Interview with Jim Jacobs
Date: January 17, 1985
Interviewer: N/A
Camera Rolls: 39, 40, 41
Sound Rolls: 21, 22
Team: V. Grundez

Interview gathered as part of *Black Champions*. Produced by Miles Educational Film Productions, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, William Miles Collection.

Interview with Jim Jacobs, conducted by Miles Educational Film Productions, Inc. on January 17 1985 for *Black Champions*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, William Miles Collection.

Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in bold italics was used in the final version of *Black Champions*.

[camera roll 39]

[sound roll 21]

[slate]

00:00:00:00 — 00:03:58:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Speed. Hit it, please.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Sound 69.

[slate]

Jim Jacobs:

Well, Jack Johnson was the f-—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Start all over, please, Mr. Jacobs.

Jim Jacobs:

Certainly. Jack Johnson was the first black heavyweight champion that we ever had. He was an extraordinary individual, extraordinary because in the turn of the century, when it was very difficult to succeed as a black athlete, he not only succeeded, but he managed to demonstrate his own particular brand of confusion inasmuch as he made the white community play the game by his rules. And this is quite extraordinary. It, it would be difficult today, but in 1908, when he won the Heavyweight Championship in Sydney, Australia, from Tommy Burns, Johnson was singularly unique. There were many reasons. One is that he was the type of fighter who disassociated himself from all emotion. When he fought, he always gave the impression that he was having a wonderful time. He talked to his opponents the same way that I would talk to a friend of mine at dinner: without any emotion, making gags, cutting up. And then, after demonstrating enormous superiority over all of the heavyweights at the time—being heavyweight champion from 1907 to 1915—he married three different white wives. And of course, the community, the white community at that time, was aghast. And what they did, in 1912, Johnson was taking his secretary around the United States. Her name was Lucille Cameron. And the white community had no one to beat Jack Johnson in the ring, and the only way they could get at him is to pass a law making it illegal to take a woman, a s-, so-called—this is, was Lucille Cameron—over a state line for immoral purposes.

[missing frames]

Jim Jacobs:

And***—the Congress of the United States passed a law called the Mann Act, and it was specifically passed to get Jack Johnson. [Note Interview gathered as part of Black Champions; Episode 1]***

[missing frames]

Jim Jacobs:

And they tried him, sentence-, sentenced Johnson to five years in prison. As the heavyweight champion of the world, he fled the United States in 1912, and went to Europe. He defended the title twice. Once, twice in France. And then defended the title finally against Jess Willard in Havana, Cuba. That was a very controversial fight. Johnson always claimed, in the twenty-sixth round—and that's twenty-six three-minute rounds—that he threw the fight. He made a deal, he stated, with the Federal authorities to come back to the United States of America to see his mother, and the only way they would permit him to come back to the United States to see his mom was to throw the fight to Jess Willard. That was his position. When you look at the fight film—which is remarkably clear, shockingly clear—you make your own decision. I could go on. Clayton—I could go on, and on, and on.

Interviewer #1:

Please do.

Jim Jacobs:

I didn't know—I mean, I, this is not a Jim Jacobs show, this is a, a black athlete show.

00:03:59:00 — 00:06:26:00

Interviewer #1:

I know, but please, could you—may-, maybe you would talk about your own conclusions from looking at the film of the Jess Willard fight.

Jim Jacobs:

Well, regarding the Jess Willard/Jack Johnson fight, I'm not exempt from the disadvantage of being human, and I make mistakes. But I've watched tens of thousands of fight films. I believe Jack Johnson was beaten in Havana, Cuba, by Jess Willard. And the reason for that is they fought at twelve noon, under one hundred and eight degrees of enervating heat. It was suffocating heat. The rounds were three minutes. Now, Johnson tried desperately—I repeat, desperately—in the eighth and ninth round to knock Willard out, and his flurries could very well have won the fight. But he was unsuccessful-, unsuccessful. Willard was six foot, seven inches tall, 240 pounds, and what he lacked in, in boxing skills he made up with enthusiasm and, and strength. And Johnson eventually, after twenty-six three-minute rounds, under terrible heat, was hit by a right hand, went down, and it appears that his right hand goes up and shields his eyes from the sun. It, he states that that's what transpired.

[missing frames]

Jim Jacobs:

But***—logically, I always thought that if a man was going to throw a fight under such horrible conditions, where it was insufferable just to stand under the sun, [laughs] I always thought if I was gonna dump a fight, I'd—***

[missing frames]

Jim Jacobs:

—dump it in round three round six, round seven. I wouldn't go twenty-six three-minute rounds. So I came to the—

[missing frames]

Jim Jacobs:

—conclusion that Johnson was beaten fairly and squarely, and that I think Jack would rather—it's, extraordinary as it is, I think that he would rather have people think that he

threw the fight than lost the fight. [Note Interview gathered as part of Black Champions; Episode 1]

[missing frames]

Jim Jacobs:

Now, I could be entirely wrong, but that's the conclusion I came to. I never met Jack Johnson, but I've, I've fallen in love with the guy.

