped smooth over any anxieties brought on by the racial implications of the fight and promoted Wills as a national symbol who transcended race. The *Chicago Defender* argued that the crowd had come to Boyle’s Thirty Acres, not because of racial concerns, but to see an American defeat a foreigner.³⁶ In the same paper, Roscoe Simmons described the bout as a contest between North and South America and stated that “Wills, wearing the red, white and blue, put off race and took on nationality.” He continued, “The Wills-Firpo meeting was more than a prize fight, as you see. Two civilizations not two men met. Two ideas as well as two pairs of hands were in that ring. YOUR idea, that of your country, Mr. Wills stood for, fought for. He whipped Mr. Firpo with it.” He concluded his discussion of the fight by publishing the “Saxon Song” and declaring that Wills can also “sing” the poem. Written by English poet Victoria Sackville-West, the work is a celebration of things Saxon, from tools to landscapes to children.³⁷ Although probably meant as satire, having Wills “sing” the Saxon song clearly illustrated that the black press was showcasing Wills as an American champion. Simmons was going to extreme lengths to show that Wills shared American values, even those traditionally associated with its Anglo-Saxon heritage. The entire effort aimed to demonstrate that Wills had proved himself in the ring and deserved a chance at the title because he was an American. Simmons concluded on a positive note by predicting that Dempsey and Wills would meet on the patriotic date of July 4, 1925, “All in all, bet on our white people. They are slow, but they get there just the same.”³⁸

Such optimism must have been challenged by white newspapermen like Arthur Brisbane who believed that it would be better if whites and blacks only fought opponents of the same race. The *New York Amsterdam News* used Brisbane’s argument to highlight the sacrifice that African Americans had made during World War I. The article stated that most blacks would have been happy if the conflict had remained between whites alone, but instead the government enlisted blacks from all over the world to fight for a democratic system that denied them equal rights. Men like Brisbane seemed happy to deny African Americans an equal opportunity “now that our services are not needed to help crush the Hun.” The author argued that Wills “has met every demand of American citizenship” and would have joined the military had the war continued, something that could not be said for Dempsey.³⁹ The *Baltimore Afro-American* also invoked the Great War to

refute the claims of white sportswriter Robert Edgren. In a column for the *Baltimore News* Edgren blamed Jack Johnson for the riots that ensued after he won the heavyweight crown and cited this as one reason to prevent another black fighter from claiming the title. The sports editor of the *Afro-American* responded that even “the French *poilu* at Verdun” had not fought as hard as Edgren and other writers to stop a Wills-Dempsey title fight.⁴⁰ By referencing black participation in the Great War, these writers advanced claims that such service entitled them to equal treatment as citizens. They sought to expose the hypocrisy that required black soldiers to fight the war and then denied black boxers the opportunity to fight for the heavyweight championship.

Reports on Wills’s bouts combined an appeal to national principles of equal opportunity with efforts to once again distance Wills from the legacy of Johnson. Articles and commentaries stressed that the country no longer opposed the idea of mixed race heavyweight bouts and that fair competition would not lead to violence even if the black man won.⁴¹ Discussion of Wills’s fights and his long quest for a championship match sought to prove that talent and skill rather than skin color would determine success. In one sense they used the specific case of Wills to argue for a broader vision of equality of opportunity for all African Americans.

The match up with Firpo was not the first significant mixed race bout of Wills’s career. In 1920 he met Fred Fulton in front of 30,000 people including heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey. Articles in the black press were confident that if Wills demonstrated his ability by beating Fulton, he would soon get a shot at Dempsey. After Wills dropped Fulton in the third round, statements by the champion seemed to confirm such optimism.⁴² In an article from the *Chicago Defender* entitled “The Waning ‘Jim Crow’-ism of the American Prize Ring” the author wrote that after Wills’s destruction of Fulton only “pin-head whelps” continued to resist a mixed race title bout. By the middle of 1921 however, the attitude of some in the black press had changed as Dempsey seemed intent on dodging Wills. Nevertheless, the black press still believed that as long as Wills kept winning, he would eventually get his chance against the champion. Three years later, W. Rollo Wilson continued to insist that “the agitation against ‘mixed bouts’ and the days of ‘white hopes’ are gone forever.” When talented boxers like Wills or middleweight champion Tiger Flowers enter the ring, he wrote, race no longer mattered and that true fight fans only wished to see the best man win. For Floyd J. Calvin of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, Wills’s popularity combined with the successful and peaceful conclusion of the Wills-Firpo fight had definitively shown that mixed race bouts were not as feared as they had been in Johnson’s era.⁴³

