

Jack Blackburn: Murder to Glory

By Daniel Attias

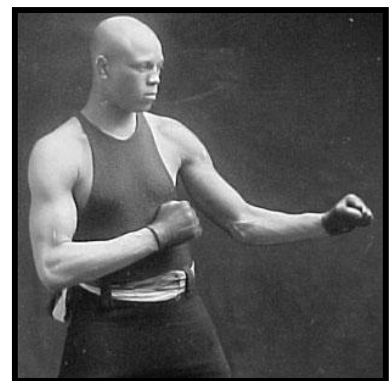


Louis needed Blackburn but perhaps the older man needed his young protégé even more.

“When Blackburn got drunk, his eyes turned blood red, he was ungovernable, mean and just plain bad, with his temper just a hair trigger away from violence...”

Like a hurricane that makes landfall and destroys everything in its path, the thunderous right hand of “The Brown Bomber” lands flush on the jaw of heavyweight world champion James J. Braddock, he drops to the canvas languishing in a crumpled and unconscious heap. The referee counts Braddock out and the world has a new champion. Jack Blackburn, Louis’ trainer, jumps through the ropes and embraces his fighter. Glory, fame and riches await but it wasn’t always such an illustrious ride for the man Louis affectionately called “Chappie.”

Charles Henry Blackburn or Jack as he was known to most had a promising ring career himself back in the early part of the 20th century. A lightweight contender, Blackburn faced many of the best fighters the world has ever seen, often taking on bigger men along the way. He battled Sam Langford on six occasions, losing just once; took on the great lightweight Joe Gans three times, including a newspaper decision victory in 1903; got the better of Joe Holly three out of the four times they shared the ring; and dropped a newspaper decision to Philadelphia Jack O’Brien in a bout described as ‘one of the fastest ever seen’ in the city of Philadelphia.



Blackburn had made a real name for himself by the end of 1908. Charles D. Marshall of The Freeman newspaper summed up the quality of fighter Blackburn had become when he said, “Sam Langford and Jack Blackburn have caused all the men in their classes to draw the

color line." Marshall went on to state that his desire was to see Blackburn fight middleweight world champion Stanley Ketchel, such was the regard in which Blackburn was held in at that time. "What I desire to see is a finish fight between Blackburn and Stanley Ketchel for I am of the opinion that this would be one of the greatest fights of all time."

The color line was always going to be a problem for Blackburn, a fighter many would have avoided were he white, but this was soon to be the least of his worries.

The night of December 30, 1908 began with Blackburn and his brother Fred drinking and playing poker. Fred, like Jack, was a lightweight boxer and they had shared common opponents, though it was clear that Fred was a level below his younger brother in terms of skill. The trouble began when the elder sibling made insulting comments about Jack's wife, Maud Pillian, things escalated and Fred slashed his younger brother's face and body with a razor blade. The injuries weren't life threatening but were enough to leave scars that would be with Jack for the rest of life.

Things worsened ten days later on January 9th, 1909, when Blackburn, after a night of heavy drinking, arrived in a taxi with a friend, Alonzo Polk, to a residence in Philadelphia around 3:00 am. Blackburn "had a dark side" according to boxing promoter, author and lawyer, Truman K. Gibson Jr., a dark side that would emerge that particular night. Gibson would go on to say that "when Blackburn got drunk, his eyes turned blood red, he was ungovernable, mean and just plain bad, with his temper just a hair trigger away from violence."

Upon arrival Blackburn and Polk witnessed their wives arguing, when they intervened things became heated; Blackburn drew out a pistol and shot Polk, once in the stomach and once in the neck. Blackburn claimed he was only protecting his wife but the fact that he shot Polk's wife Matilda in the back as she tried to escape was testament to the fact that Blackburn had done a fair deal more than protect his wife and he would pay dearly for the shooting and death of Polk.

Whilst awaiting trial, newspaper reports circulated that Blackburn had attempted to take his own life. Some sources claimed he had hung himself, while others, like the Chicago Tribune, reported he had poisoned himself. "Mystery surrounds the reported attempted suicide of Jack Blackburn, the negro pugilist, who is in Moyamensing prison awaiting trial for murder. It is said a woman visited Blackburn a few days ago and slipped him a vial containing poison, which he swallowed in his cell last night. No confirmation of this report, or other rumors about the affair, can be obtained at Moyamensing."

The real details of what happened are lost to the annals of time, and the prison inspector, Gen. St. Clair Mulholland refused to answer any questions about the rumors.

