

Boxing Ringside with Bobby Franklin

Red Burman Was Not Intimidated By Joe Louis

“I define fear as standing across the ring from Joe Louis and knowing he wants to go home early.” Max Baer

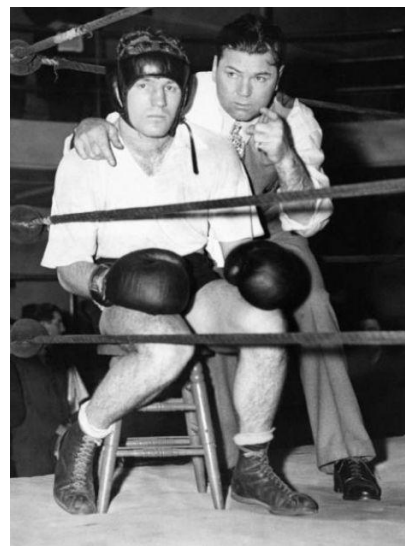
Those words rang true for many who challenged Joe Louis for the Heavyweight Championship. Louis was certainly a champion to be in awe of. He had lethal power in both hands, with blistering combinations and guided missile accuracy. For his challengers, it wasn't just a matter of being in with a man who repeatedly reinforced his reputation for greatness; it was also a matter of surviving with their senses still in one piece.

Joe was a machine of destruction in the ring, and that well earned reputation struck even the most professional of fighters with the jitters when the moment came they had to step into the ring to face him. It has been reported that Max Baer, a man whose courage was never questioned, hesitated when the call came to his dressing room that it was time to fight Louis. *(Red Burman and Joe Louis)*



There had been many who had to deal with the Joe Louis Jitters. Some held up okay while others froze up when the bell rang. One man who did not let fear overcome him was Clarence “Red” Burman.

Red Burman was a protege of former champ Jack Dempsey. He was born in Baltimore and fought out of that city for his entire career. Burman began fighting as a professional in 1930. His early fights were in the middleweight division. He gradually put on weight and began competing as a heavyweight in the later 1930s, though he never weighed over 200 pounds. *(Red Burman and Jack Dempsey)*

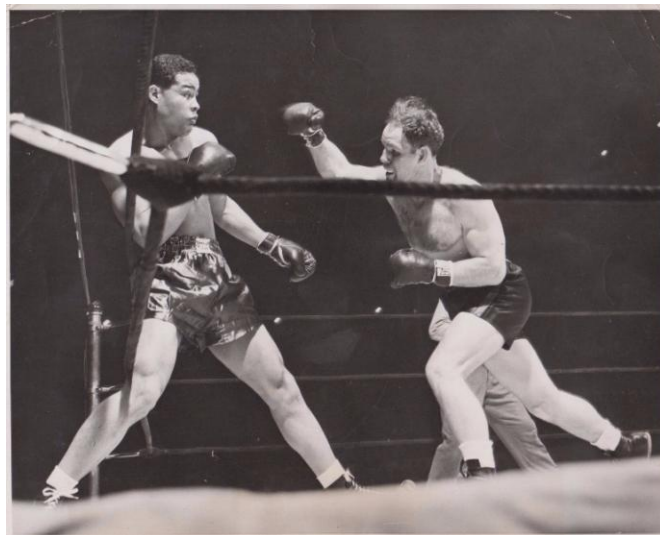


Throughout the 1930s, he compiled a respectable record.

Burman was on a 14-fight winning streak when, in 1936, he took on the great light heavyweight champion John Henry Lewis in a non-title fight. Lewis kayoed Burman in the second round of a one-sided bout.

Burman came back from that devastating loss and, over the next four years, ran up a record of 27 wins, 3 losses, and 1 draw. It was in 1939 that he began making waves as a serious contender for the world title. In a pair of fights against Tommy Farr he won and lost close decisions. After the loss to Farr, Red went on to win nine in a row. Wins over Steve Dudas and Tony Musto earned him a shot at Joe Louis.

The Louis/Burman fight took place on January 31, 1941 at Madison Square Garden. It was not felt Red would be able to put up much of a battle against the Brown Bomber, but he surprised everyone, Louis included. Somehow Burman had not only managed to avoid being intimidated by Louis, but as the UP reported, “The big crowd in Madison Square Garden saw Burman light into Louis like he never heard of him, and continue to fight with everything he had until a final sickening right under the heart sent him down in 2:49 of the fifth round”. (*Burman on the attack against Louis*)



There is no film of the fight available, but I was able to find a recording of the radio broadcast of the bout. The UP description of the fight is certainly accurate. Joe had his hands full with Burman, who never took a backwards step during the entire fight.

Burman who weighed in at 188 pounds to Louis’s 203, looked to be emulating his mentor Jack Dempsey with his all out assault on the champion. He was unable to hurt the champion, but Louis, though landing solid shots to the head was not able to shake Burman. (*Final moments of Red’s fight with Joe Louis*)



Going into the fifth round, Burman still appeared fresh though he was cut over the left eye. It was in this round that Louis shifted gears and began attacking the body. A hard right to the pit of the stomach was the beginning of the end. Joe followed this up with a

devastating right hand to the heart that finished the job. The reporter at ringside wrote “It landed over Burman’s heart, and Red crumbled like he had been shot”.

After the fight Louis said “He really came after me. I had to hit him the hardest I ever hit a man”. While Louis was never in danger of being beaten and was not hurt at anytime during the fight, he still had his work cut out for him with the relentless challenger.

Red Burman was always proud of his effort against Joe Louis, as well he should have been. He gave it his all and then some. He stood up to the punches of the most lethal heavyweight champion in history. Burman was the personification of courage that night in New York City.



Burman would continue fighting for a little under two more years. He retired in 1942 with a record of 78 wins (33 by knockout), 22 losses, and 3 draws. Later in his life he said “Without Joe giving me a chance at the title, the world would never have heard of me. I’m indebted to him, and in my nightly prayers I never forget to include his name”. That quote is not completely accurate, as Burman’s performance against Louis contributed greatly to the world knowing who he was. *(Painting by Robert S. Pious of the Louis/Burman fight)*

Red Burman died in Baltimore on January 25, 1996 at the age of 80. His legacy lives on in his hometown where they are still proud of the man who took the fight to the Great Joe Louis.