

**Champion of the *Patria*: Kid Chocolate, Athletic Achievement, and the Significance
of Race for Cuban National Aspiration**

Enver Michel Casimir

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Approved by:

Louis A. Pérez, Jr.

Kathryn J. Burns

John C. Chasteen

John F. Kasson

Jocelyn H. Olcott

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ABSTRACT

ENVER MICHEL CASIMIR: Champion of the Patria: Kid Chocolate, Athletic Achievement, and the Significance of Race for Cuban National Aspiration
(Under the direction of Louis A. Pérez, Jr.)

As the country's first world champion in the sport of boxing, Kid Chocolate was enormously popular among Cubans when he fought professionally between 1928 and 1938, and remains a national hero to this day. This dissertation focuses on Cuban reactions to the career of Kid Chocolate in order to examine how racial ideology factors into the link between sport and Cuban nationalism. It argues that the close link between sport and nationalism in Cuba preceded the triumph of the socialist revolution of 1959, and was directly related to the role that athletic competition, particularly boxing, took on globally as a site for the articulation and contestation of notions of racial and national hierarchy by the 1920s. Sport emerged as an important mode of nationalist expression in Cuba because it helped to address specific concerns regarding race and the feasibility of the Cuban nation-building project. Through his success as a professional boxer in North American rings, Kid Chocolate not only ignited a sense of national pride among Cubans, he also directly challenged racial ideologies of the era that cast African descended peoples as incapable and inferior. Thus he helped to allay Cuban fears that the African heritage of a significant portion of the population doomed the newly independent nation to backwardness and poverty.

In addition to demonstrating the feasibility of using athletic achievement to bolster national prestige, Chocolate helped create the niche of the hero-athlete as a means of discursively integrating Afro-Cuban men into the nation-building project. The power of Chocolate's example drew on a tradition of highlighting the role of Afro-Cuban men as perpetrators of legitimate violence on behalf of the nation; a tradition that had its roots in the wars for independence. As a result, his career both reflected and reinforced a celebration of a hierarchical fraternity between white men and men of color for the good of the nation, as well as the notion that the principal way in which men of color could contribute to Cuban nation-building was through physical exertion.

To my family.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	xi
INTRODUCTION.....	1
Chapter	
I. RACIAL HIERARCHIES, NATIONAL HIERARCHIES AND ATHLETIC COMPETITION AS METAPHOR.....	19
The <i>Cuba Contemporánea</i> Group and Cuban Nation-Building	19
The Global Rise and Significance of Sport in the Early Twentieth Century.....	23
The Special Significance of Boxing.....	32
Race and the Feasibility of Cuban Nationhood.....	38
The Turn to Sport as a Means of Proving Cuban “Fitness”	54
II. RISE OF A CUBAN CHAMPION.....	77
The Boy Who Grew up in the Ring.....	77
The Sensation of New York.....	84
Dimensions of Celebrity.....	99
Racial Identities and National Identities.....	108
The Quest for a Championship.....	120
III. ICONOGRAPHY OF A NATIONAL HERO.....	133
Northern Exposure – Sport as a Cultural Contact Zone.....	134
Seeing the Self Through the Eyes of the Other – North	

American Praise and Popularity as Validation.....	142
Kid Chocolate as a Source of International Prestige and National Pride.....	152
Welcoming the Hero – The Homecomings of Kid Chocolate.....	162
Redeeming the Republic – Kid Chocolate as a Compensatory Sports Hero.....	172
IV. THE <i>NEGRITO</i> AS NATIONAL HERO: THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF RACIAL INCLUSION IN REPUBLICAN CUBA.....	194
Anti-Racism as Nationalist Expression.....	195
Blackness and Cubanness.....	201
Heroism and Denial – Kid Chocolate and Domestic Race Relations.....	209
From the Battlefield to the Boxing Ring – Kid Chocolate and the Construction of Afro-Cuban Masculinity.....	217
Racialized Masculinity and the Limits of Male Privilege.....	230
V. THE FALL OF A SUPERSTAR AND THE LEGACY OF AN ICON.....	247
The Fall of Kid Chocolate.....	247
The <i>Dirección General de Deportes</i> and the Institutional Commitment to Cuban Sport.....	264
The Legacy of Kid Chocolate – Sport and Cuban Nationality.....	277
CONCLUSION.....	285
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	297

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure

1.1	“The End of a Fairy Tale”.....	62
2.1	Luis Angel Firpo, Argentine Heavyweight.....	116
2.2	Paulino Uzcundún, Basque Heavyweight.....	117
2.3	Kid Chocolate.....	118
3.1	Cover of the Inaugural Issue of <i>Nocaut</i> Magazine.....	151
3.2	The September 1929 Homecoming of Kid Chocolate to Havana – Image 1.....	166
3.3	The September 1929 Homecoming – Image 2.....	166
3.4	“Kid Chocolate and His New Car”.....	176
3.5	Advertisement for the Soft Drink <i>Kola Astier</i>	181
3.6	Advertised Endorsement for Pasteurized Milk.....	182
3.7	Advertisement for the Beverage <i>Trimalta</i>	183
3.8	Advertisement for <i>Tropical</i> Beer.....	184
3.9	Advertisement for the Soft Drink <i>Champan Sport</i>	185
4.1	March 9, 1930 Cover of <i>Carteles</i> Magazine.....	227
4.2	Nude photograph of Kid Chocolate in <i>Carteles</i> magazine.....	234
4.3	Nude photograph of Kid Chocolate in <i>Nocaut</i> magazine.....	235
4.4	Nude photograph of Kid Chocolate as printed in <i>Carteles</i> magazine....	236
5.1	Fulgencio Batista and the <i>Ciudad Deportiva</i>	274

Introduction

In the summer of 1931, a twenty-year old Afro-Cuban returned to Havana after a four-month stay in the United States. Upon his arrival in the capital, residents of the city turned out “*en masse*” to demonstrate their adulation for the young man; throngs flooded the *Caballería* pier in Havana to await his arrival.¹ Indeed, before he had even set foot in Cuba, the Cuban consul and a large number of expatriates had greeted him in Key West to offer their congratulations as he made his way back to Havana. Once in Havana he was taken to a reception in his honor where members of the presidential cabinet waited to greet and congratulate him. Adoring crowds outside the hotel were so overwhelming that he needed a police escort to leave the building.² Shortly thereafter one Havana daily dubbed him the “most popular figure in Havana,”³ and he spent the next few weeks attending events in his honor. Headlines announcing his exploits appeared throughout major newspapers and his image appeared in the most popular magazines in the country.

Why had so many Cubans come out to greet and cheer this young man? Precisely what had he accomplished in the United States that endeared him to the populace and generated such enthusiasm at a time of deepening economic and political crisis on the island? He had just won the world junior lightweight boxing championship, and because

¹ *Havana Post*, July 24, 1931, p. 2.

² *Ibid.*, p. 11. Jess Losada, “*Regresa nuestra campeón*,” *Carteles* 17 (July 26, 1931), supplement p. vii.

³ *Diario de la Marina*, July 28, 1931, p. 13.

of this feat he had achieved status as a national hero. The young man was born Eligio Sardiñas, but the world had come to know him by another name: Kid Chocolate.

In a country that reveres its sports heroes and has a reputation for excellence in international boxing competition, Kid Chocolate holds a special place as the first Cuban boxing world champion. Immensely popular when he boxed professionally from 1928 to 1938, he was one of the very first members of the Cuban sports pantheon, and remains a national icon to this day. Both during and after his tenure as a professional boxer, Chocolate generated reams of writing in the media, as well as poetry, works of drama and documentary films. He is still considered by many to be the best Cuban boxer of all time, and a gym bearing his name sits directly across from the *Capitolio* building in the heart of Havana.

Kid Chocolate's popularity in Cuba provides the initial point of inquiry for this project. Precisely why did he enjoy such tremendous popularity in Cuba? The methodological approach of this dissertation centers on the persona of Kid Chocolate and its meaning for Cubans. Where possible, I have tried to pull the individual Eligio Sardiñas out of the historical record, but my project incorporates a self-conscious focus on his alter ego, Kid Chocolate. Historian John Kasson has examined the historical significance of iconic American figures by highlighting the question of larger cultural needs. He has suggested that the popularity of celebrities in a society can be largely explained by the ways in which their personas directly address the concerns and anxieties that are prevalent in that society.⁴ The driving question behind this project is: what were

⁴ See John F. Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), especially the introduction for an example and discussion of how celebrities can help to illuminate broader cultural developments.

the larger concerns of Cubans that the career of Kid Chocolate helped to address?⁵ Thus my intent is to use his career as a prism through which I can examine some of the hopes, fears and aspirations that preoccupied many Cubans during the early years of the republican era.⁶

In so doing, this study seeks to illuminate the origins of the close link between sport and Cuban nationalism, tracing these origins to notions about race, development and nation-building that were of great concern to many Cubans in the first few decades after independence from Spain in 1898. This dissertation provides a corrective to common misconceptions about why sport has been and continues to be a significant facet of Cuban national expression. Generally Cuban achievement in international athletic competition is seen strictly as an accomplishment of the post-1959 revolutionary state, an attempt by the Castro government to leverage sporting success as justification for a socialist mode of socioeconomic organization, similar to efforts in the Soviet Union, East Germany and other countries in the eastern bloc. Scholarly explorations of the significance of sport in Cuban society have typically focused on the institutional efforts after 1959. Such studies devote space to sport in pre-revolutionary Cuba only to decry the exploitative nature of professional sports and the indifference of pre-revolutionary governments to the physical well being of the Cuban people as a means of setting up a

⁵ A number of historians of the United States have looked at the lives of sporting celebrities, especially boxers, as a means of gauging the preoccupations and mindset of ordinary citizens. See for example Benjamin G. Rader, "Compensatory Sports Heroes: Ruth, Grange and Dempsey," *Journal of Popular Culture* 16 (Spring 1983), pp. 11-22; Michael T. Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 13; Mike Marqusee, *Redemption Song: Muhammad Ali and the Spirit of the Sixties* (New York: Verso, 1999) and Randy Roberts, *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes* (New York: The Free Press, 1983).

