

# Joe Louis-Max Schmeling Fight--Clem McCarthy, announcer (June 22, 1938)

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*Clem McCarthy*



*Louis vs. Schmeling*

## *Clem McCarthy and the “Greatest Fight of Our Generation”*

Clem McCarthy (1882-1962) broadcast a heavyweight championship boxing match between Joe Louis (1914-1981) and Max Schmeling (1905-2005) on June 22, 1938 that he termed “the greatest fight of our generation.” Historians have largely agreed with him due to the symbolism and political ramifications of the encounter.

The two combatants had fought previously on June 6, 1936 in New York. At that time, Louis was an undefeated 22 year-old contender for the heavyweight championship, and Schmeling was a 30 year-old German and former champion, considered to be past his prime and a decided underdog. Schmeling, however, was an astute tactician who noticed a flaw in Louis’s technique. Clem McCarthy provided the broadcast of the fight for the NBC network from Yankee Stadium, which ended in a major upset when Schmeling knocked out the seemingly invincible Joe Louis in the 12th round.

The Nazis had not been in favor of the bout, lest Louis triumph. They were also discontented with Schmeling’s American Jewish manager, Joe Jacobs. While Jacobs was unwelcome in Germany, the Nazis feted Schmeling and his Czech wife, Anny Ondra, a movie actress, upon his return. Despite political pressures, Schmeling never joined the Nazi party. Still, the fight film, entitled “Schmeling’s Victory: A German Victory” was shown throughout Germany, by Hitler’s decree, to promote Nazi nationalism.

The fight carried more than just local interest. The heavyweight championship symbolized the status of the toughest man in the world with great resonance for Adolf Hitler’s and his Nazi ideology of Aryan supremacy. Schmeling expected to get a title shot against the then current

title holder, Jim Braddock. Any such battle took on great political significance as the fighters represented opposing political systems and ideologies.

Fascism had taken root in Europe after World War I with Benito Mussolini installing a fascist regime in Italy in 1922. In Asia, Japan invaded China in 1931 and took possession of Manchuria. Fascism assumed a greater role in international politics when Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany in 1933. He soon instituted his pogroms to persecute Jews and promote his ideology of racial purity and hegemony. The 1936 Olympic Games, hosted by Hitler in Berlin, were intended to showcase the dominance of his German athletes. American athletes, spearheaded by African Americans, most notably Jesse Owens, foiled Hitler's international display by winning most of the track and field events. Germany, however, won the most medals overall in all competitions, with the United States finishing well behind in second place. Combined with Schmeling's victory in the boxing ring, Hitler might still tout his racial supremacy doctrine. The Olympic Games did not curtail the fascist advance.

Italy had invaded Ethiopia in 1935. The Spanish Civil War erupted in 1936 and both Germany and Italy aided the fascist nationalists headed by General Francisco Franco, who cemented his victory in 1939. Germany and Italy also allied with Japan in an anti-communist pact in 1937, as Japan continued its depredations in China, including the Massacre of Nanking in which tens of thousands of Chinese were killed and raped. In March of 1938, Hitler sent his troops into Austria and soon began agitating German residents of Czechoslovakia to effect further conquest. In the United States, the German American Bund, founded in 1936, numbered about 25,000 members who supported Hitler in his anti-Semitic policies, and established youth camps to indoctrinate children. Such was the global political climate when Joe Jacobs negotiated a rematch with Joe Louis, set for June 22, 1938.

Schmeling had been unable to get a match with champion Jim Braddock, as American administrators feared that in the event of a Schmeling victory, Joe Louis would never get a chance to win the heavyweight title from the German sports administration. Braddock fought Louis instead, which resulted in a Louis win by knockout in the eighth round. Clem McCarthy again served as the broadcaster from Comiskey Park in Chicago. Although the undisputed world champion, Louis stated that he could not truly relish the title until he had defeated Max Schmeling. He needed to find redemption for the only blemish upon his record.

The rematch assumed greater social, national, and international political significance as both the print media characterized both fighters as representatives of two opposing political systems, soon to face off in a bigger battle for world domination as the bout foreshadowed the larger conflict of World War II. Such propaganda differed from the truth. Schmeling was not a Nazi, and he even rescued two Jewish boys during Kristallnacht, the Nazi rampage in November of 1938 that violently destroyed Jewish businesses, killed and arrested Jewish men, and raped Jewish women. Joe Louis, hailed as an American hero, hardly enjoyed the benefits of citizenship. Boxing was the only activity in which a black man could hit a white man and avoid jail or lynching. Louis was idolized by the black masses as a messianic figure whose victories lifted the spirits of the entire race. His victory over Braddock fostered massive celebrations, which only invited violent white retaliations. Many whites supported Schmeling in the first bout but, by 1938, fans and the media were swept up in a nationalist crusade, and Schmeling's welcome was less than

enthusiastic for the rematch in Yankee Stadium. Still, an estimated one-third of southerners backed the white German against the African American.

A measure of the interest can be gleaned from the approximately 70,000 fans who packed the stadium, including politicians, celebrities, and socialites, as well as a couple thousand who traveled all the way from Germany. Another 60,000,000 Americans, almost half the population, tuned in on the radio, and a worldwide audience numbered 100,000,000 as the fight was broadcast around the world in English, German, Spanish, and Portuguese. The 10 pm start time in New York was 3 am in Germany, but fight fans were not deterred. Once again Clem McCarthy provided the broadcast, but his night was a short one. Joe Louis came out of his corner with malevolent intentions, pounding the challenger without mercy and knocking him down three times before Schmeling's handlers through in the towel at 2:04 of the first round. McCarthy delivered a rapid-fire, staccato account of the beating, not unlike the horseraces that he customarily worked. Print journalists who attended the fight roundly criticized McCarthy's efforts because, in the flurry of activity, he had missed some of the blow-by-blow and neglected to inform listeners of one of the knockdowns.

Radios went dead in Germany as soon as the referee, Art Donovan, stopped the fight. Hitler would later exact his revenge on Schmeling for his refusal to join the Nazi party by drafting him into the German army as a paratrooper. Schmeling survived to become a wealthy philanthropist in Germany as the holder of the Coca-Cola franchise. He would serve as a pallbearer and helped to pay for Joe Louis's funeral, who died a pauper and a relatively forgotten American hero.

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\* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.