[missing frames]

Jim Jacobs:

He is, ***he is Muhammad Ali of, of 1908 to 1915. He played by his own rules. He was supremely indifferent. He, he had the type of arrogance that was classic. That was the reason he was such a great, great fighter. [Note Interview gathered as part of Black Champions; Episode 1]***

[missing frames]

Jim Jacobs:

And that's one great more than I give most fighters.

00:06:27:00 00:07:29:00

Interviewer #1:

Well, d-, could you tell us something about hi-, his, his actual physical skills. What made him such a superior fighter? I mean, we know Ali was perhaps faster than most of the heavyweights he was bouting in his time.

Jim Jacobs:

[coughs] Jack Johnson's physical skills are something that the, the average television watcher would not possibly understand. Because when you l-, watch an, a Muhammad Ali, people will say, he was lightning fast, which he was; or when you watch Joe Louis, people will say, he was a great, magnificent feat-, finisher. He never missed when he finished a fighter. Five punches and he was out. But Johnson had many things going for him which only an athlete would understand. Only an athlete would, would, would be able to perceive that Johnson was [phone rings] unaffected. Johnson was unaffected by his emotions. [phone rings] [unintelligible] I can, I can repeat that. I hear the bell.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Do you wanna stop, Vinnie?

Interviewer #2:

Cut.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Cut it out, man.

[cut]

00:07:30:00 — 00:09:44:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Speed. Hit it, please.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Sound seventy.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK. Go ahead.

Jim Jacobs:

The qualities that make Jack Johnson a magnificent fighter are not the type of qualities that the average television watcher would be able to perceive, and I say that with all respect. When, when people talk about Muhammad Ali, they measure things of what they can see with their eyes. Ali was lightning fast, almost—it was almost unfair, Ali was so terribly fast when he fought other heavyweights. Joe Louis, who is my favorite fighter, was a great finisher. ***When he got a fighter in trouble, he would land seven consecutive punches, and each one would hit, hit the guy on the jaw, and the public could see that.*** But Johnson, Johnson had a quality which was truly the essence of the sport, and that is, Jack Johnson was the true professional. Now, if you look up the word professional in the English dictionary, it'll say, a professional is a fellow who gets paid money for his performance, and an amateur is an individual who doesn't get paid for his performance. But that's incorrect. A professional is a man who has a job to do, and in spite of the way he or she feels, does what must be done in order to accomplish their objectives. The amateur, feeling the same way, lets the way they feel adversely affect their performance. Johnson was a professional. No matter how he felt, his conduct in the ring was that of a great professional fighter. You never knew—when you hit him, he never revealed whether it hurt or not. He always did what had to be done in the

ring in order to win. Always fought within the rules. And he was something very special around the turn of the century. I've always felt—and I don't confine this to boxing— ***[Note Interview gathered as part of Black Champions; Episode 1]***

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Jim Jacobs:

—but each generation of athletes uses the accumulated knowledge of their predecessors.

Interviewer #2:

Cut off.

[production discussion]

00:09:45:00 — 00:11:23:00

[camera roll 40]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Sound seventy-one.

[slate]

Jim Jacobs:

One of the things that, whenever fighters get together, that is f-, always a form of mental masturbation is when you say, could Louis have beaten Johnson? Could Johnson have beaten Ali? Could Jack Dempsey have beaten -- Rocky Marciano? I never got involved in, I don't like to get involved in any of those types of discussions, because it's, it's always been my feeling—I feel very strongly about this, and I don't confine it to boxing. I think it's this way with people. I think, think each generation of people—boxers, athletes—each generation uses the accumulated knowledge of their predecessors as a jumping-off point for further development. So I think that people get better. I don't think it's confined to boxing, but I'm including boxing. So when Jack Johnson was the heavyweight champion from 1908 to 1915, he demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was greatest heavyweight of the time. And that's sufficient. If, if Joe Louis wants to use Jack Johnson as a stepping-stone to get better, or if Muhammad Ali wants to use Ray Robinson as a stepping-stone to get better, I find it unnecessary to say whether Jack Johnson could have beaten Joe Louis, or whether Joe Louis could have beaten Muhammad A-, Ali. It's enough for a [phone rings]—I'll wait. It's—you probably pick up the bell?

Camera Crew Member #2:

Yes.

Interviewer #1:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

Cut.