⁶ In Cuban historiography the years 1902-1959 are typically described as the republican years.

favorable comparison for the achievements of the revolution.⁷

That the socialist government in Cuba has made tremendous strides in developing a world-renowned amateur athletic program that produces results way out of proportion to the number of people and amount of resources available in Cuba is undeniable. This government has achieved unprecedented results in sport. My objective here is not to discount these efforts, but to provide a more accurate context for them by highlighting their antecedents in the republican era. Well before 1959, Cubans contemplated and emphasized the usefulness of athletic competition and achievement as part of the nation-building project. Thus efforts by the Castro-led state to promote athletic participation and achievement built on a pre-existing tradition that cast sport as an important facet of Cuban national aspiration and identity.

Dissenting voices have already pointed to the prominence and importance of sport in republican Cuba. José González Echevarría has documented the vibrant and dynamic condition of Cuban baseball before 1959, and briefly commented on efforts by the Cuban state to promote sport.⁸ Similarly, Felix Julio Alfonso and Lou Pérez have also observed that sport held significance for the expression of Cuban national identity as early as the

⁷ See for example Paula J. Pettavino and GERALYN PYE, *Sport in Cuba: The Diamond in the Rough* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994); Eric Wagner, "Sport in Revolutionary Societies: Cuba and Nicaragua," in *Sport and Society in Latin America: Diffusion, Dependency and the Rise of Mass Culture* ed. Joseph L. Arbena (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), pp. 65-73; Julie Marie Bunck, "The Politics of Sports in Revolutionary Cuba," *Cuban Studies* 20 (1990), pp. 111-131; Trevor Slack, "Cuba's Political Involvement in Sport since the Socialist Revolution," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 6, no. 2 (September 1982), pp. 35-45 and R.J. Pickering, "Cuba" in *Sport Under Communism: The U.S.S.R., Czechoslovakia, The G.D.R., China, Cuba* ed. James Riordan (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1978), pp. 141-174.

⁸ Roberto González Echevarría, *The Pride of Havana: A History of Cuban Baseball* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 8-9 and 23.

late nineteenth century.⁹ While these works are significant in their attempts to modify the historical narrative on the association between sport and Cuban nationalism prior to 1959, they do not explore the reasons why this association became especially strong in the 1920s and 1930s, culminating in 1938 with the establishment of a government agency devoted solely to the goal of promoting sport. This study argues that the career of boxer Kid Chocolate is critical in understanding why this link developed as well as apprehending its broader ideological significance. It expands on the works listed above by explaining the origin of the importance of sport in Cuba and situating that explanation within broader historiographical discussions.

By the late 1920s many Cubans were particularly concerned about the feasibility of Cuban nationhood. In the first few decades after independence many wondered how best to foster national progress and development, and whether such progress and development could even be achieved. Doubts with regard to this issue stemmed in large part from long-standing concerns about the racial composition of the Cuban population and its implications for the prospect of joining the family of modern and advanced nations. Even as Cubans struggled to attain independence in the nineteenth century, they grappled with this issue. Spanish colonial authorities repeatedly insisted that the large number of slaves and free people of color on the island made Cuban nationhood unattainable, and independence would only result in chaos and race war. Such assertions forced pro-independence thinkers to confront the issue of race and nationhood and shaped

⁹ See Louis A. Pérez, Jr., "Between Baseball and Bullfighting: The Quest for Nationality in Cuba, 1868-1898," *Journal of American History* 81 (September 1994), pp. 493-517 and Félix Julio Alfonso López, "Las narrativas del béisbol en la construcción del nacionalismo cubano: 1880-1920" in *Perfiles de la nación*, ed. María del Pilar Díaz Castañón (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2004), pp. 123-154.

the very nature of the Cuban independence movement itself.¹⁰

Once independence from Spain was achieved in 1898, the intervention and subsequent occupation of the island by the United States from 1898 to 1902 thwarted Cuban national ambition and hopes for full sovereignty. North American intervention was largely justified by racist ideology that cast Cubans as an inferior people incapable of managing their own affairs, further reinforcing concerns that first arose in the nineteenth century. Continued interference by the United States in Cuban politics ensured that these anxieties regarding Cuban nation building would persist well into the 1930s, if not beyond. In addition, theories of social Darwinism and scientific racism became influential among a significant number of Cuban intellectuals, making many especially preoccupied about whether a population that was at least one-third African-descended could truly attain status as a viable and functioning republic.¹¹ By the 1920s intellectuals and policymakers, as well as many other Cubans, became especially concerned with establishing and confirming the feasibility of Cuban nationhood both to themselves and the rest of the world.

Athletic competition and achievement became one possible way of establishing that feasibility. As chapter 1 relates, by the early twentieth century spectator sport had spread throughout the world to become a prominent cultural facet of modern life. In addition, athletic competition increasingly assumed symbolic significance as a site where social Darwinist notions of racial and national competition and hierarchy were

¹⁰ For a complete discussion of the ways in which Cuban patriot-intellectuals negotiated this issue see Ada Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation and Revolution, 1868-1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

¹¹ For an analysis of this process, see Alejandra Bronfman, *Measures of Equality: Social Science, Citizenship, and Race in Cuba, 1902-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

articulated. Sporting success became a means of projecting national or racial superiority and indicating an advanced level of civilization and development. Boxing in particular, with its spectacle of two individuals engaged in physical combat, assumed significance as a metaphor for struggles between racial or national groups. Policymakers and commentators recognized the new symbolic power of sport throughout the world, and Cuba was no exception. Cuban sports journalists in particular made note of the power of success in sport to both convey and foster a degree of progress and advancement, and argued that because of this Cuba needed to devote resources to promoting the development of sport on the island.

Such was the environment in which Kid Chocolate emerged to become a world-renowned boxer and international celebrity. In the fall of 1928 he burst onto the professional boxing scene in New York City and quickly established himself as one of the best boxers of the day. In addition to garnering praise from North American critics as a superlative fighter, he also became a fan favorite, attracting impressive numbers of spectators to his boxing engagements. Back home his success was interpreted as a boon for Cuban prestige abroad, and proof positive of Cuban capacity in other spheres of human activity. His rise was especially significant because it occurred at a time when Cubans were particularly concerned with proving their fitness for self-rule and capacity for progress and national advancement. His remarkable success confirmed the potential effectiveness of using sport as a means of promoting an image of Cubans as an advanced and capable people, and lent credibility to those who viewed sport as a means of promoting a modern and developed Cuba. He also buoyed national pride at a time when political conflict and economic decline posed acute threats to a sense of well being for

many Cubans.

In addition to deepening our understanding of the historical connection between sport and Cuban nationalism, the career of Kid Chocolate also sheds light on the way race influenced Cuban national aspiration and self-imagining during the Republican era. As a successful athlete who was unmistakably of African descent, Kid Chocolate directly addressed the racial dimensions of Cuban anxieties about their capacity for self-rule and progress. His accomplishments unequivocally challenged racist and Darwinist notions that cast Cubans as an inferior people and did so in a cultural realm, the world of sport, that by the 1920s had assumed considerable currency worldwide as a means of proving the relative “fitness” and status of racial and national groups. As a result, his career also addressed Cuban concerns about how poor Afro-Cubans could engage in activities that contributed to a broader nation-building effort. Through the lens of the career of Kid Chocolate, this study also seeks to highlight the ways in which ideas of race influenced the nature of Cuban nationalism. By the 1930s Cuban nationalism became increasingly linked to an ideology of anti-racism that served to counter racist justifications for North American interference. In addition, a sense of racial inclusion was a key aspect of national identity and self-imagining. Descriptions of the career of Kid Chocolate in the Cuban press illuminate the specific contours of these ideals of nationalist anti-racism and racial inclusion.

In the early twentieth century, Cuban considerations of race reflected two distinct but inter-related spheres; one related to the issue of internal race relations and social practices, and another related to the influence of race on the country’s image and potential for development in comparison to other countries in the world, particularly the

United States. While many Cubans sought to challenge racist ideology in order to assert national sovereignty, the existence of racial discrimination within Cuba remained a taboo subject that many viewed as divisive and counter-productive. Kid Chocolate provided a vehicle which many journalists used to foster a sense of racial fraternity, but he also reflected the ways in which even a sense of cross-racial unity incorporated hierarchical visions of Cuban society. Examining the career of Kid Chocolate can help illuminate some of the ways that Cubans negotiated the relationship between racial ideology and national identity and aspiration. In addition, as boxer and male hero, he also highlighted the gender dimensions of Cuban ideals of racial inclusion.