If the black press generally hoped to minimize the racial connotations of the fights or at least portray them as unimportant, they reacted with strong criticism against those who sought to use race to criticize these matches or prevent them from happening. The efforts by Brooklyn minister and morals activist William S. Chase to have Firpo deported before the fight occasioned a response from the black press who believed that the campaign was motivated as much on racial as on moral grounds. Newspapers also criticized Chase’s efforts and applauded the fact that despite the controversy, the fight would go on as scheduled.⁴⁴ Undue emphasis on the racial implications of the fight spurred Roscoe Simmons to write, “Quit saying this is a battle between **WHITE** and **BLACK**. Not so. This is a

battle between MEN.”⁴⁵ Simmons and others hoped to make the bout seem routine and commonplace by downplaying the racial content of the match up. Instead the stories emphasized that it was a masculine competition and that Wills had the opportunity to demonstrate both his physical and moral strength. They appealed to American values of fair play and sportsmanship that called for talent and masculine ability rather than race, to differentiate between potential claimants for the title. A cartoon published a few years later reiterated this point. Titled “One Who Will Be Barred from the Big Fight” the image showed a woman labeled “true sportsmanship” being excluded from the arena where Dempsey and Tunney contested the heavyweight title.⁴⁶ By describing the bouts as a test of manly ability, rather than race, such statements seemed to question the manhood of Dempsey if he continued to avoid facing Wills. In addition, by linking the contest to the proper adherence to American values, the newspaper writers and artists also challenged the champion’s patriotism, perhaps recalling the controversy over his actions during World War I.⁴⁷

The desire of the black press to minimize the racial implications of the Firpo-Wills bout can be clearly seen in the reaction to a *New York World* article by famed columnist Haywood Broun. Broun argued that a deeply instilled “race memory” of slavery motivated Wills to settle the score against “a symbol of the oppressive Nordic.” He explained the lack of a knockout by claiming that Wills had enjoyed punishing his opponent and seemed content to “hit white skin” rather than end the fight prematurely. Norton Thomas commenting on the article in *Negro World* agreed with Broun’s notion that, for Wills, Firpo represented “the white man’s conceit.” Thomas believed, however, that if Wills were truly fighting for all the sufferings of blacks, Firpo would not have lasted even one round.⁴⁸ Although Broun’s article was published with Norton’s favorable commentary in the newspaper *Negro World*, the sneering and vengeful black man of the article was too much for other commentators and it appeared in no other black newspaper. The editorial section of the *Messenger* found the article distasteful and called it more prejudiced than most things written about the fight.⁴⁹ The illustration of the black fighter as being on a strictly racial mission to avenge the wrongs of slavery through physical violence undermined the efforts of the black press to depict the fights as being devoid of such connotations.

The Boxer As Race Man

In the 1920s the black press avoided political radicalism and constructed an image of Wills as a morally upstanding family man and defined him as a true American who enjoyed great success in his chosen profession. A willingness to downplay the racial significance of his mixed race bouts did not prevent the newspapers from also presenting his struggle against boxing’s color line as representative of the larger community’s fight for equality. Such imagery reflected the perceived connection between sport and racial progress, and by the 1920s many black Americans viewed sport as a way to overcome the country’s social and cultural inequalities.⁵⁰

As early as 1920 columnist William White called Wills a “Race Man,” a sobriquet usually bestowed on academics and businessmen. Stories highlighted Wills’s generosity to underline his role as a race leader who supported the entire community. According to the newspapers Wills donated money to a wide range of causes including \$500 to *Opportunity*

magazine and \$100 to the building fund of the New Zion church and gave money to the *New York Amsterdam News* for distribution to the needy. Wills also lent his time and his celebrity to various events designed to help local groups in New York and elsewhere. He was part of a Knights of Pythias fundraiser in April of 1923, and when he attended a youth athletics carnival at Ebbets Field he was so mobbed by fans that policemen were needed to restore order.⁵¹ Such accounts once again distinguished Wills from Johnson, who seemed to care for little beyond the pursuit of his own desires.⁵²

The campaign to convince both promoters and politicians that Wills deserved a title shot became representative of the fact that, despite important gains, African Americans continued to be denied equal opportunities. The constant drumbeat to convince or shame Dempsey and the boxing establishment to agree to a fight against Wills was an ongoing feature of the newspaper coverage dating back to Wills's victory over Fulton in 1920. William Pickens mocked the thinking of Dempsey and others who refused to meet black fighters and linked this exclusion to other examples of discrimination both large and small:

[W]e prove our "superiority" to Negroes by never measuring our strength against theirs in a sportsmanlike contest. We prove that the Negro "can't" by never letting him try. Providing it seems to victimize only the Negro, we tolerate any immorality from packed juries and disenfranchisement to restricted "spelling-bees" and "white champions."⁵³

When Gene Tunney captured the title from Dempsey in 1926, the press declared that his crown would never be legitimate until he fought Wills. The editors of the *New York Age* sent a letter to other black papers arguing that Tunney should be referred to in print as the "white heavyweight champion." From this date on, the letter continued, there are two crowns: the white and the colored, only when the two holders meet will there be a single champion.⁵⁴