[cut]

00:11:24:00 — 00:11:31:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Speed.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Sound seventy-two. [phone rings]

Interviewer #1:

[laughs]

Jim Jacobs:

Why don't you take it off the hook? It's a—

[no audio]

[cut]

00:11:32:00 — 00:12:50:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Speed.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Sound seventy-three.

[slate]

Jim Jacobs:

It's enough that a man wins the world heavyweight championship and demonstrates a degree of superiority for many, many years over the competition. I think that's an, a, a remarkable achievement. And that's the reason I never like to get involved in hypothetical fights—whether a fighter in the eighteenth century could beat one in the nineteenth century, and, or so on. Jack Johnson was undoubtedly one of the great heavyweight champions of all time. If he had been born in 1940 instead of the 1800s, there is no question that he would have fought differently. H-, when he was seven years old, he would have w-, gone to the television set and he would have seen fighters like Sugar Ray Robinson, and he woulda said, ah, that's the way to fight. But what he did—

[missing frames]

Jim Jacobs:

—in the turn of the century, ***he brought a new dimension to the sport of boxing. He brought a defense, a type of heavyweight fighting where he accomplished his objective, and when the fight was over, you never knew what his profession was. You looked at his face.***

[missing frames]

Jim Jacobs:

It was never, ever marked. And that was remarkable. ***[Note Interview gathered as part of Black Champions; Episode 1]***

00:12:51:00 — 00:14:44:00

Interviewer #1:

Jim, I wonder if you'd talk a little bit about the, the ability, the—

Jim Jacobs:

[coughs]

Interviewer #1:

—capacity of fighters around the turn of the century, like Jack Johnson, particularly—to go twenty-six three-minute rounds was unheard of in modern boxing.

Jim Jacobs:

Around the turn of the century—

[missing frames]

Jim Jacobs:

—fights were scheduled, not for fifteen rounds, but fer [sic], for forty-five three-minute rounds. And this was considered normal. This was not considered unusual. Fighters trained with a great deal of zeal and enthusiasm.

[missing frames]

Jim Jacobs:

And they did not place any unrealistic limitations on themselves. You find today, in the 1980s, when athletes, when someone tells an athlete, something cannot be done, what it really means—when someone tells you something can't be done, it really means that they can't do it. It shouldn't create in you any sense of obligation. In -- at the turn of the century, the lightweight fights for the world title, Gans-Nelson; the heavyweight fights, Jack Johnson, Jim Jeffries—they were scheduled for forty-five rounds. Gans-Nelson went forty-one rounds. When Nelson fought Welga-, Wolgast, went forty rounds. Hectic, three minute rounds, all out action. They weren't tired because they thought it was proper to train in a fashion which permitted the body to fight forty-five three-minute—

[missing frames]

Jim Jacobs:

—rounds. ***Today, a vast majority of the fighters—not all of them. Not all of them. But a vast majority of them, after six rounds, they're exhausted. And it's, it's rather humorous, because they don't even know boxing history, and they don't understand, in Jack Johnson's time it was just normal to fight forty-five three-minute rounds. [Note Interview gathered as part of Black Champions; Episode 1]***

[missing frames]

Interviewer #1:

OK. Cut.

Interviewer #2:

Cut.

[cut]

00:14:45:00 — 00:17:51:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Speed.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Sound seventy-four.

[slate]

Jim Jacobs:

Well -- Joe Louis is a fighter, a human, that I always adored. I was born in 1930, so that when I was a, a kid in 1937, when Louis won the heavyweight championship from James J. Braddock, and then went on to defend it over a period of eleven years. When I was a youngster, I always thought that President Roosevelt was always gonna be president, and that Joe Louis was always going to be the heavyweight champion of the world. I can remember as clearly as yesterday how I g-, became so terribly excited to listen to a Joe Louis fight over the radio. And it was something very special. And when I became older in my twenties, and went into the fight film business, and met Joe, it was, it-, it's hard to think of an analogy. But there was no human I wanted to talk with or be with more than Joe Louis. He was a very special man. As a, as a fighter, his record, of course, stands for itself. He defended the, the title twenty-five times consecutively. He never regained the title because he never lost the title. When people talk about Ali, who was a marvelous, magnificent fighter, regaining the title three times, you have to lose it in order to regain it. Louis could have re-won the title twelve times. All he did is fight twenty-five guys over eleven years and beat them all. A v-, a magnificent fighter. His qualities in the ring—I, I could talk about his qualities out of the ring. But in the ring, he gave off an aura that fifty percent of the time defeated the opposition before the bell rang.

