**[America at War: World War II](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/database/subtitles.cfm?TitleID=75)**

**Joe Louis**

**Period:** 1940s

The most famous boxing match in history took place in 1938. It pitted Joe Louis against Max Schmeling. The match was filled with symbolism: black versus white, freedom versus fascism.

In fact, Schmeling was not a member of the Nazi party and was criticized at home for having a Jewish manager. Still, the match seemed to embody the struggle between Nazism and freedom.

Joe Louis was much more than a sports hero. He was an important American symbol. His life began in a sharecropper's cabin in Alabama; he had only a sixth-grade education. Yet he had become one of America's greatest heroes. A clean-living, modest man, Louis was regarded as the opposite of an earlier black heavyweight champion, Jack Johnson, who had shocked white opinion with his affairs with white women.

Schmeling was a shrewd fighter. When he faced Louis in 1936, he studied his opponent and knew his weak spot: a tendency to drop his left hand after throwing a punch, leaving himself open. Schmeling knocked him out. In spite of this, Louis was better prepared for the 1938 rematch. His punches left Schmeling in tears. Louis knocked out the German boxer in the first round.

When World War II began, Louis became an icon for black recruitment, helping to urge prospective soldiers to overcome their doubts about serving in the white man's army. He was instrumental in helping desegregate the Army, not only by encouraging enlistment, but by using his influence to combat racial bias on military bases.