Soon after Tunney defeated Dempsey stories appeared lauding the actions of Charles Fred White, the sole black member of the Pennsylvania Boxing Commission and the only one to vote against allowing the Dempsey-Tunney bout to be held in Philadelphia. The papers believed that White's vote led the governor to remove him from the \$5,000 per year post. For using his position to protest the treatment of Wills, "the world's real champion," the *New York Amsterdam News* claimed that White had "brought added glory to a race which, we again repeat, must be ready to make great sacrifices before it can reach the level of its ambitions."⁵⁵ Reporters also praised middleweight Tiger Flowers who rejected an invitation to help train Dempsey for the Tunney fight because his manager believed that to do so would anger many African Americans. The story also called Bill Tate, who had worked with Dempsey for years, the "Uncle Tom" of the training camp.⁵⁶

The press linked, both directly and indirectly, Wills's case to larger political and social issues and discrimination against the boxer became an expression of the collective experiences of African Americans. After Wills defeated Fulton the *New York Age* published the result on its front page alongside stories about the development of a black-owned realty company in Harlem and the reorganization of the Georgia Ku Klux Klan. When the news broke in 1922 that Dempsey had signed to meet Wills the *Baltimore Afro-American* ran the story on its front page. Placement on the front page above the fold illustrated the importance of the news to the community. In fact the story got top billing in the day's

headline, "Harry Wills matched to fight Jack Dempsey July 1st; No Asst. Superintendent to Be Named for Schools; Mob in Texas Burns Three Men and Hangs a Fourth." In the minds of the editors the sports story clearly merited the same attention as local educational issues and stories about violence directed toward blacks. A month later the paper published another article about Wills on the front page, this time accompanied by a picture of his wife. Other top stories meriting front-page exposure that day included one on school discrimination and a report on an anti-lynching bill.⁵⁷

In a speech at Newark in 1926, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) official William Pickens linked the treatment of Wills to broader issues in the black community when he spoke on the recent lynching of three African Americans in Aiken, South Carolina, and "the lack of opportunity given Harry Wills to pursue his profession."⁵⁸ The *Baltimore Afro-American* ran an article by W.O. McGeehan of the *New York Herald* claiming that Wills's efforts to earn a championship fight could "become another Dred Scott case" that would spur the passage of equal opportunity legislation. Neval H. Thomas, president of the NAACP's Washington D.C. chapter, wrote an open letter to George "Tex" Rickard accusing the promoter of racism.⁵⁹ An editorial in the *Messenger* claimed that both "Battling DuBois" and "Kid Garvey" had snuck into the Firpo-Wills fight "in order to get the low down on a real KNOCKOUT BLOW."⁶⁰ Although written in a mocking style the essay indicated that Wills's success in the ring could have as much significance for larger efforts to end segregation as the activities of W.E.B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey.

The black papers believed that New York politicians manipulated Wills's case to further their own political careers and complained about "the unfairness of the white man in continually using us as a political football." On August 22, 1923, the giant front-page headline of the *New York Amsterdam News* proclaimed, "GOV. KILLS WILLS BOUT." Romeo L. Dougherty reported that Governor of New York Alfred Smith had stopped the Wills-Dempsey bout because he needed Southern support for his presidential bid. Monroe Mason revived the story a few years later writing that the "colorphobia" of New York boxing authorities was attributable to political maneuvering involving Smith's presidential aspirations. Wills, like other African Americans before him, had fallen victim to "northern political insincerity and damnable southern bourbonism." Other reporters alleged that Wills's case had become a part of the Republican party's political maneuverings designed to avoid criticism from reformers who wished to ban the sport. According to accounts, the Republicans publically demanded that Wills be given a title bout while at the same time insuring that it would never take place.⁶¹ Although Marcus Garvey's *Negro World* generally disdained boxing, it too saw Wills as an example of the way blacks were treated in the U.S. One article posed the question: if whites refused to allow Wills a shot at becoming "the prize animal of the country" how could they accept blacks as statesmen, industrialists, or merchants?⁶² All these examples show how Wills became a symbol of black discontent and the unwillingness of authorities to grant him a shot at the title represented one part of a broader system of discrimination that ran from the backrooms of state and national political power to the streets of Southern cities.

