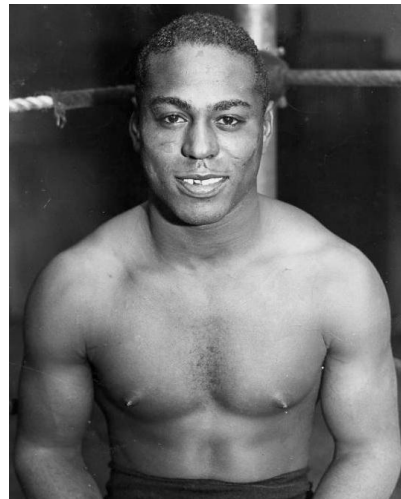


Boxing Ringside with Bobby Franklin

John Henry Lewis Forgotten Great

It has long been talked about how many great fighters never got a chance at a title. Many agree that if people like Charlie Burley and Holman Williams got the breaks they deserved in boxing, history might very well be different. For many years the fighters who became known as The Black Murderers' Row lived in obscurity. However, in recent years they have been receiving their due. Thanks to the work of writers like Springs Toledo whose epic book *Murderers' Row: In Search Of Boxing's Greatest Outcasts* did so much to educate the public about these forgotten men, their names are now much more familiar to the boxing public.



It's interesting to note that it is not only those who never got a shot at the top who have been forgotten, but there are also great fighters who did win and defended titles that have faded from memory. One reason for this is there were so many great fighters back in the 1920s and 1930s that some overshadowed others. Benny Leonard, Joe Louis, Barney Ross, and a host of others gained legendary status and have become almost immortalized, with countless articles and a number of books written about them. They deserve all the praise they get. Others have slipped from view though. *(Joe Louis and John Henry)*



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One of these was Light Heavyweight Champion John Henry Lewis. Up until recently I wasn't able to find many photographs of the former champ. While I was familiar with his name it was mostly for the same reason most people would have heard of him. He was kayoed in one round when he challenged Joe Louis for the Heavyweight Title. It was John Henry's last fight and he was almost blind in one eye. The story goes that Joe Louis gave him a shot as the two were friends and he wanted him to have one big payday before the boxing commissions took his license from him. It has also been said that Joe the Champ dispatched him early to spare him taking too many punches. In fact, John Henry was quoted later saying "...that was really the easiest fight I was ever in. I went to sleep early and easy."

The loss to the great Joe Louis should not define John Henry's career. While no footage exists of his fights, except for a 15-second clip of the Louis fight, Lewis certainly deserves to be mentioned when the greatest light heavyweights of all time are discussed. The International Boxing Research Organization (IBRO) listed John Henry as the 15th greatest light-heavyweight in their All-Time-Ratings on December 31, 2019.

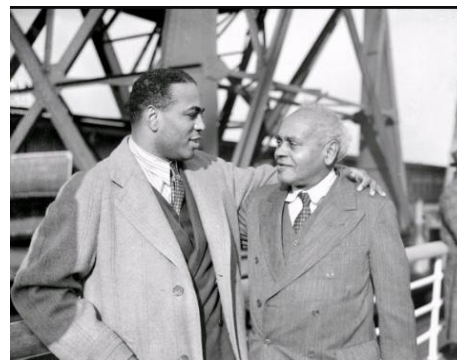


Lewis had a total of 117 fights of which he won 101 with 57 by knockout. He lost 11 times and Joe Louis was the only man to stop him. He also had five draws. On the way up he fought Light Heavyweight Champion Maxie Rosenbloom five times, winning two and losing three. In their third fight Lewis dropped Rosenbloom five times. That was something that did not happen to Maxie. It is interesting to note what Lewis said about his bouts with Rosenbloom: "Maxie and I fought five times, and each time I learned something new. He was the craziest and trickiest fighter you ever saw. Of course I had learnt a lot from my father and those old time fighters, but fighting with Maxie was like going to college."

In the era in which John Henry fought, it was no shame to lose a fight. The important thing was to learn from your losses, and having fifty rounds with Maxie Rosenbloom truly was like going for a Phd in boxing. The things he picked up in those fights are what contributed to him becoming a great champion.

Lewis's father had also been a fighter and owned a boxing gym in their hometown of Phoenix, Arizona. It was there at an early age that John Henry and his brother got to meet old-timers like Sam Langford and Eddie Anderson. He said "...they taught us some tricks like jabbing and footwork." That knowledge stayed with him and was instrumental in him later developing into a savvy and complete boxer.

John Henry was close to his father who not only taught him boxing but instilled in him the importance of dressing and behaving like a gentleman. Looking at a photo of the two of them together you can tell these are two classy gents. Lewis retained his gentlemanly demeanor even when he was signed to fight Two Ton Tony Galento, a fighter not known for being careful with his words. When Tony pulled out of the match due to having contracted pneumonia, a disappointed Lewis visited him in the hospital. The fight was never rescheduled. *(John Henry with his Father, John Edward Lewis)*



John Edward Lewis' philosophy on life was summed up succinctly in the aftermath of the Louis-Lewis fight when Joe Louis went to John Henry's dressing room and spoke to him and his dad. John Henry's dad stared in awe at Joe and then said. "You are a great man, Joe. I'm honored to shake your hand." Louis blushed, "I'm sorry what happened to John, but we both made some money, and after all, that's what counts in the long run." "No," John Henry's father broke in. "Money isn't what counts in the long run, as you will learn when you are as old as I am. Human dignity and mutual respect for your fellow man count in the long run. Remember that, both of you, victor and vanquished." And both men did remember that – the record proves it.

Lewis won the Light Heavyweight title from Bob Olin on October 31, 1935 by decision in an exciting fifteen round battle. From then until his final fight in 1939 against Joe Louis, John Henry fought 59 times in a combination of title defenses and non-title fights against light heavyweights and heavyweights. He lost only five times including the loss to Louis. One loss was a controversial decision to heavyweight Al Ettore whom he defeated in two subsequent bouts. He also beat Johnny Risko, Elmer Ray, Jimmy Adamick, Al Gainer, Jock McAvoy, Len Harvey, and Patsy Peroni. Before winning the title he defeated Red Burman, Tiger Jack Fox, future heavyweight champ Jimmy Braddock, and Tony Shucco. His career of 117 fights took place over ten years in an era that was extremely rich with talent. Lewis still wanted to fight despite having lost the vision in his left eye which was the reason the commissions pulled his license; a wise decision. He was only 25 years old. (*Jock McAvoy and John Henry*)



Upon retirement he became a liquor salesman. Having started boxing professionally at the age of 14 he managed to put together a spectacular career and leave the game while still a young man.

John Henry Lewis died in 1974 at the age of 59. He was suffering from emphysema and Parkinson's disease. It is believed he was a descendent of Tom Molineaux the great bare knuckle boxer. It is sad that this great fighter and soft spoken gentleman has been all but forgotten. Perhaps if he didn't have to retire so young things may have been different. When you hear the name John Henry Lewis, resist the urge to immediately think of his fight with Joe Louis. Rather, take some time to look at his record and learn more about his outstanding career.