While it has been a relatively understudied topic in Cuban historiography overall, in the last fifteen to twenty years historians have devoted increased attention to the significance of race in republican Cuba. Some have examined the seeming disjuncture between ideals of racial fraternity that emerged out of the struggles for independence and the continued existence of racial discrimination and inequality. Alejandro de la Fuente and Aline Helg have examined the nature of racial politics in Cuba during the first half of the twentieth century. Both focus their analyses primarily on the political and social realm, documenting the continued existence of racial inequality and examining Afro-Cuban efforts to realize social equality through political mobilization and responses to these efforts by the state and white Cubans.¹² These scholars have built upon the work of Cuban historian Tomás Fernández Robaina, who helped to break a historiographical silence on the relevance of race in twentieth century Cuba with his study of Afro-Cuban

¹² See Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality and Politics in Twentieth Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001) and Aline Helg, *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886-1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

political activism.¹³ Frank Andre Guridy has noted that while the idea of racelessness was a foundational national ideal in Cuba, there was considerable disagreement as to what this racelessness would actually mean or look like. Beneath the veneer of a seemingly monolithic ideal of racial harmony lay a multiplicity of conceptions regarding the meaning of racial equality and how it might take form. This multiplicity reflected divisions in Cuban society based on both class and race, as well as trans-national dialogues with North American actors who articulated their own views on the significance of race.¹⁴

Other historians have initiated analyses of how conceptions of race related to national identity and hopes for national development. Alejandra Bronfman demonstrates that the goal of establishing a viable national polity in the first few decades of the twentieth century prompted intellectuals and policymakers to leverage the social sciences in an effort to manage the “race question” in Cuba. She argues that the influence of scientific racism and concern with which racial theories and practices would be most effective in fostering the development of a modern nation-state reinforced notions of racial difference despite a nominal foundational discourse that cast Cuba as a raceless society.¹⁵ Similarly, Aviva Chomsky, focusing primarily on the 1910s and 1920s, has also noted that concerns with Cuban sovereignty and economic development engendered

¹³ Tomás Fernández Robaina, *El negro en Cuba, 1902-1958: Apuntes para la historia de la lucha contra la discriminación racial* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1990).

¹⁴ Frank Andre Guridy, “Racial Knowledge in Cuba: The Production of a Social Fact, 1912-1944” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2002).

¹⁵ See Bronfman, especially introduction and chapters 1-5.

heated debates on racial policies.¹⁶ Robin Moore observes that beginning in the late 1920s Cubans drew on the African derived components of Cuban culture to assert Cuban identity as a means of defying North American dominance. The resulting intellectual and cultural movement, known as *Afrocubanismo*, marked a significant change in the way blackness and African culture were incorporated into a larger sense of Cubanness, though not necessarily a change in the dynamics of racial inequality within Cuba.¹⁷

This dissertation seeks to add to the historiographical discussion of race in Republican Cuba by highlighting the ways in which race informed Cuban national aspiration and self-imagining in a global context. Race and nation can never be fully disentangled from each other conceptually.¹⁸ As one theorist has noted, the logic underpinning national hierarchies and racial hierarchies are closely related.¹⁹ This was especially the case in the early twentieth century, when theories of social Darwinism held considerable influence throughout the world. As a result, those Cubans who contemplated their relative status in the international community or prospects for national advancement

¹⁶ Aviva Chomsky, “‘Barbados or Canada?’ Race, Immigration and Nation in Early-Twentieth-Century Cuba,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 80, no. 3 (August 2000), pp. 415-462.

¹⁷ Robin Moore, *Nationalizing Blackness: AfroCubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920-1940* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997). Alejandro de la Fuente has also noted the growing links between Cuban nationalism, anti-Americanism and anti-racism. See Alejandro de la Fuente, “‘Antídotos de Wall Street’: Raza y racismo en las relaciones entre Cuba y los Estados Unidos,” in *Culturas encontradas: Cuba y los Estados Unidos*, eds. Rafael Hernández and John H. Coatsworth (Cambridge: David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, Harvard University, 2001), pp. 243-261. For an examination of the *afrocubanismo* movement from the perspective of literary criticism, see Vera Kutzinski, *Sugar’s Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism* (Charlottesville, VA.: University of Virginia Press, 1993.), especially chapter 5.

¹⁸ On this matter I am particularly influenced by the work of Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein. See Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, eds., *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London: Verso, 1991).

¹⁹ Etienne Balibar asserts that one function of the concept of race and the formulation of history as a racial struggle has been to “establish for all time each nation’s status and place in the hierarchy of nations.” See Etienne Balibar, “Racism and Nationalism,” in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* ed. by Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, p. 63.

had no choice but to incorporate understandings of race into their assessments. The relevance of race for Cuban national aspiration was especially salient since racial ideology had been used in the nineteenth century to challenge the feasibility of independence from Spain, and again in the early twentieth century to justify subjugation to the United States. The alleged inferiority of certain racial groups cast a pall over hopes that Cuba could attain status as a fully sovereign and modern nation. If prevalent notions of racial hierarchy could not be refuted or somehow addressed, then prospects for national advancement were grim.

Sport and international athletic competition became a cultural site where racist logics that undermined Cuban nationhood could be challenged and national aspiration could be redeemed. By the 1920s sport had emerged globally as a site for the articulation and contestation of notions of racial and national hierarchy. The symbolic significance of sport had international cachet, and it was almost universally accepted as a means of proving or reflecting the capabilities of racial or national groups. Thus the origins of the significance of sport for Cuban nationalism are very much tied to the ways in which sport served as a means of addressing a particular set of Cuban concerns with respect to the significance of race and the feasibility of Cuban nationhood. By examining these links this project puts the literature on sport in Cuba in dialogue with the literature on race in Cuba.

I hope to further add to the recent historiography on race in republican Cuba by seeking to understand the ways in which gender constructs and norms affected the nature of racial formations and the experience of racial subordination. Because gender influences the ways individuals experience race and vice-versa, our understanding of the

significance of race in pre-revolutionary Cuba will remain incomplete until scholars begin to incorporate gender analysis in their work. This position is informed by the understanding that race and gender (along with other categories of difference) constitute “semiautonomous systems of social inequality and difference, and they structure each other in complex and sometimes contradictory ways.”²⁰ One key analytical goal of this project is to understand how gender can affect notions of racial difference.

In general, the construction of gender in republican Cuba has received scant attention from historians. Lynn Stoner examines political activism among middle and upper-class women, but focuses more on the struggle by Cuban women for political equality rather than on the nature of gender itself as a cultural phenomenon.²¹ Likewise, the interaction between gender and race has also been an understudied theme. One trend has been a focus on the legacy of cross-racial masculine bonding established during the wars of independence.²² Another theme that has also been briefly explored is the fears about the sexual predation by Afro-Cuban men upon white Cuban women that at times arose in response to Afro-Cuban political mobilization along racial lines.²³ While

²⁰ Michael A. Messner, *Out of Play: Critical Essays on Gender and Sport* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 4.

²¹ Lynn Stoner, *From the House to the Streets: The Cuban Women's Movement for Legal Reform, 1898-1940* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

²² In her work on the nineteenth century wars for independence, Ada Ferrer introduces the trope of the loyal black insurgent, arguing that during the wars for independence, nationalist intellectuals promoted this trope to allay fears of armed Afro-Cuban men and the prospects of race war. See Ferrer, chapter 5. Aline Helg has argued that feminizing stereotypes of black men became popular in Cuba in the early twentieth century as a means of undermining Afro-Cuban claims to full citizenship that were based on participation in the independence wars. See Aline Helg, “Black Men, Racial Stereotyping, and Violence in the U.S. South and Cuba at the turn of the Century,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42 (July 2000), pp. 576-604.

²³ Aline Helg describes the image of the black rapist of white women as one of a number of “icons of fear” that served to mobilize white Cubans against Afro-Cuban political mobilization during the first two decades of the twentieth century, especially during the so-called “race war” of 1912. See Helg, *Our Rightful Share*, pp. 17-18. Likewise Frank Guridy has noted how racial conflict in the summer and fall of

instructive, these explorations of the intersection of race and gender have focused on the way gender influenced internal racial dynamics in Cuban society and have been limited in their attempts to assess how gender constructs influenced racial ideology and its relationship to Cuban national identity.

The career of Kid Chocolate provides an opportunity to highlight the construction of Afro-Cuban masculinity as an object of historical study. Kid Chocolate helped create the niche of the heroic athlete as a means through which Afro-Cuban men could overcome racial exclusion and lay claim to standing as bona fide members of the nation. Through his success he overcame racial barriers, as both black and white Cubans adopted him as a national hero. In addition, his career provided an example of how poor Afro-Cuban men could contribute to the nation-building project through athletic endeavor. The emergence of sport as a means of incorporating Afro-Cuban men into the nation built on previous understandings of the potential contributions of black men through physical exertion or the exercise of legitimate violence that can be traced back to the wars for independence. Because sport often served as a metaphor for warfare, the link to Afro-Cuban participation in the wars for independence was a simple and easy association. Because Kid Chocolate participated in the especially violent sport of boxing, his career reinforced that link. Status as men mitigated the experience of racial subordination and exclusion for Afro-Cuban men in ways that were unavailable to Afro-Cuban women.

