Exodus of champions: the great migration and the shaping of the civil rights activities of Floyd Patterson, Sonny Liston, Joe Frazier and George Foreman

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Abstract
While the intersection of sport and the Civil Rights era has been well documented from a number of angles and approaches, perhaps no athlete has been so thoroughly connected to this period in history as Muhammad Ali. His stances on Vietnam, race relations and religion during this period have provided a fountain of historical research and narratives on this very turbulent period. However, what about the political and social activities of Ali's contemporaries? Floyd Patterson, Sonny Liston, Joe Frazier and George Foreman were not just heavyweight champions, but also individuals who were profoundly affected by the mass exodus of Blacks out of the South and into the cities of the North and West. Known to history as the Great Migration, this movement not only affected these men physically, but also helped to shape their ideas and understandings about racial identity, civil rights and race relations in their adult lives.

The purpose of this research is to examine the political and social activities and experiences throughout the lives of Floyd Patterson, Sonny Liston, Joe Frazier and George Foreman. In addition to exploring the narratives surrounding their migration experiences, it will display the differences in opinion each man had regarding issues such as segregation and how they defined themselves against Ali's largely ignored, hardline segregationist stance. Finally, it will explore the possibilities for reexamining not just the popularly accepted narratives of these four men, but also of Ali himself.

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While the intersection of sport and the Civil Rights era has been well documented from a number of angles and approaches, perhaps no athlete has been so thoroughly connected to this period in history as Muhammad Ali. His stances on Vietnam, race relations and religion during this period have provided a fountain of historical research and narratives on this turbulent period. However, the political and social activities of Ali's contemporaries have been largely ignored, as well as the influences on those activities. When we examine the individual histories and experiences of Floyd Patterson, Sonny Liston, Joe Frazier and George Foreman, we see that each man shared several similarities. All emerged from the rural south and into the cities of the north and west as part of the mass exodus now known to history as the Great Migration. This research will
argue that this movement not only affected these men physically (specifically, the physical spaces they lived and worked in), but also helped to shape their ideas and understandings about racial identity, civil rights and race relations as young men and adults.

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**Keywords**
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The champion, Floyd Patterson, could not have been more different from Liston. He was an Olympic gold medalist and the youngest man to ever wear the heavyweight crown. Instead of being reared by the mob as Liston had been, Patterson had been brought through the boxing ranks by Cus D'Amato, a legendary and revered trainer. Liston never enjoyed the same. To social-climbing blacks and even civil rights activists — ever conscious of the image high-profile blacks portrayed to the world — Liston represented the wrong version of blackness for an age when change seemed sible — change threatened, however, by the unsavory image of Liston. Two decades later, the civil rights movement and integration would give poor black men access to those same pathways and eventually drain boxing's black pipeline. But first, Cassius Clay would propel prizefighting to an unprecedented level of cultural importance by turning his black rivals into symbols of white

With his tongue and charm captivating the white media, Ali browbeat Joe Frazier, George Foreman, Sonny Liston, Ken Norton and countless other challengers, thus placing them on opposite side of the moving color line Ali enforced as passionately as John L. Sullivan administered his. After the passage of civil rights legislation, desperation waned and opportunities for advancement burgeoned.