Conclusion

By the time he met Firpo in 1924 Wills was thirty-five years old and on the downside of his long career. He had fought professionally for the first time in 1910—the same year that Johnson defeated Jeffries in Reno. In many ways Wills had too many links to the older generation of black boxers like Sam Langford and Joe Jeannette who, despite being among the most skilled pugilists of their era, were generally forced to fight other black boxers, sometimes on cards with the notorious and demeaning Battle Royal.⁶³ The constant bouts between the African-American fighters attracted a fair share of criticism, either because they seemed to be giving less than full effort or because of accusations that the results were predetermined. The black press tried to minimize the damage that questionable bouts inflicted on the boxers and on the sport itself. An editorial from Frank A. Young took the fighters to task for “faking and stalling.” Young wrote that the accusations leveled against Langford, McVea, and Wills had merit and that such tactics could not be blamed on the fact that the boxers had met multiple times. He believed that the practice had the potential to ruin the sport of boxing. Indeed Wills had his share of unsavory fights, including one where he threw his opponent to the mat with such force that the injured man was taken to the hospital. Wills had also once been banned from fighting in Philadelphia after officials believed he had agreed to carry McVea for six rounds, a charge Wills denied.⁶⁴

The fact that Wills was unsuccessful in forcing a title fight also led some to question his manliness. Just two weeks after his defeat by Jack Sharkey, a loss that effectively ended his title hopes, the *Baltimore Afro-American* reprinted a story originally published in the *Chicago Whip*. Under the title “Wills Henpecked? Mrs. Wills Boss” the author discussed a visit he had made to Wills’s house. Wills rarely spoke, he reported, and his manager and wife constantly coached him on the answers. Ultimately the writer claimed that he was kicked out of the house by “tough customer” Sarah Wills.⁶⁵ Another story declared that Tiger Flowers was now more popular than Wills in part because he mixed with supporters: “fight fans like to idolize their heroes and when their demigods refuse to bend to their wishes they feel slighted.” If Wills had been more personable, the reporter concluded, he would have already gotten a chance to fight for the title. The author also wrote that friends of the boxer claimed that Mrs. Wills did not allow him to socialize with them.⁶⁶ Despite the praise heaped on Wills by the black press in the wake of his defeat at the hands of Uzcudun in 1927, George S. Schulyer compared Wills unfavorably to Jack Johnson. Writing in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, Schulyer argued that despite his faults Johnson had to be respected for doing and saying whatever he liked. Unlike the “conciliatory” Wills, Jackson acted like “a man with a capital M” and as a result drew the ire of the entire country.⁶⁷

The negative descriptions illustrate that despite his popularity and success, Wills’s reputation suffered because of his inability to overcome boxing’s color line. The disillusionment that some reporters felt may reflect how fully inculcated modern notions of masculinity had become now that U.S. culture valued “winning over striving.”⁶⁸ Negative assessments of his career and personality in the black press may also signal how traditional notions of racial uplift had begun to change even as Wills continued to box. In *Manliness and Its Discontents* (2004) historian Martin Summers argues that by 1920 a new black middle class had emerged, one tied more closely to consumer capitalism than to produc-

tive capitalism. Changes also occurred in the ways this group viewed manhood: “respectability, or the public performance of producer values” was replaced with an emphasis on the consumption of goods along with the physical expression of virility through leisure activities.⁶⁹ Coverage of Wills reflected, perhaps incompletely, this transition although newspapers continued to describe him as embodying the traditional male values of temperance, clean living, and property ownership. Wills seemed a part of an older time, either because of his associations with the most disputable aspects of the segregated boxing industry or because of his inability to successfully embody the next generation of upwardly mobile African Americans. Wills’s age and his aspirations to middle-class respectability, for example, meant that he never earned the admiration of the young artists and intellectuals associated with the developing Harlem Renaissance. Novelist Wallace Thurman sarcastically described having a home on Strivers Row, as Wills did, as a sure sign that one had made it. Thurman was especially critical of the people who aspired to live there calling them “stupid and snobbish” with “an unconscious ambition to be as near white as possible.”⁷⁰

Despite the fact that he was never allowed to fight for the title, coverage of Wills in the black press showed how the papers could use sporting figures as important symbols in the broader fight for civil rights. During the 1920s newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* had begun to move away from sensationalist reporting towards a greater emphasis on race advocacy through the celebration of individual achievement. Athletes came to play an especially important role in this transition, accounting for nearly a quarter of all personality driven stories appearing in the newspaper.⁷¹ By leading the fight against boxing’s color line while promoting Wills the black press established a precedent that was soon applied to a new generation of sports stars. The image of Wills, for instance, as a morally upstanding citizen anticipated the construction of Joe Louis as an all-American “God-fearing, Bible-reading, mother-loving, clean-living, humble young man.”⁷² Within a few years of Wills’s retirement the black press used the astonishing rise of Louis to critique both national and international racism. Newspapers like the *Pittsburgh Courier* celebrated the accomplishment of black athletes at the 1936 Olympic games and fought hard to end baseball’s persistent segregation.⁷³ Although it was ultimately Louis who finally overcame the legacy of Jack Johnson to become truly both a racial and a national hero, in many ways the construction of Louis’ public image owes a debt to Harry Wills.



¹The Jeffries-Johnson fight took place on July 4, 1910. Luis Firpo, nicknamed the Wild Bull of the Pampas, was an Argentine boxer who fought heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey on September 14, 1923. During the bout Firpo knocked Dempsey through the ropes, but newspaper reporters helped the champion back into the ring in violation of the sport’s rules. Nevertheless, the fight went on, and Dempsey eventually knocked out Firpo in the second round.