This being said, the power of male privilege in moderating notions of racial hierarchy had its limits. Afro-Cuban masculinity constituted what R.W. Connell has

1933 generated similar declarations that mobilization by African-descended Cubans represented a threat to the virtue of white women. Guridy, "Racial Knowledge in Cuba," pp. 242-254.

described as a subordinated or marginalized masculinity.²⁴ As chapter 4 will demonstrate, this incorporation of black men in the formulation of Cuban nationhood posited a subordinate role to white men. Narratives about Kid Chocolate and his white manager reflected a persistent understanding in Cuba that racial co-operation between white and black men was hierarchical in nature. While men of color had a chance to serve as exemplars of masculinity through athletic endeavor, they did so in a way that reinscribed their presumed inferior status. Inclusion formed part of the patriarchal dividend, but equality did not.²⁵ In addition, reactions to the personal life of Kid Chocolate and his demise as a prominent boxer suggest that the emergence of athletics as a site for the inclusion of African-descended men did not completely resolve tensions surrounding their sexuality. Instead these tensions were subsumed into narratives regarding the importance of restraint and discipline for athletic success.

Chapter one establishes the origins of anxieties regarding national sovereignty and fitness that were prevalent in Cuba during the early decades of the republic, locating those anxieties in the racial discourse that surrounded the war for independence as well as North American co-optation of the independence effort and occupation of the island from 1898 to 1902. This chapter also situates these developments in Cuba within an international context. In the early twentieth century, social Darwinism and scientific racism were the dominant ideologies of the day. In addition sport had gained acceptance as a means of projecting national prestige and power and contesting notions of racial hierarchy. As a result, many Cubans, in part as a response to these international trends,

²⁴ R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 76-81.

²⁵ Connell defines the patriarchal dividend as “the advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women.” Connell, p. 79.

increasingly came to view sport as a means of allaying their anxieties regarding the viability of Cuban nationhood.

Chapter two documents the boxing career of Kid Chocolate, his phenomenal rise to fame and the considerable acclaim he garnered in the United States over the course of his career. In addition to providing the narrative of his rise, this chapter notes that Chocolate was cast as both a national and racial representative in the United States, depending on the subject position of the observer and the context of observation. North American reporting on his career and on boxing in general highlighted ways in which sport served as a site where the boundaries between the categories of race and nation were often confused, and the analytical similarity between the two concepts was especially evident.

Chapter three documents and examines the responses in Cuba to the success of Kid Chocolate in the United States. Kid Chocolate became a source of national pride in Cuba and was interpreted as incontrovertible proof of Cuban capabilities more broadly. His exploits provided a positive affirmation of Cuban national aspiration at a time of deepening economic and political crisis. As a result he was hailed as a national hero who deserved praise and gratitude for the international prestige he generated for the nation. Positive responses to his career also reflected the contradictory attitudes towards the United States that circulated on the island and the ways in which sport constituted a shared cultural world between the two countries.

Chapter four examines reactions to the career of Kid Chocolate in order to reveal the ways in which race and gender related to conceptions of Cuban national identity and the nation-building project. By the 1920s, ideals of racial inclusion became increasingly

central to Cuban self-imagining, even as racial inequality and discrimination persisted within Cuban society. The status of Kid Chocolate as a national hero reaffirmed Cuban self-conception as a society characterized by racial fraternity and devoid of racial conflict. In addition his career demonstrated that the Cuban ideology of racial fraternity was unequivocally gendered and also reflected specific notions as to what norms of Afro-Cuban masculinity would best further the cause of Cuban modernity and development.

Chapter five examines the fall of Kid Chocolate as an elite boxer and the narratives constructed by Cubans to explain his fall. These narratives reflected and reinforced the notion that athletics could help to shape Afro-Cuban masculinity in ways that were beneficial to the nation as a whole. In addition, chapter five documents the considerable institutional efforts by the Cuban state to promote sport on the island beginning in the late 1930s, linking those efforts to the affect that Kid Chocolate had on Cuban understandings of the efficacy of sport in fostering national development. The close link between sport and Cuban nationalism persists to this day and has been emphasized by both the revolutionary government as well as its opponents. For both groups, Kid Chocolate has continued to serve as an iconic representation of this link and a foundational emblem of the tradition of Cuban sporting excellence.

It now seems that any scholarly work written by a North American or for a North American audience on race in Cuba must incorporate a requisite note on the use of racial terminology and language. Since language is such an important aspect in determining the contours of racial formations, and racial categories are themselves contingent upon context both geographic and historical, precision and self-consciousness in the use of

language is critical. As a cultural historian I feel my most important goal is to reconstruct the conceptions and ideologies of the past as accurately as possible while striving to make them accessible and intelligible for my audience.

In an effort to be analytically precise I have tried to use African descended or the phrase “of color” when referring to Cubans that were not understood to be white, though at times I have used the term “black” to minimize awkwardness in the text or when referring to African descended peoples in both the United States and Cuba. In similar situations I have also used Afro-Cuban, even though some Cubans reject the phrase as a North American construct. This objection notwithstanding, I do believe that a fundamental divide between whites and non-whites was characteristic of Cuban society in the republican era, thus the phrase Afro-Cuban is analytically useful. In the translation of sources I have maintained a strict adherence to the verbiage used in the original documents. When the word “*negro*” appears in Spanish language documents as an adjective I have translated it as black rather than Negro. However, when the word “*negro*” appears in Spanish language sources as a noun, I have translated it as Negro in English.

Chapter 1: Racial Hierarchies, National Hierarchies and Athletic Competition as Metaphor

The Cuba Contemporánea Group and Cuban Nation-Building

In the early decades of the twentieth Century, many Cubans expressed concerns and doubts whether or not Cuba could ever attain status as a modern and developed society. After three decades of intermittent and destructive military struggle for independence from Spain,¹ four years of occupation by North American military forces, and continued North American political tutelage under the terms of the Platt Amendment, many Cubans worried that full expression of Cuban national aspiration and self-determination was beyond the realm of possibility. By the 1910s and 1920s, the viability of the Cuban nation-building project was in considerable doubt. In fact, a vast number of Cubans viewed the institutions of the first republic (1902-1940) as a frustration, rather than expression, of Cuban nationality.²

Not least among those who worried about the feasibility of Cuban nationhood

¹ The military struggle for independence against Spain consisted of what scholars have typically divided into three discrete conflicts, the Ten Years War (1868-1878), the “Guerra Chiquita” (1879-1880) and the final war for independence (1895-1898). For a discussion of the Ten Years War, see Ramiro Guerra y Sánchez, *Guerra de los diez años, 1868-1878*, 2 vols. (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1972). For an account of the *Guerra Chiquita* see Francisco Pérez Guzmán and Rodolfo Sarracino, *La Guerra Chiquita: Una experiencia necesaria* (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1982). For a discussion of the final war for independence see Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba between Empires, 1878-1902* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1983), chapters 2-11 and Philip Foner, *The Spanish-Cuban American War and the Birth of American Imperialism 1895-1902*, 2 vols. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972).

² “Fernando Martínez Heredia, “Nacionalizando la nación: Reformulación de la hegemonía en la segunda república cubana,” in *Pensamiento y tradiciones populares: estudios de identidad cultural cubana y latinoamericana*, ed. Ana Vera Estrada (Havana: Centro de Investigacion y Desarrollo de la Cultura Cubana Juan Marinello, 2000), p. 33.

were the contributors to the prestigious journal *Cuba Contemporánea*. As scholar Ann Wright has noted, all those who contributed to *Cuba Contemporánea* were united by an intense preoccupation with “la problemática de Cuba.” These intellectuals, whom Wright labels the *Cuba Contemporánea* group, constituted the intellectual leadership of the island in the 1910s.³ They were deeply concerned by “an abysmally low level of confidence and pride in the Cuban nation” and preoccupied with the issue of promoting Cuban nation building. The central objective with which the journal concerned itself was seeking ways to advance the cause of Cuban nationhood. Through their writings, they sought to foster a sense of national aspiration among Cubans, a notion that Cuba could improve on its status and advance along a path of increased progress and civilization, however those concepts might be defined.⁴

In June 1914, the journal published an essay titled “*El deporte como factor patriótico y sociológico: Las grandes figuras deportivas de Cuba.*”⁵ José Sixto de Sola, one of the editors of the journal, wrote the essay with the objective of analyzing “the nationalist social function that sport plays.” The appearance of the essay by Sola indicated that the *Cuba Contemporánea* group, the most prominent grouping of Cuban intellectuals at the time, saw that sport could, and should, play a role in the nation-building project and help fulfill national aspirations. Sola described the potential benefits of sport for Cuban society as manifold. He observed that sport contributed to the cause of

³ Ann Wright, “Intellectuals of an Unheroic Period of Cuban History, 1913-1923. The ‘*Cuba Contemporánea*’ Group,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 7, no. 1 (1988), pp. 109-110. Wright is rather vague in her discussion of who exactly belonged to the *Cuba Contemporánea* group and never clearly defines what she calls their principal concern of seeking to “*hacer patria*,” (create the nation) but does make a convincing case that defining and fostering Cuban nationhood was a principal concern.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 110-114.

