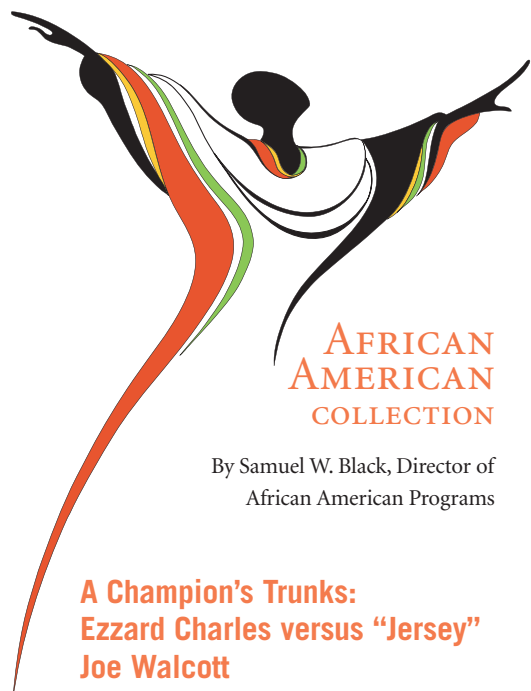


UP FRONT



By Samuel W. Black, Director of
African American Programs

A Champion's Trunks: Ezzard Charles versus "Jersey" Joe Walcott

When "Jersey" Joe Walcott was crowned the heavyweight boxing champion of the world, neither he nor his fallen opponent, Ezzard Charles, realized that Charles' boxing trunks would serve as material evidence of that historic occasion. Two years previously, in June 1949, Charles had defeated Walcott and claimed the heavyweight championship. The two pugilists came together again at Forbes Field on July 18, 1951, in the only heavyweight championship ever fought at that venue. Here, Charles' defense of his title served as a major milestone for Forbes Field and in Black sports nationwide.

Charles and Walcott had a long history together; they fought each other four times in three years. Today it is difficult to get top fighters in the ring together multiple times unless a world title is contended, but during boxing's heyday in the first half of the 20th century it was much more common. Major match-ups included Jack Johnson vs. Joe Jeanette (6), Charles vs. Walcott (4), Charles vs. Jimmy Bivins (5), Sugar Ray Robinson vs. Jake La Motta (5), Charley Burley vs. Holman Williams (6), and more recently Manny Pacquiao vs. Juan Manuel Marquez (5).



Learn More Online

Video of the Ezzard Charles vs. "Jersey"
Joe Walcott match

Black satin trunks with white trim worn by heavyweight champion of the world Ezzard Charles in his title fight against "Jersey" Joe Walcott, July 18, 1951. In the only heavyweight championship bout hosted at Forbes Field, Walcott upset Charles by knockout in the seventh round. Steelers owner Art Rooney and his partner in boxing promotion Barney McGinley promoted the bout. More than 28,000 fans attended what *Ring* magazine called the "Fight of the Year."

HHC Collections, gift of John R. McGinley, Jr., 2007.33.1. Photo by Liz Simpson.

Local sportsmen and owners of the Steelers, Art Rooney and Barney McGinley, promoted the Charles versus Walcott match. While Charles was entering a Pittsburgh ring for the 10th time in his career, the 37-year-old Walcott was fighting in the city for the first time. *Pittsburgh Courier* sports reporter Al Dunmore referred to Pittsburgh as Charles' "adopted hometown" because he fought here so much. However, as the boxers entered the ring, Walcott received the loudest applause.¹ Most people attribute the cool welcome for Charles to his unpopularity after defeating the beloved Joe Louis in the legends comeback title challenge in 1950. Charles found it hard to replace Louis as champion.

The 1951 bout was the ninth defense of the heavyweight championship for Charles. He spent most of his professional career that began in 1940 fighting at middleweight and light heavyweight.² In fact, he is recognized as one of the greatest light heavyweights of all time. Undersized as a heavyweight, Charles tipped the scales at 183 pounds — nothing like today's super-sized fighters, who rarely go below 220 pounds. Charles and Walcott were from a different era and fought at less than 200 pounds each. Nicknamed the "Cincinnati Cobra," Charles was the first man to defeat Joe Louis in a heavyweight championship fight in 1950. Louis was a national hero and such an icon of Black sport culture that Charles is said to have wept

in the dressing room after the fight. Walcott too fought Louis but lost in his first bid at the heavyweight title in 1949. The 1951 Forbes Field fight would be Walcott's fourth shot at the title, and at age 37 his chances of becoming champion were fading fast.