²A newspaper decision was the informal determination of a winner based on the general consensus of the reporters present at the bout. “For the First Time in Ring Career Wills Smiles as Firpo Stumbles Along,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 13 September 1924, p. 6.

³Wills fought Jeanette three times, McVea five times, and Langford as many as twenty-two times. James B. Roberts and Alexander G. Skutt, *The Boxing Register: International Boxing Hall of Fame Official Record Book*, 4th ed. (Ithaca, N.Y.: McBooks Press Inc., 2006), 248-249; Jeffrey Sammons, *Beyond the Ring. The Role of Boxing in American Society* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 74. Wills career

record is available at “Harry Wills,” http://boxrec.com/list_bouts.php?human_id=17615&cat=boxer&pageID=1 [12 May 2010].

⁴The reasons why Wills never obtained a title bout are myriad and reflect a variety of motives. Both Dempsey and his manager Jack “Doc” Kearns expressed contradictory thoughts on the matter throughout his reign as heavyweight champion. At times they declared that they would maintain the color line, but at other points they expressed a willingness to meet Wills. Promoter George “Tex” Rickard also seemed reluctant to give Wills a shot at the title. In 1924 the New York State Athletic Commission refused to sanction any fight involving Dempsey until he first met Wills. Later, a court ruled that Dempsey had signed a binding contract in 1926 to fight Wills. Sammons concludes that the maintenance of the color line for over two decades was a result of “institutional racism and conspiracy” both within the sport and larger political circles. Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*, 74, 77, 249.

⁵Other popular black fighters included middleweight champion Theodore “Tiger” Flowers and light heavyweight titleholder Amadou Fall, better known as Battling Siki, who was a French citizen born in Senegal. Andrew M. Kaye, *The Pussycat of Prizefighting: Tiger Flowers and the Politics of Black Celebrity* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004); Peter Benson, *Battling Siki: A Tale of Ring Fixes, Race, and Murder in the 1920s* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2006).

⁶Johnson has numerous biographers including Al-Tony Gilmore, *Bad Nigger! The National Impact of Jack Johnson* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1971); Randy Roberts, *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes* (New York: Free Press, 1983); and Geoffrey C. Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson* (New York: Knopf, 2004). He also wrote several autobiographical accounts: *Jack Johnson—In the Ring and Out* (London: Proteus, 1977); and *My Life and Battles*, trans. Christopher Rivers (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2007).

⁷The most recent treatment of Louis is Randy Roberts, *Joe Louis: Hard Times Man* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010).

⁸Thomas R. Hietala, *The Fight of the Century: Jack Johnson, Joe Louis and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 43, 86 [QUOTATION]. On the trial and its results see chaps. 2-3.

⁹Ted Carroll, “Wills vs. Firpo,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 30 August 1924, p. 12.

¹⁰“Sporting Mirror,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 11 August 1922, p. 8.

¹¹In 1921 there were 253 black newspapers in the United States. Frederick G. Detweiler, *The Negro Press in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922), 4. I focus only on the most prominent papers with the highest circulations including *Chicago Defender*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Baltimore Afro-American*, and the *New York Age* and *Amsterdam News*. These papers are also among the few that could claim to have a readership outside of their respective cities. For the *Defender*’s numbers see Roi Ottley, *The Lonely Warrior: The Life and Times of Robert S. Abbott* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1955), 139; and Detweiler, *The Negro Press*, 11.

¹²Andrew Buni, *Robert L. Vann of the Pittsburgh Courier: Politics and Black Journalism* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974), 79, 143.

¹³Kaye, *The Pussycat of Prizefighting*, 13.

¹⁴A 1926 article in *Collier’s* referred to Sarah Wills as a “mulatto,” and she identified her “color” as white on a driver’s license renewal form in 1955. Despite this the black press never questioned her racial identity as an African American. John B. Kennedy, “‘If Jack Dempsey’s Afraid Let Him Say So’ Says Harry Wills,” *Collier’s*, 20 March 1926, p. 43; “Operator’s Renewal License Stub,” 15 August 1955, folder 2, Harry C. Wills Collection, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York, New York. I thank Andrew Smith for bringing the license to my attention.

¹⁵“Wills’ Patience Rewarded,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 4 July 1924, p. 14 [1ST QUOTATION]; “Harry Wills Is K.O. King,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 9 May 1924, p. 15 [2ND QUOTATION].

¹⁶William White, “Wills Gets Ready for Firpo Bout,” *Chicago Defender*, 9 August 1924, p. 1; “Wills’ Wife His Partner in Training,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 16 August 1924, p. 7.

¹⁷“Harry Wills Is on a Second Honeymoon,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 5 September 1924, p. 11; William White, “Harry Wills Ready for Next Thursday’s Fight,” *Chicago Defender*, 6 September 1924, p. 9.