⁵ “Sport as a Patriotic and Sociological Factor: The Great Sports Figures of Cuba.”

social progress through direct improvement of the individual. It provided “incalculable benefits” for physical development and encouraged mental discipline. Lastly, sport had a beneficial moral effect: “The youth who is obsessed with [sport] is rarely an individual prone to vices. Sport and vice in many ways repel each other.” Sola cast the positive impact that sport had on the individual in explicitly eugenic terms, noting that it was “a powerful factor” in improving “what eugenicists call the ‘biological aptitude’ of peoples.”⁶

In terms of its direct impact on civil society, Sola highlighted the potential of sport to forge bonds of unity. He pointed to baseball games in Havana where “as a general rule, good humor and a sporting spirit are the norm; no one there remembers if they are Liberal or Conservative, poor or rich.” Sport also helped to strengthen civil society through the creation of social groups or associations devoted exclusively or in part to the pursuit of athletic activities, thus encouraging “the development of a spirit of association among us.” By forming clubs that “fortified the body and harnessed discipline and sympathy, the longing for glory, gallant emotions, mutual respect and love of institutions,” Cubans strengthened “the bonds that unite them, and labor for the sake of nationality.”⁷

Sola advocated the use of public funds to promote sport on the island, calling such an expenditure an act of “sensible patriotism.”⁸ Not least among the reasons why the state should devote resources to the promotion of sport was the potential it had to foster

⁶ José Sixto de Sola, “El deporte como factor patriótico y sociológico: Las grandes figuras deportivas de Cuba,” *Cuba Contemporánea* 5, no. 2 (1914), pp. 122-125.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 127-134.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

national unity and be part of a larger nation-building project. Sola wrote at length about this particular salutary effect of athletic achievement on the consolidation of national identity and pride, insisting:

What Cuban has attended a baseball game between Almendares⁹... and one of the great North American teams... and has not felt connected to our players and the rest of the crowd through a powerful link?

Sport contributed to the consolidation and strengthening of national sentiment and this was, in the words of Sola, “one of the most essential services that they afford us.”¹⁰

Sola anticipated that some would dismiss sport as a trivial subject unworthy of serious consideration, but insisted that as soon as people really considered the question, “they would have to be convinced that the matter was of paramount importance and relevance.”¹¹ To support his case, he invoked the previous generation of Cuban intellectuals, insisting, “there has been for quite a while the tendency on the part of the precursors of the nation to promote and stimulate sport.” Sola quoted an essay written by Cuban intellectual luminary Enrique José Varona in 1887, eight years before the start of the final war from independence with Spain, to help make his case. Varona wrote, “there is nothing that affirms the independence of the spirit or invigorates the awareness of self-worth like a musculature of steel. A strong man is a free man.” Sola added his own corollary to Varona’s words, declaring that if sport had helped Cubans obtain liberty it would also help them preserve and justify that liberty.¹² Just as sport and physical fitness

⁹ Almendares was one of the more prominent professional baseball clubs in pre-revolutionary Cuba. See Roberto González Echevarría, *The Pride of Havana: A History of Cuban Baseball* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 25-28.

¹⁰ Sola, pp. 127-128.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 124-125.

had helped the national cause by facilitating independence, so too would it advance that cause by promoting development and progress.

Sola also cited the growing importance of sport throughout the rest of the world, and observed the power of success in athletic competition to promote a positive image abroad. Sporting accomplishments were an excellent way for the young republic to create bonds of admiration with the prominent powers of the day. He declared, “little study is necessary to see that in all countries, especially those that in this century march at the head of civilization, more and more attention is being paid to all types of sports.”¹³ The triumph of Cubans in sporting activities abroad would thus “necessarily mean that our renown as a civilized nation capable of producing surprising successes in all walks of life...would reach greater heights.” Sola astutely noted that athletic competition connoted an equalizing arena whereby smaller countries, if only for brief moments in time, could put themselves on a par with the major powers of the day and establish a reputation for achievement out of proportion to the resources at hand in those countries. Sola observed that it was critical to promote sympathy and respect for Cuba in these countries, especially the United States, since North Americans at the time held considerable influence over Cuban affairs. Since the United States was the country where “the most veneration was given to sport,” it was only logical that Cubans leverage sport as a means of promoting a positive national image.¹⁴

The Global Rise and Significance of Sport in the Early Twentieth Century

Sola could not have been any more accurate in his perception of the growing

¹³ Ibid., p. 121.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 129-130.

importance of sport throughout the world. By the 1920s and 1930s, athletic competition had taken on considerable significance internationally as an indicator of national or racial capacity in general. Just as the first republican generation was reaching maturity and seeking to define Cuban nationality, sport was gaining currency globally as a means of nationalist expression and proof of national capacity. The spread of modern sport and its increased ideological significance was itself a discrete historical process.¹⁵ Modern sport constituted a form of physical culture that first emerged in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain.¹⁶ It subsequently displaced its major European rivals, workers' sport and traditional gymnastics, and became the leading form of physical culture in Europe.¹⁷ In part through its dominant position in Europe, it spread throughout the world as non-European countries sought to emulate a European model of development and civilization.¹⁸ Over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, sport would

¹⁵ Allen Guttman defines modern sport based on the presence of "a distinctive set of systematically interrelated formal structural characteristics," namely: secularism, equality, bureaucratization, specialization, rationalization, quantification and the obsession with records. See Allen Guttman, *Games and Empires: Modern Sports and Cultural Imperialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 1-6.

¹⁶ Guttman, p. 1-2. Guttman asserts that modern sport was "to a large degree a British invention," and defines its spread as the modernization of traditional sports as well as the spread of games like soccer or basketball. For a history of the rise of sport in Britain, see Richard Holt, *Sport and the British: A Modern History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) and Adrian Harvey, *The Beginnings of the Commercial Sporting Culture in Britain, 1793-1850* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004). On the spread of sport and associated cultural norms through the British empire see Patrick F. McDevitt, *May the Best Man Win: Sport, Masculinity and Nationalism in Great Britain and the Empire, 1880-1935* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004). In response to Guttman's formulation, at least one scholar has insisted on the continued significance of traditional sport forms in non-European societies, declaring that "the total world sports heritage is vastly more complex." See Eric Wagner, ed., *Sport in Asia and Africa: A Comparative Handbook* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), p. 5.

¹⁷ Barbara J. Keys, *Globalizing Sport: National Rivalry and International Community in the 1930s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 3.

¹⁸ In this sense the diffusion of modern sport can be seen as another aspect of the global spread of modern liberal ideals associated with the ascendancy of capitalism. Guttman observes that modern sport spread throughout the world around the same time as the spread of world markets and colonial empires, and that they in fact aided imperial expansion. See Guttman, pp. 4-5. Joseph Arbena has noted that in the specific case of Latin America, "sport also vividly expresses the unique ways in which different peoples have

establish “global supremacy” in the realm of physical culture.¹⁹ As one historian of China has noted, “one of the amazing cultural developments of the twentieth century” was the popular acceptance of modern sport “in virtually every nation on earth.”²⁰

The spread of sport engendered an expansion of the common cultural currency shared across the globe. Sporting culture became a universal idiom, understood by a growing number of fans across the world, and part of a network of cultural flows that crossed national borders.²¹ The consumption of sport as spectacle spread even more rapidly than direct participation. The popularity of male-centered spectator sport grew considerably, spurred by the rise of mass media, consumer culture and improvements in technologies of communication and transportation.²² Stadiums accommodating crowds in the thousands were built, leagues were devised to govern competition, newspapers expanded their sports sections, and new publications devoted exclusively to sports coverage were established. Cinema, radio and the press served to fan public interest, and

reacted to the penetration of so-called modern models of transnational institutions with connections between metropolitan centers and weaker peripheries. In other words, the process of adoption/adaption, rather than true innovation, which marks modern Latin American sport, permits comparison... between Latin America and other Third World Areas.” See Joseph L. Arbena, “Sport and the Study of Latin American Society: An Overview,” in *Sport and Society in Latin America: Diffusion, Dependency and the Rise of Mass Culture*, ed. Joseph Arbena (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), pp. 2-3.

¹⁹ Keys, p. 18.

²⁰ Andrew D. Morris, *Marrow of the Nation: A History of Sport and Physical Culture in Republican China* (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 2004), p. 2.

²¹ Keys, p. 181.