[missing frames]

Jim Jacobs:

He w—***Louis was very unique, because when the people fought him, they were so awestruck before the f-, the f-, the fight began, that they couldn't perform the way they normally did in other fights. Not that th-, it would have helped them. It would have just made the fight more interesting.***

[missing frames]

Jim Jacobs:

Louis had enormous hand-speed. He didn't have the foot-speed of Muhammad Ali, but he had enormous hand-speed, ***and he was terribly accurate.*** And ***when a fighter was hurt in a Louis fight, the fight was over. There was no finisher, none, like Joe Louis.*** When a fighter was hurt, six punches later the referee would be counting ten over him. Louis, when he came up as a youngster in 1934, when he turned pro, he knocked everyone out. And he brought into boxing a type of—lemme, lemme gather my thoughts, and then I'll start that sentence. ***[Note Interview gathered as part of Black Champions; Episode 1]***

Interviewer #2:

Cut.

[production discussion]

[missing frames]

[cut]

00:17:52:00

[camera roll 41]

[sound roll 22]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Black Champions. January seventeenth, 1985. Camera roll forty-one, sound roll twenty-two, sound seventy-five.

Jim Jacobs:

When—

[missing frames]

Jim Jacobs:

—Joe Louis came up and turned professional in 1934, the last black champion, heavyweight champion, that we had had was Jack Johnson. And the community, the white community, thought that Jack Johnson's conduct was deplorable, so that—

[missing frames]

Jim Jacobs:

—Joe Louis's managers, handlers—Julian Black; Jack Blackburn, his, his trainer—

[missing frames]

Jim Jacobs:

—they impressed upon Joe that his conduct had to be exemplary in the ring. There were many things that perhaps Joe may or may not have wanted to do in terms of expressing himself in the ring, but they, they were very careful to let Joe understand that he had to be perfect. His conduct had to be perfect. He had to always fight within the framework of the rules. And there were many times when other great champions fought within the rules. But if the opponent brought in a new set of rules, then the champion would fight by those rules. Louis, never. Louis always fought by the book, and he was such a great, great fighter that he could do that. He never showed any emotion in the ring. You could never tell by looking at Joe Louis when the fight was over, whether he had won or lost. He had just been told that was the way to conduct yourself, and I personally believe it was rather innate with him. [Note Interview gathered as part of Black Champions; Episode 1]

[missing frames]

Jim Jacobs:

One of the stories that I love about Joe Louis. About t-, nine years ago, I got an idea to get all of the living heavyweight champions together in Las Vegas. A gentleman by the name of Bob Andreoli financed it, and we got thirteen heavyweight champions in the same room: Schmeling, Louis, Patterson, Johansson, Sharkey—all of these great heavyweight champions—Ali—all in the same room, talking boxing. And Ali said to Louis in an exchange, well, you went on a bum a month tour, and, tho-, a lot of those twenty-five title defenses, that, that bum a month tour, you just fought bums. And Louis said, well, you might say that some of them were bums, but he s-, said to Ali, you woulda been on that tour— [Note Interview gathered as part of Black Champions; Episode 1]

[missing frames]

Jim Jacobs:

—[laughs] which I always got a big kick out of [laughs], because Louis was great, absolutely great, at the one-liners. Louis, of course, had a lot of problems with taxes which are well-documented, but in my book, at his best—and we always talk about a fighter at his best, not when he's a young kid or when, when he's an old man. But at his best, I personally would take Louis over any heavyweight who ever lived. And I adore Ali, but I would take Louis as the greatest heavyweight champion of all time.

00:21:09:00

Interviewer #1:

Wha-, what are the qualities that, that you think go into making this particular champion, or were there all kinds of champions? The heavyweight champion, of course, in the United States is a, is a particularly special figure. Knowing these people, having watched their films or met them, known them personally, what is it—is there a particular quality about the heavyweight champion that perhaps shows up in most of them, or, or all of them?

Jim Jacobs:

The one thing that stands out amongst the heavyweight champions, is that they are absolutely nothing alike. Nothing alike. There isn't any ingredient that one looks for in a Joe Frazier, or a Joe Louis, or a Max Schmeling, or a Muhammad Ali. The time then you, when you realize that they're so dramatically different is when you get them in the same room talking boxing, and they can't even agree on what day it is. They don't agree on anything. The only thing, the only thread, the only spine that holds them together is that they were all the heavyweight champion of the world. But their, their personalities are vast and varied, and some of them are extroverts, like Ali; and some of them are introverts, like the wonderful Floyd Patterson. There is nothing about 'em that are the same, except that marvelous courage, that great intestinal fortitude, that carried them on to achieve what I believe is the greatest athletic achievement of all time, and that is the world heavyweight championship.

Interviewer #1:

OK, cut.

Interviewer #2:

Cut.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:22:52:00