Charles set up his training camp at a house owned by Earl Stroupe in Ligonier. Walcott trained at Rainbow Gardens in McKeesport.³ Both men entered the ring with impressive records: Charles claimed 71 wins, 5 losses, and 1 draw, while Walcott entered at 49, 16, and 2. Their previous two fights had built-up an intensity between them, and with the title on the line it promised to be one of the more explosive bouts in heavyweight history. That Wednesday evening, 28,000 fight fans crowded into Forbes Field.⁴ The live television audience in 46 cities nationwide tuned into what would be the largest audience to ever see a televised championship fight.⁵

Charles was the champion and favorite, and looked the part. He entered the ring with a bounce in his step. His white robe and black trunks clashed with Walcott's white trunks and plain robe. But once the fight started it was evident that Walcott's left hook would continue to find Charles' jaw. It was unlike their last fight, where Charles had dropped Walcott in round nine on his way to a unanimous decision win. This time Jersey Joe was smooth with his counter-punching, fade in and out style. Charles changed ring positions almost

Boxer Ezzard Charles poses with children wearing "Cheers for Charles" sashes, including Ethel Holt, Jacqueline Holyfield, Chestina Mallory, Barbara Jackson, Ernestine Allen, and Johnnie Allen, Donald Smith, and possibly Carl Redwood Jr. on left, in Ligonier High School gymnasium, 1951.

Charles "Teenie" Harris, © 2016 Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh: Heinz Family Fund, 2001.35.6200.

unnecessarily and his bounce began to fade. But whenever Walcott got close to land his patented left hook, Charles countered with a series of right and left hooks to the body and chin, then faded to Walcott's right to escape. Each man landed significant blows and the crowd cheered at every punch.⁶ By the end of the sixth round Charles was ahead on points. Pittsburgh had never seen a heavyweight championship fight with so much action.⁷

In round seven, Walcott landed one of the best left hooks in boxing history and sent the champion Charles collapsing at his feet in the center of the ring. Charles fell face-first and struggled to get up. In fact, he never got up completely, as he fell backward into the neutral corner and onto the seat of his trunks, where he was counted out. Jersey Joe Walcott was mobbed by his handlers and the press—he was not only crowned heavyweight champion of the world, but was also the oldest fighter to ever claim the title. Never again would a heavyweight champion have so many losses (16). And not until George Foreman defeated Monessen's Michael Moorer in 1994 at age 45 would someone break Walcott's old-age record. The next heavyweight championship

fight in Pittsburgh would be the 1981 Larry Holmes TKO of Renaldo Snipes at the Civic Arena. Charles versus Walcott was voted *Ring* magazine's fight of the year.

Both Ezzard Charles and Jersey Joe Walcott became Hall of Fame fighters. *Ring* magazine honored Charles as fighter of the year for 1949 and 1950 and the greatest light heavyweight of all time in 1994.⁸ He was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 1990. Walcott was honored as fighter of the year in 1951 and inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame with Charles. He served important capacities both inside and outside the ring. He refereed the Muhammad Ali versus Sonny Liston "phantom punch" rematch in Lewiston, Maine, in May 1965, and served as New Jersey State Boxing Commissioner from 1975 to 1984.

The trunks that Charles wore in his Forbes Field heavyweight title match are now preserved in the collection of the History Center. Made by Everlast, one of the leading boxing equipment

companies at that time, the trunks are made of black and white satin and cotton, and were also worn by Charles during his historic fight against Joe Louis in 1950. These trunks not only document the thrilling championship fight but serve as a reminder of the many sporting activities once held at Forbes Field, as well as the dynamic world of Black sports in 20th-century America.

¹ Al Dunmore, "Did Crowd Reaction Beat EZ?" *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 28, 1951, 14.

² Charles took a hiatus from 1944 to 1945 while he served in the army during World War II.

³ Images of both training camps are in the Charles "Teenie" Harris Archives of the Carnegie Museum of Art.

⁴ "Did Crowd Reaction Beat EZ?" 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶ Youtube.com/watch?v=p4jK73WONBk; Boxing.com shows the full fight from an ESPN Classic broadcast. The original distributor of the film was Big Fights, Inc. The fight was shown live on television in the early days of televised fights.

⁷ This fight was the second major heavyweight fight in Pittsburgh following Jack Johnson's defeat of New Castle's Tony Ross at the Duquesne Gardens on June 30, 1909. *The Pittsburgh Post* did not count the Johnson versus Ross fight as a title fight. Johnson battered Ross around the ring at will for six rounds, sending him down for a nine count in the first round and an eight count in the third. Johnson was so confident that he spent much time entertaining his audience until he had to go to work and land meaningful blows to win.

⁸ *Ring* magazine was called the boxing bible as it was the leading boxing journal for most of the 20th century. *Ring* also was the official sanction of champions.



Boxer "Jersey" Joe Walcott with a baby on his lap, getting a haircut from barber Clarence "Speedy" Williams at the Crystal Barber Shop in the Hill District, July 1951.

Charles "Teenie" Harris, © 2016 Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh: Heinz Family Fund, 2001.35.6734.