²² David Rowe, *Sport, Culture and the Media: The Unruly Trinity*, 2nd ed. (Berkshire, England: Open University Press, 2004), p. 21. For a discussion of the rise of consumer culture and its role in stimulating the primacy of spectator sport in the United States, see Mark Dyreson, “The Emergence of Consumer Culture and the Transformation of Physical Culture: American Sport in the 1920s,” *Journal of Sport History* 16, no. 3 (Winter, 1989), pp. 261-281 and Elliot Gorn and Warren Goldstein, *A Brief History of American Sports* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), pp. 188-197.

athletes “became national stars with cult followings.”²³ The United States was the epicenter of the growing cultural prominence of spectator sport and its ties to the emerging mass consumer culture in the early twentieth century. The sports page, which first appeared in North American newspapers at the end of the nineteenth century, became a standard feature in large daily newspapers around the world by the 1920s. Major boxing matches and the World Series became front-page news, and radio broadcasts of major sporting events drew millions of listeners. Advertisers began to approach star athletes to endorse products, epitomizing the integration of sport into the new mass consumer culture. As in other cultural spheres, observers in other countries saw the United States as the exemplar of modernity, technology and progress. In turn, by tying sport to mass culture, entertainment and leisure, the influence of the United States helped to propel its global spread and popularity.²⁴

This global influence certainly had a considerable impact in Cuba, given the particular sway that North American cultural forms had on the island.²⁵ Elements of North American culture had begun to circulate in Cuba beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century. During the early years of the republic, Cuban periodicals, radio programs and movie theaters featured North American culture “at least as prominently” as Cuban culture.²⁶ North American cultural forms had profound impact on Cuban

²³ Keys., p. 25.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 68-89.

²⁵ The awareness of North American sport in Cuba will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3. For a discussion of the broader influence of North American culture in Cuba more generally, see Louis A. Perez, Jr., *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality and Culture* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

²⁶ Robin Moore, *Nationalizing Blackness: Afrocubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920-1940* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), p. 120. Beginning in the late 1920s, Cubans would grow

society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Because of historical circumstances and geography, Cubans were “among the first people outside the United States to come under the influence of North American material culture.”²⁷ Moreover, as early as the mid-nineteenth century Cubans associated the United States with modernity and progress,²⁸ and this association also manifested itself in the world of sport. Baseball arrived in Cuba in the 1860s, and Cubans quickly adopted it as a means of “participating in modernity.” They increasingly turned to baseball as a means of embracing the modern and distinguishing themselves from a backward Spain, represented in contrast by the “barbarous” sport of bullfighting.²⁹ Thus if the association between sport, consumption and modernity highlighted the United States as an exemplar of progress worldwide, it is safe to conclude that nowhere was such an association stronger than in Cuba.

Concurrent with the worldwide growth in spectator sport as a form of entertainment was an increase in the amount of public funds spent on sports programs. Especially after World War I, for the first time in many countries, governments were willing to devote substantial public resources to sports facilities and initiatives. Educators and government officials adopted the view that physical education deserved a place in schools alongside math, science, and literature. Many governments formed ministries for

increasingly uncomfortable with the preponderance of North American cultural forms on the island. Moore argues that this discomfort helped to spark a turn to Afro-Cuban culture as a means of affirming national identity, see Moore, pp. 121-146.

²⁷ Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*, p. 10.

²⁸ See Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*, chapter 2 for a discussion of the early emergence of the link between the United States and modernity in the Cuban imagination.

²⁹ Louis A. Pérez, Jr., “Between Baseball and Bullfighting: The Quest for Nationality in Cuba, 1868-1898,” *Journal of American History* 81 (September 1994), p. 507-512.

sport or other specialized state agencies to oversee the promotion of physical recreation.³⁰ Governments and political elites promoted sport as a modernizing force. In Japan, the adoption of modern sport from the west became part of broader modernizing efforts during the Meiji period, as “the modernizing elite seemed as eager to emulate Westerners at play as they were to learn from Westerners at work.”³¹ Competitive and achievement-oriented, sport offered a means of inculcating the ideal of discipline, and providing physical conditioning that was useful for preparing better soldiers and more productive workers.³² It helped to promote notions of “discipline, progress, and modernity” that underscored nation-building projects.³³

The quest to build healthy, fit populations, through physical education and sport became a “global phenomenon” in the interwar years.³⁴ This trend reflected the understanding that sport and physical fitness programs would have a salutary eugenic effect on national populations. Several Latin American thinkers, for example, saw sport as a means to “teach the behavior necessary to accelerate modernization in their still laggard societies.”³⁵ In addition, physical recreation was understood to instill moral

³⁰ Keys, pp. 25-26.

³¹ Allen Guttman and Lee Thompson, *Japanese Sports: A History* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), p. 73.

³² Keys, p. 4.

³³ Morris, p. 3.

³⁴ Keys, p. 26.

³⁵ Joseph L. Arbena, “The Later Evolution of Modern Sport in Latin America: The North American Influence,” in *Sport in Latin American Society: Past and Present*, eds. J.A. Mangan and LaMartine P. DaCosta (London: Frank Cass, 2002), p. 43. For a case study on the association of sports with modernization in Latin America see William H. Beezly, “Bicycles, Modernization, and Mexico” in *Sport and Society in Latin America: Diffusion, Dependency and the Rise of Mass Culture*, ed. Joseph L. Arbena (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), pp. 15-28.

virtues and divert citizens from vices such as gambling.³⁶ One Iranian reformer observed: “[among] those who have investigated deeply the philosophy of the progress of nations... [physical sport] is counted among the most prominent reasons for national power, for the nation’s progress, independence, civilization and survival.”³⁷ Promotion of physical fitness came to be seen as central to maintaining or increasing national productivity and power.

The growing association between athletic success and national prestige across the globe drove the increased attention of governments to sport. Governments, as well as the general public, interpreted athletic contests not just as an indication of the athletic abilities of individuals or teams, but also as a reflection of the quality and effectiveness of various sociopolitical systems, as well as an indication of national power. Sport became a barometer of the overall power and prestige of a country, in part because it seemed to offer a universal and easily quantifiable standard of achievement. In the Olympic Games, medal count became a standard way to measure the overall performance of a national team. Performance in international competition became a gauge of national strength.³⁸

Sport also became a means of consolidating national identity. Like the possession of a flag and anthem or the sending of diplomatic representatives abroad, sport became one of the practices that shaped the form and image of a nation as it entered the international order.³⁹ Modern sport was particularly potent in its stirring of group

³⁶ Keys, p. 20.

³⁷ Quoted in Cyrus Schayegh, “Sport, Health and The Iranian Middle Class in the 1920s and 1930s,” *Iranian Studies* 35, no. 4 (Fall 2002), pp. 359-360.

³⁸ Keys, pp 20-37.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

sentiments, including those at the national level.⁴⁰ As different sports were adopted in different countries, they were appropriated for the construction and consolidation of national identities.⁴¹

The symbolic power of sport had unique implications for countries that were smaller or less affluent. Victories by these countries served as proof of the potential to one day equal the great powers in status and prestige. Elites in republican China promoted sport as part of an effort to reinsert the nation “into an international narrative of history and progress” and make the country “the equal of the hated and envied imperialist powers.”⁴² In 1930, the foreign minister of China remarked on the importance of the Olympics, “[i]f a people want to pursue freedom and equality in today’s world, where the weak serve as meat on which the strong can dine, they must first train strong and fit bodies.”⁴³ By the mid-1920s in Iran soccer had become a symbol of modernization, and

⁴⁰ Janet Lever has observed that sport, particularly spectator sport “helps complex modern societies cohere” as it forms a “mechanism that builds people’s consciousness of togetherness.” See Janet Lever, *Soccer Madness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 3. Allen Guttman has asserted this point more forcefully, observing, “If nations are what Benedict Anderson’s influential theory claims them to be, imagined communities, then modern sports are an important and popularly accessible aid to the politically indispensable form of imagining.” See Guttman, p. 183.

⁴¹ In discussing the occurrence of this phenomenon in Latin America, Joseph Arbena has observed “the paradox evident in the efforts of Latin Americans to employ basically European cultural forms (sports, etc.) to implement a fundamentally European concept – the construction of a nation state with a more nationalistic society – all for the purpose of distancing themselves from Europeans, North Americans, and perhaps each other.” While Arbena ultimately argues that sport has largely failed to contribute significantly to national identity and cohesiveness in Latin America, he concedes that efforts to use sport towards this end have been commonplace throughout the region and the rest of the Third World. See Joseph L. Arbena, “Nationalism and Sport in Latin America, 1850-1990: The Paradox of Promoting and Performing ‘European’ Sports,” in *Tribal Identities: Nationalism, Europe, Sport*, ed. J.A. Mangan (London: Frank Cass, 1996), pp. 230-233.

⁴² Morris, pp. 3-4.

⁴³ Quoted in Morris, p. 167.

cited as “the secret of the grandeur, power and progress of the British.”⁴⁴ When a Japanese college team beat North American residents of Yokohama in the first official U.S.-Japanese baseball game in 1896, it was heralded as a victory in the battle for national dignity and a development that would accelerate Japan’s rise to equal status among the world powers.⁴⁵ Sport became a vehicle through which countries that saw themselves as needing or wanting to catch up could gain parity with the leading powers of the world.

The increased attention to sport at the time of the rising influence of eugenics and social Darwinism is not without significance.⁴⁶ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the cultural sphere of athletic competition took on particular meaning as a means of buttressing or contesting various theories of racial or national superiority. The notion of relative fitness in the Darwinian sense was often deployed as justification for neo-colonial and hierarchical relationships between nations, and nowhere was relative fitness more starkly demonstrated than in direct physical competition. Social Darwinists who saw life as a struggle among races and nations argued that physical strength was key to the ‘survival of the fittest’ for human societies.⁴⁷ The absence of sport in a given society was even taken by some to be a signal of cultural weakness and racial inferiority.