¹⁸W. Rollo Wilson, “‘Harry Wills Worse Than I Thought—Wilson,’” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 23 July 1927, sec. A, p. 4.

¹⁹William Pickens, “Harry Wills a Success,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 20 July 1927, p. 6 and *Baltimore Afro-American*, 23 July 1927, p. 14. Emphasis in the original.

²⁰Fred B. Watson, “Fighters Who Have Earned and Spent a Fortune,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 6 June 1924, p. 14. Another Watson creation with a similar message ran on July 4, 1925, “Sports thru Fred Watson’s Eyes,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, p. 7. The celebration of African-American success, especially in obtaining property, was a common feature in many publications during this period. Anne Elizabeth Carroll, *Word, Image and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 39.

²¹“Harry Wills, in Real Estate Game Buys Apartments,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 20 August 1927, p. 14. Similar stories ran in the *Chicago Defender* and *New York Age*. Jervis Anderson, *This Was Harlem: A Cultural Portrait, 1900-1950* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), 340.

²²Theresa E. Runstedtler describes Louis as typifying this new image of masculinity: “In Sports the Best Man Wins: How Joe Louis Whupped Jim Crow,” in *In the Game: Race, Identity, and Sports in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Amy Bass (New York: Palgrave, 2005).

²³Tom Pendergast, *Creating the Modern Man: American Magazines and Consumer Culture, 1900-1950* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 15, 195, 196; Ted Hooks, “Harry Wills Right to Fight Jack Dempsey,” *New York Age*, 31 July 1920, p.1.

²⁴Pendergast, *Creating the Modern Man*, 197n49. On the other magazines, 127-133.

²⁵Buni, *Robert L. Vann*, 117-119; “Wills and Dempsey,” *The Competitor* 1 (1920): 73; “Wills to Get His Chance,” *The Competitor* 2 (1920): 70 [QUOTATIONS].

²⁶“Bronzed Panther Knocks out Buddy Jackson in Second Round of Short and Sweet Battle,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 25 August 1922, p. 12 [1ST QUOTATION]; “The Sporting Mirror,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 4 August 1922, p. 9 [2ND QUOTATION]. In 1922 Wills was thirty-three years old.

²⁷“Morris Music Shop,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 29 July, p. 6 and 5 August 1925, p. 6. The *Baltimore Afro-American* reported that Wills had purchased a Cadillac touring car: “Sport Tid-Bits,” 24 February 1922, p. 9. Another story mentioned Wills’s car and chauffeur: “Wills Loses Auto and the ‘Missus,’” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 25 August 1922, p. 12. Such views contrasted Wills with Johnson who was known for dangerous driving. Hietala, *The Fight of the Century*, 55. On the significance of black boxers in Europe see Theresa Runstedtler, “Visible Men: African American Boxers, the New Negro, and the Global Color Line,” *Radical History Review* 103 (2009): 59-81.

²⁸“Notables Sail on the S.S. Berengaria,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 18 July 1925, p. 6; “Dempsey Doesn’t Worry Them,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 25 July 1925, sec. A, p. 9. At other times the paper tracked his vacations to Hot Springs, Arkansas, for example the cartoon by Fred Watson, “What Harry Wills Is Thinking About While Taking a Rest Down in Hot Springs Arkansas,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 15 February 1924, p. 14; and “Lester Walton and Perry Bradford in New Song,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 13 October 1926, p. 11 [QUOTATION].

²⁹Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 166, 194, 200.

³⁰Patrick S. Washburn, *The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 104; Theodore Kornweibel, Jr., “*Seeing Red*: Federal Campaigns against Black Militancy, 1919-1925” (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), chap. 3.

³¹Buni, *Robert L. Vann*, 104; Ottley, *Lonely Warrior*, 177, 182. On the violent events in Chicago during the summer of 1919 and the *Defender’s* role in them, see Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922).

³²Although the political attitudes of the editors varied, they generally all promoted racial self-help, and entrepreneurship and stressed non-violent protest. Joseph E. Mitchell of the *St. Louis Argus*, for example, largely embraced Booker T. Washington's principles as "the key to racial freedom" while Robert S. Abbott of the *Chicago Defender* eschewed both accommodation and radicalism preferring instead a middle ground. Debra Foster Greene, "Published in the Interest of Colored People: The *St. Louis Argus* Newspaper in the Twentieth Century" (Ph.D. diss., University of Missouri-Columbia, 2003), 15-16; Ottley, *Lonely Warrior*, 126.

³³Barbara Foley, *Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 110.

³⁴Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 305-306; Carroll, *Word, Image, and the New Negro*, 124.

³⁵W. Rollo Wilson, "Outfights, Outgames Argentine Battler As Fight Goes 12 Rounds," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 13 September 1924, p. 1; "Wills-Firpo Fight" *Messenger*, editorial section, October 1924, p. 313.