Once a shining light of the fight game, Blackburn was now sentenced to fifteen years in prison after pleading guilty to the murder of Polk. The Gettysburg Times from June 30, 1909 explained the charge and sentencing. "Jack Blackburn, the colored lightweight pugilist who was on trial, charged with the murder of Alonzo Polk, another colored man, last January, changed his plea to one of guilty. He was sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment. His sentence dates from his commitment last January, and with good behavior he can secure his freedom in a little more than eight years."

He served as a boxing instructor for the prison warden and his three sons whilst incarcerated, a smart move indeed as Blackburn was astonishingly released for good behavior just four years and eight months into his fifteen-year sentence.

Blackburn returned to the ring on April 4, 1914, winning a six-round newspaper decision. A fight with the six-foot-two-inch Gunboat Smith followed on May 20, but Blackburn lost the decision. Smith had outweighed Blackburn by thirty pounds that night. He would fight on for another nine years though he was never to regain the form of his days prior to spending almost five years in a jail cell.

Upon retirement, Blackburn took up training fighters, a step that seemed the most logical for a convicted felon who knew little else but boxing. For most, Blackburn is remembered for being the trainer of arguably the greatest heavyweight who ever lived, Joe Louis, but what few remember is the fact that the partnership between the two men almost never happened.

Blackburn had been training fighters for a number of years before he ever came across Louis. He had trained Sammy Mandell to a world lightweight title in 1926. He also took Charles "Bud" Taylor to a bantamweight title in 1927 when he defeated fellow great Tony Canzoneri. He also trained one of Louis' most famous opponents in Jersey Joe Walcott for a short time.

Louis and Blackburn teamed up in June of 1934 as Louis prepared to make his debut into the professional ranks. Blackburn had taken some convincing when it came to training Louis. He felt as though a black heavyweight would never get an opportunity to fight for the title and thus the chance for Blackburn to earn good money was negated. "A colored boxer who can fight and won't lie down can't get any fights," said Blackburn. "I'm better off with white boys who aren't as good."



Blackburn would eventually be persuaded to mentor the young Louis, the punching prowess of the young "Bomber" no doubt impressing him. He would teach him the finer points of the art of boxing and his tutelage would be paramount to Louis' success. But whilst Louis was fast becoming a national hero, especially in the African-American community, Blackburn was up to his old tricks.

It was no secret that Blackburn drank too much, it was also apparent that he was a force to reckon with when partaking in what was becoming his favored pastime. Just months prior to Louis' first bout against Max Schmeling, Blackburn was involved in yet another shooting. A report in *The Milwaukee Journal* on March 4, 1936, outlined the apparent incident. "Jack Blackburn, negro trainer for Joe Louis, and William Parnell, negro, both charged with assault with intent to kill, Wednesday heard John Bowman, another negro, describe how a 9-year-old negro girl was wounded seriously in gun play following a fight he had with Blackburn. Bowman said he and Blackburn fought in a south side alley when the trainer was inspecting real estate."

According to Truman K. Gibson Jr. in his book titled, *Knocking Down Barriers*, the altercation had nothing to do with real estate. Instead, Jack had been drinking and gambling when things went awry. "That's not the way it went down. The truth was that Jack liked to gamble and had been shooting craps, while of course drinking, when he caught another player cheating. That proved to be enough to ignite Jack's fiery temper, and he pulled a gun and fired. Perhaps because of his inebriated state, he missed his target and hit a little girl, killing her. She was eight years old."

Blackburn, by virtue of his involvement with Louis' team, had the charges dropped and when the parents of the slain Lucy Cannon filed a civil suit, Louis' managers, Julian Black and John Roxborough, settled out of court.

The bad times for the Louis camp would continue just three months later when Louis experienced his first career loss at the hands of Max Schmeling. Perhaps Blackburn's extracurricular activities played its part in the unexpected loss for the young contender, either way things were looking grim for both men in 1936.

Blackburn had taught Louis all he knew about the art of boxing and despite the setback, Louis was back in the winner's circle just two months later with a win against another ex-world champion in Jack Sharkey. Six consecutive victories followed before that fateful night in June of 1937 when Blackburn and Louis realized their dream of the heavyweight championship of the world.

The summit had been conquered. Louis would go on to defend his title a record 25 times when all was said and done but Blackburn wouldn't have the privilege of witnessing all of them. He passed away on April 24, 1942 of a heart attack at the age of 59. Louis was distraught. "This is the worst shock I ever got in my life," said Louis. "Jack started me in the boxing game and followed me all the way through. He made a fighter of me and did more for me than anyone else."

It was clear just how much Joe Louis had needed Jack Blackburn but perhaps the older man needed his young protégé even more. Blackburn was a man with little self-control. A horrible drunk and a convicted killer, he went from murder to glory, and perhaps due to the caliber of fighter that Louis became he would be forever remembered for the glory, not the murder, right or wrong.