⁴⁴ H.E. Chelabi, “A Political History of Football in Iran,” *Iranian Studies* 35, no. 4 (Fall 2002), p. 375. For a broad overview of the use of sport by the Iranian state as a vehicle for modernization see H.E. Chelabi “The Juggernaut of Globalization: Sport and Modernization in Iran,” in *Sport in Asian Society: Past and Present*, ed. J.A. Mangan and Fan Hong (London: Frank Cass, 2003), pp. 275-294.

⁴⁵ Donald Roden, “Baseball and the Quest for National Dignity in Meiji Japan,” *American Historical Review* 85, no. 3 (June 1980), pp. 531-533.

⁴⁶ For a discussion of the rise of social Darwinism as an influential ideology see Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860-1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁴⁷ Keys, p. 20.

Without the beneficial impact that sport could have for physical and moral character, the “lesser races” had little chance of moving beyond a state of subjugation.⁴⁸ In an age where social Darwinism held considerable influence, athletic competition became not only a measure of societal progress, but also a metaphor for Darwinian competition.

The Special Significance of Boxing

Boxing in particular, given its ritualized format of physical confrontation between two individuals, was especially invested with meaning for those concerned with the Darwinian notion of the “survival of the fittest.” From early on in its history boxing and the spectacle of combat were closely linked to the trope of the champion as representative and redeemer of a collective.⁴⁹ In the United States the fact that by the 1880s the heavyweight championship of the world had left the hands of British boxers and remained consistently in the possession of North Americans symbolized the rise of the United States to the status of a world power at the expense of declining British influence. Champions such as John L. Sullivan, Jim Corbett and Jim Jeffries stood as “shining example[s] of American strength and racial superiority.”⁵⁰ Because the boxing ring served as a site where one man could exhibit direct physical mastery over another, by the early twentieth century the sport became closely associated with the ideology of social Darwinism. “In every country where boxing was practiced, the relative quality of elite boxers vis-à-vis elite boxers of other nations was held up as emblematic of ... the general

⁴⁸ Donald Roden, p. 512. Roden asserts that in the 1890s baseball “rose from oblivion to embody the Social Darwinist spirit of competition and vigor that swept Japan,” see pp. 513-514.

⁴⁹ John Sugden, *Boxing and Society: An International Analysis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 11.

⁵⁰ Jeffrey T. Sammons, *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 30-33.

Darwinian struggle for world power.”⁵¹ Indeed the doctrine of social Darwinism encouraged the view that boxing was an acceptable form of physical training and entertainment, and boxing would come to be “sustained ideologically by notions of social Darwinism.”⁵² Authorities in Australia, Britain and the United States consistently sought to keep world titles, especially heavyweight titles in the hands of white boxers for symbolic reasons tied to the Darwinian struggle between nations and races.⁵³ When Jack Johnson became the first black heavyweight champion of the world in 1915, he generated a maelstrom of anxiety and concern among whites in the United States and around the world.⁵⁴ Success in the ring, especially if it led to the heavyweight championship of the world, came to symbolize not only individual achievement, but also racial or national superiority.⁵⁵ Boxing matches became symbolically loaded as metaphors for competition between racial or national groups, and boxers became male heroes whose triumphs and defeats had direct implications for the members of the collectives they represented.

This ideological symbolism helped to stimulate the popularity of boxing worldwide. By the late 1920s, the appeal of boxing assumed international dimensions. The 1920s and 1930s constituted the “Golden Age” of boxing. By this time, it became “one of the most highly commercialized of all sports,”⁵⁶ reached unprecedented heights

⁵¹ McDevitt, p. 61.

⁵² Sugden, pp. 29-33.

⁵³ McDevitt, p. 67.

⁵⁴ The career of Jack Johnson will be discussed in more detail below.

⁵⁵ Sugden, p. 33.

⁵⁶ Biddy Bishop, “Mental Equipment of Boxers,” *The Ring* 6 (June 1927), p. 12.

in popularity and prestige, and enjoyed exceptional commercial success.⁵⁷ The rise of radio and motion pictures helped to stimulate its popularity.⁵⁸ One commentator observed in 1927, “[w]hat baseball is to [the United States], the ring sport is to the French, and in the field of athletic competition in Italy and Germany, it ranks close to the top.” In continental Europe, boxing was “a common subject of conversation wherever sportsmen have their rendezvous. Five days or more upon an ocean liner is sufficient to convince the skeptical of the great world of interest in fisticuffs.” Interest in boxing was on the rise in Holland and Sweden as well. The growing appeal of the sport was directly related to the nationalist currency that victory in the ring carried. In Paris, one promoter achieved success in drawing crowds because of “his foresight in importing British, Spanish, Italian, German and American boxers, thereby creating intense rivalry and drawing his patronage from all classes of tourists.”⁵⁹ Nationalist impulses stimulated fan interest and were often manipulated by promoters seeking to boost gate receipts.

Boxers became symbolic icons and were inextricably linked to their national and/or racial identities. Far more than an individual seeking to make a living as an athlete, a top ranked boxer was an ambassador who embodied the aspirations, ambitions and anxieties of the nation or race he represented. Boxing matches had significant consequences for national self-imagining. When Argentine Luis Firpo challenged Jack Dempsey for the world heavyweight championship in 1923, two different North American newspapers, *The New York Times* and the *Brooklyn Eagle*, suggested that

⁵⁷ Sammons, p. xvii; Sugden, p. 35.

⁵⁸ Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), pp. 211-213.

⁵⁹ Nat Fleischer, “Europe in Throes of Boxing Craze,” *The Ring* 6 (April 1927), pp. 7-9.

should Firpo win, North Americans would have to rethink the Monroe Doctrine and its meaning.⁶⁰ In the spring of 1929 an article in the New York Spanish-language newspaper *La Prensa* highlighted the fact that the success of a boxer was seen as an issue of national importance. The article, titled “The Foreign Invasion,” observed, “[t]he pugilistic supremacy of the United States is seriously threatened,” as boxers in Europe, South America and the Caribbean were consistently improving in quality. *La Prensa* added that *New York Telegram* columnist Harry Grayson was especially fearful of Spaniard Paulino Uzcundun and German Max Schmelling, so much so that Grayson issued a patriotic plea to North American Gene Tunney to come out of retirement. The full-page headline on the sports page of *La Prensa* that day read, “A Call for the Patriotic Return of Gene Tunney is Being Considered.”⁶¹ For high profile boxers, every victory and defeat carried with it a larger symbolism and commentary regarding national prestige, power and status.

One of the most famous examples of the symbolic power of boxing in the 1920s and 1930s was the worldwide response to the fight and rematch between Joe Louis and Max Schmelling in the summers of 1936 and 1938.⁶² Schmelling, who held the world heavyweight title from 1930-32 was embraced by the Nazi regime as an exemplar of

⁶⁰Cited in Daniel Fridman and David Sheinin, “Wild Bulls, Discarded Foreigners and Brash Champions: U.S. Empire and the Cultural Construction of Argentine Boxers,” *Left History* 12 (Spring/Summer 2007), p. 57. Firpo would lose the fight through a second round knockout, but not before knocking Dempsey clear out of the ring in the first round.

⁶¹ *La Prensa*, April 4, 1929, p. 5.

⁶² The two best scholarly treatments of the fights between Louis and Schmelling and their social significance are Lewis Erenberg, *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation: Louis vs. Schmelling* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) and David Margolick, *Beyond Glory: Joe Louis, Max Schmelling, and a World on the Brink* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005). For more biographical examinations of the lives of Louis and Schmeling, see Patrick Myler, *Ring of Hate, Joe Louis vs. Max Schmeling: The Fight of the Century* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2005) and Richard Bak, *Joe Louis: The Great Black Hope* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998).

German manhood.⁶³ Adolf Hitler himself, recognizing the symbolic value of the heavyweight crown, became personally involved in his career.⁶⁴ On the other hand, Louis was lionized by African-Americans, who saw his victories over white boxers as a hopeful indicator that full citizenship was attainable.⁶⁵ Schmelling had defeated Louis in their first meeting in 1936, and anticipation of the rematch was stimulated not just by interest in the bout itself, but also the symbolic implications of a contest that pitted an African-American against “a representative of a dictatorship founded on race hatred.” For weeks, the North American press was full of rhetoric depicting the fight as a struggle between “democracy and fascism, freedom and dictatorship, good and evil.”⁶⁶ The rematch was one of the most eagerly anticipated sporting events of the decade, not just in the United States and Germany, but across the globe; it was broadcast in French, Spanish and Portuguese and covered by reporters from thirty-six countries.⁶⁷ Joe Louis won the rematch in convincing fashion, knocking Schmelling out in the first round.⁶⁸ Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels immediately issued orders to downplay the loss, banning the news from the front pages of newspapers and prohibiting the showing of films of the fight.⁶⁹ In the United States, the result had equal impact. African-Americans (and blacks throughout the world) viewed the victory by Louis as an incontrovertible

⁶³ For a discussion of the regime’s and Adolf Hitler’s involvement in the career of Schmelling and in boxing more generally see Margolick, especially chapters 2 and 9 and Erenberg, chapters 2 and 3.