³⁶Hamlet "Kid" Rowe, "The Famous Kid Rowe Is a Spectator," *Chicago Defender*, 20 September 1924, p. 10.

³⁷Roscoe Simmons, "The Week," *Chicago Defender*, 20 September 1924, sec. A, p. 3.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹"The Sportive Spotlight," *New York Amsterdam News*, 26 August 1925, p. 5.

⁴⁰"Sporting Mirror," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 11 August 1922, p. 8.

⁴¹Gilmore, *Bad Nigger!* chap. 3.

⁴²Wills had at least fourteen mixed race bouts during his career. For his complete ring record see "Harry Wills," <http://boxrec.com/list_bouts.php?human_id=17615&cat=boxer> [16 September 2010]; "Wills Ready for Fulton Next Thursday Night," *Chicago Defender*, 10 July 1920, p. 9; "Dempsey Won't Draw Color Line If Wills Wins," *Chicago Defender*, 17 July 1920, p. 9; and "No Color Line for Jack; Says He'll Box Anyone," *Chicago Defender*, 24 July 1920, p. 9.

⁴³"The Waning 'Jim Crow'-ism of the American Prize Ring," *Chicago Defender*, 7 August 1920, p. 6. See also "Wills to Get His Chance," *The Competitor* 2 (1920): 70-71; W. Rollo Wilson, "'Harry Wills Worse Than I Thought—Wilson,'" sec. A, p. 4; and Floyd J. Calvin, "The Digest," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 20 September 1924, p. 16.

⁴⁴"Wills on Eve of Biggest Fight, Is Fit," sec. A, p. 1; Floyd J. Calvin, "The Digest," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 13 September 1924, p. 16. Chase led a group called the Civic League, which tried to outlaw boxing and saw the deportation of Firpo as a means to that end. John Lardner, *White Hopes and Other Tigers* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1951), chap. 9; Juli Jones, "The Wills-Firpo Bout," *Chicago Defender*, 6 September 1924, p. 9.

⁴⁵Roscoe Simmons, "The Week," *Chicago Defender*, 23 August 1924, p. 13. Emphasis in the original.

⁴⁶Rodgers, "One Who Will Be Barred from the Big Fight," *Chicago Defender*, 18 September 1926, p. 1.

⁴⁷Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 8; Roberts, *Joe Louis*, chap. 2; Randy Roberts, *Jack Dempsey: The Manassa Mauler* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979; rev. ed., Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 42-45 and chap. 6.

⁴⁸Haywood Broun, "Wills Toys with Firpo; Smiles through 12 Rounds to Victory," *Negro World*, 20 September 1924, p. 5; Norton Thomas, "The Spotlight," *Negro World*, 20 September 1924, p. 2.

⁴⁹"Wills-Firpo Fight," *Messenger*, October 1924, p. 313. Broun, who was white, was politically liberal and probably intended the article to be read as a positive affirmation of black resistance to centuries of white oppression. Richard O'Connor, *Haywood Broun: A Biography* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1975).

⁵⁰Daniel R. Anderson, "Renaissance Men: The Harlem Intelligentsia, the African-American Press, and the Culture of Sport, 1918-1940" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 2005), 17-18.

⁵¹William White, "Wills Drops Fulton for Count in Third Round," *Chicago Defender*, 31 July 1920, p. 6; "The Sportive Spotlight," *New York Amsterdam News*, 1 July 1925, p. 4; "Mother Zion Church," *New York Amsterdam News*, 7 October 1925, p. 10. Wills also chaired the board of trustees at Shiloh Baptist Church: "Harry Wills on Church Board," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 15 August 1925, sec. A, p. 6; "Wills, Norfolk and Gans to Appear at Benefit," *New York Amsterdam News*, 25 April 1923, p. 4; "Young America Greet Pugilist Harry Wills," *New York Amsterdam News*, 9 May 1923, p. 4.

⁵²Hietala, *The Fight of the Century*, 130-131.

⁵³William Pickens, "What a World!" *Baltimore Afro-American*, 26 May 1922.

⁵⁴"The Week," *Chicago Defender*, 2 October 1926, sec A, p. 1; "The Status of Gene Tunney," *New York Amsterdam News*, 6 October 1926, p. 12.

⁵⁵"Voted 'No' on Dempsey, He Loses Job," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 28 August 1926, p. 1. The governor appointed a white man to replace White, the only African American on the board. See "White Commissioner Succeeds White," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 4 September 1926, p. 8; "Hon. Charles Fred White to be at St. Marks," *New York Amsterdam News*, 13 October 1926, p. 13; and William Pickens, "Pennsylvania's Governor and Boxing," *New York Amsterdam News*, 8 September 1926, p. 12.

⁵⁶"Tiger' Ignores Dempsey's Bid," *New York Amsterdam News*, 1 September 1926, p. 12.

⁵⁷"Harry Wills Right to Fight Jack Dempsey"; "Justice for Negroes in South Is Keynote of New Movement; Facts about Development of Harlem Realty Business," and "Georgia Whites Reorganize the Infamous Ku Klux Klan," *New York Age*, 31 July 1920, p. 1; "Harry Wills Matched to Fight Jack Dempsey July 1st; No Asst. Superintendent to be Named for Schools; Mob in Texas Burns Three Men and Hangs a Fourth," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 12 May 1922, p. 1. The fight never took place. "Meet the Missus"; "Dempsey Must Come up Now or Shut up"; "Lodge Will Lead Fight for Anti-lynching Bill"; "One Drop of Black Blood Bars Child from School," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 16 June 1922, p. 1.

⁵⁸"Newark News Briefs," *New York Amsterdam News*, 13 October 1926, p. 6.

⁵⁹W.O. McGeehan, "[missing] . . . Match Kills Boxing as a Sport," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 9 February 1923, p. 11; Kaye, *Pussycat of Prizefighting*, 126.

⁶⁰Editorials, *Messenger*, October 1924, p. 313. Emphasis in the original.

⁶¹The story was originally reported by Damon Runyon and discussed in the *New York Amsterdam News*. "Sportive Spotlight," 3 January 1923, pp. 4-5; Romeo L. Dougherty, "Gov. Kills Wills Bout," *New York Amsterdam News*, 22 August 1923, p. 1; Monroe Mason, "The Dempsey-Wills Political Complex," *New York Amsterdam News*, 8 September 1926, p. 12 [QUOTATION]. Smith unsuccessfully sought the Democratic nomination for president in 1924 but gained the nomination in 1928. Donn C. Neal, *The World beyond the Hudson: Alfred E. Smith and National Politics 1918-1928* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1983).

⁶²"The Case of Harry Wills, Black Pugilist," *Negro World*, 9 October 1926, p. 4.

⁶³The Battle Royal was a free-for-all that featured a number of African-American men, who were often blindfolded, fighting over coins thrown into the ring by the largely white spectators. The last man standing was the winner. The advertisement for Wills versus Kid Cotton also noted that a battle royal would be held on the same card. "Kid" Cotton Meets Harry Wills Wednesday," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 10 February 1912, p. 10. See also Kaye, *Pussycat of Prizefighting*, 59-67.

⁶⁴Frank A. Young, "Sport Editorial," *Chicago Defender*, 23 April 1921, p. 11; "Boxing Notes," *Chicago Defender*, 2 February 1921; "Philly Lifts Ban on Harry Wills; Herman Sails," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 24 December 1920, p. 17.

⁶⁵"Wills Henpecked? Mrs. Wills Boss," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 30 October 1926, p. 12. Another explanation for such stories may be that the reporters resented the fact that Wills rarely gave interviews. A story from 1925 criticized him for not coming to the door to answer questions and asserted that Wills probably would have gotten a title fight if he "had a little more of the ability to make friends." "Wills

Greatest but Most Unpopular Champion,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 11 July 1925, sec. A, p. 6. The stories may also reflect the belief that women could have a detrimental effect on a boxer’s abilities in the ring. Perhaps for the writers, these stories helped to explain why Wills seemed unable to obtain a title fight.

⁶⁶“Harlem Plunges All on Tiger Flowers,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 27 February 1926, p. 9.

⁶⁷George S. Schuyler, “Views and Reviews,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 13 August 1927, sec. A, p. 8. Schuyler’s support of Johnson and his flouting of social convention might have been influenced by his own personal life. In the summer of 1927 when he wrote the article, he met a young white woman named Josephine Codgell, and the two would later marry. Oscar R. Williams, *George S. Schuyler, Portrait of a Black Conservative* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 47.

⁶⁸Pendergast, *Creating the Modern Man*, 200.

⁶⁹Martin Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 6, 8.

⁷⁰Anderson, “Renaissance Men,” 78; Wallace Thurman, “Negro Life in New York’s Harlem: A Lively Picture of a Popular and Interesting Section,” in *The Collected Writings of Wallace Thurman: A Harlem Renaissance Reader*, eds. Amritjit Singh and Daniel M. Scott III (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 46.

⁷¹T. Ella Stother, “The Black Image in the Chicago ‘Defender’ 1905-1975,” *Journalism History* 4 (1977-78): 138, 139.

⁷²Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*, 97. See also Runstedtler, “In Sports the Best Man Wins...”; Lewis A. Erenberg, *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation: Louis vs. Schmeling* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, *Black Culture and the New Deal: The Quest for Civil Rights in the Roosevelt Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), chap. 4.

⁷³John D. Stevens, “The Black Press and the 1936 Olympics,” *American Journalism* 4 (1997): 97-102; David K. Wiggins, “Wendell Smith, the *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal* and the Campaign to Include Blacks in Organized Baseball, 1933-1945,” *Journal of Sport History* 10 (1983): 5-29.