⁶⁴ Sammons, p. 105; Margolick, pp. 41-45

⁶⁵ Margolick, pp. 97-115; Hietala, pp. 158-177; Erenberg, pp. 52-54 and 81-87.

⁶⁶ Keys, pp. 116-117.

⁶⁷ Erenberg, p. 136; Keys, p. 117.

⁶⁸ Sammons, pp. 114-117.

⁶⁹ Erenberg, p. 149; Keys, pp. 118-120.

repudiation of theories of racial superiority. For North Americans as a whole, Louis embodied the triumph of American democracy over German fascism as military conflict between the two grew imminent.⁷⁰

The significance of the Louis victory in the United States exemplified the ways in which sport, through its emphasis on physical competition, could throw the close, sometimes contradictory, links between racial and national identity into sharp relief. In response to the fight, white North Americans had to choose between nationalism and racism, and by supporting Louis, they opened the door to a more racially inclusive sense of North American national identity.⁷¹ Contemporary white viewers could not avoid the fact that Louis' victory disproved notions of Aryan superiority. As a result of the adoption of Louis as a national hero, Americans began to question the notion of white supremacy as an American national ideal and contemplate a new conception of North American identity, one based on civic nationalism and ethnic and racial pluralism.⁷² Reactions to the Louis victory demonstrated that racial ideology often formed an implicit, but significant component of national identity. In both the United States and Germany, the fight showed how a certain racial ethos and understanding of the significance of race formed a key component of national self-imagining. That Louis and Schmelling could serve as both racial and national heroes at the same time demonstrates the functional similarity between the two concepts. With its emphasis on physical performance in an age where social Darwinism and biological determinism posited the primacy of

⁷⁰ Erenberg, pp. 151-156.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 155-161. Erenberg concedes that this shift was only the "first step... on a long and difficult road to redefining American national identity as ethnically and racially diverse," but argues that the beginnings of this new sense of identity were demonstrated in responses to the bout.

seemingly inheritable traits, sport helped to highlight the close link between, and frequent conflation of race and nation as categories of difference.⁷³ In turn, this link between race and nation also meant that notions of the inferiority and superiority of racial groups often served as the ideological justification for unequal relationships between nations in the form of imperialism and neo-colonialism.

Race and the Feasibility of Cuban Nationhood

Perhaps nowhere was the relationship between racial ideology and subjugated national status more pertinent in the early twentieth century than Cuba. Cuban anxieties about race and its implications for the viability of nationhood predate the very establishment of the republic itself. The moment Cubans even began to conceive of an independent Cuba, they contemplated the impact that the large proportion of African-descended people in the population would have on the fate of the island and its prospects for stability and prosperity. While independence revolts swept through the Spanish-American mainland during the first two decades of the nineteenth century, Cubans for the most part decided to forego the option of obtaining independence through violent means for fear of sparking a large-scale slave insurrection similar to the one that occurred in French Saint Domingue. For decades after the nations of Central and South America

⁷³ Etienne Balibar has observed that “the discourses of race and nation are never very far apart,” noting that racism “maintains a necessary relation with nationalism and contributes to constituting it by producing the fictive ethnicity around which it is organized.” See Etienne Balibar, “Racism and Nationalism,” in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, ed. Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (London: Verso, 1991), especially pp. 37-48. Immanuel Wallerstein helps to clarify the functional overlap between race and nation by defining them (along with ethnicity) as types of ‘peoplehood’ that are used to explain and justify hierarchical relationships and unequal division of resources. The category of nation arose “primarily as a mode of expressing the competition between states” but helped to provide a more “detailed degree of advantage... as opposed to the cruder racial classifications.” He argues, “we could say that race and racism unifies intrazonally the core zones and the peripheral zones in their battles with each other, whereas nation and nationalism divides core zones and peripheral zones intrazonally... for detailed rank order. Both categories are claims to the right to possess advantage in the capitalist world-economy.” See “The Construction of Peoplehood: Racism, Nationalism, Ethnicity,” in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, ed. Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 77-82.

gained their independence, Cuba would remain the “Ever-Faithful Isle,” largely because of white fears of social disintegration and racial disorder.⁷⁴ With a population that was over fifty percent African-descended in the middle of the nineteenth century, whites in Cuba for the most part clung to Spanish colonial rule, fearful of the example provided by the Haitian revolution of what could happen to whites in the midst of armed rebellion.⁷⁵

Even as the desire for independence gained momentum over the course of the nineteenth century and exploded into armed insurrection in 1868, white Cubans remained conscious of what historian Ada Ferrer has called the “racial risks of rebellion.” The “very existence” of blacks on the island served as “the primary obstacle to the development of Cuban nationalism” in the nineteenth century.⁷⁶ In order for the independence movement to succeed, its leaders had to combat the notion that rebellion against Spain would incite Afro-Cubans to engage in racial warfare and cause social chaos. Spanish authorities and Cubans who favored colonial rule constantly stoked these insecurities by casting insurgent efforts as preludes to race war rather than struggles for political sovereignty.⁷⁷ Even as Cubans struggled militarily to obtain independence, they engaged in intellectual efforts to defend its feasibility. As a result, a nationalist struggle against Spain also became a “cultural and ideological struggle” to disprove what up to that point had been “a central claim of Cuban historical knowledge:” the notion that the

⁷⁴ Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 74-76.

⁷⁵ Ada Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation and Revolution, 1868-1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), p. 2.

⁷⁶ Jill Lane, *Blackface Cuba, 1840-1895* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), p. 15.

⁷⁷ Helg, *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886-1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), pp. 49-51. Also see Ferrer, chapter 3 for a discussion of attempts by Spanish colonial authorities to promote anti-colonial military efforts as “race wars” and preludes to social chaos.

racial profile of the population and the history of racial slavery on the island made Cuba unfit for nationhood.⁷⁸

Moreover, the movement for Cuban independence developed momentum in the second half of the nineteenth century just as European and North American thinkers began to “link biology to progress and divide the world into superior and inferior races.”⁷⁹ The intellectual links that tied the prestige of scientific inquiry to racist thought manifested themselves in Cuba through the foundation of Cuban Anthropological Society in 1877. The activities of the society and new research on race and ethnicity in Cuba signaled the embrace of the science of anthropology and “its new modes of reifying and systematizing racial difference.”⁸⁰ This new scientific approach to race allowed several Cuban intellectuals to reformulate their anxiety regarding the presence of blacks as an obstacle to Cuban progress by using the “methods and tools of scientific analysis.”⁸¹ As early as the 1870s scientific racism would reinforce the anxieties of Cuban elites regarding race and Cuban progress while at the same time legitimizing those anxieties through the prestige of science as a form of knowledge.

These racial anxieties and concerns prompted many elite thinkers to consider ways to limit the prevalence and influence of African-derived culture on the island. The abolition of slavery in 1886 did not lessen racist concerns that Afro-Cubans constituted

⁷⁸ Ferrer, p. 112. Ferrer argues that in order to counter this claim, pro-independence thinkers recast the independence struggle as a cooperative endeavor between black and white men and created the trope of the loyal black insurgent as a central figure in the cause for Cuban independence. As a result, by the onset of the final war for independence, claims that agitation for independence would lead to race war gradually lost their cachet among the majority of Cubans. See chapters 5 and 6.

⁷⁹ Ibid., pp. 3-4.

⁸⁰ Lane, p. 182.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 197.

an obstacle to progress, and discrimination in post-abolition Cuba was common.⁸² Studies continued to identify Afro-Cubans as the primary cause of Cuba's problems.⁸³ The parameters of debate presented the options in terms of "white civilization" versus "African barbarism," and formed such a dominant framework that even Afro-Cuban intellectuals and elites advocated the elimination of African-derived culture and religion.⁸⁴ Municipal decrees restricted drumming and related activities, and police and legislators "systematically suppressed overtly African-influenced genres."⁸⁵ A "de facto war" on African-derived cultural expression became pronounced beginning in the 1880s.⁸⁶ Before independence from Spain was even achieved, Cuban officials sought to minimize the presence of African-derived cultural forms in Cuba.

By the time Spain finally ceded control over Cuba, United States intervention in the war for independence and subsequent military occupation of the island from 1899 to 1902 reinforced concerns about proving the feasibility of Cuban nationhood. The entry of the United States into the conflict precluded the attainment of Cuban independence and instead produced an occupation government headed by a governor general from the U.S. military, thereby frustrating Cuban aspirations to full sovereignty and self-determination. Through U.S. intervention, "a Cuban war of liberation was transformed into a North

⁸² For a detailed discussion of the forms which discrimination assumed after abolition, see Helg, chapters 1 and 3.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

⁸⁵ Moore, p. 18.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

American war of conquest.”⁸⁷ Justification for this war of conquest required a marginalization of the Cuban independence effort and a discounting of Cuban capabilities. North Americans attributed the supposed absence of noteworthy Cuban military achievements to the deficiency of Cuban actions, if not Cuban character. In appropriating credit for the military triumph over Spain, the United States claimed the right to supervise the Cuban national government. “Cubans were denied more than victory - they were deprived of their claim to sovereignty.”⁸⁸

The truncation of Cuban sovereignty and institution of North American authority on the island were based on a racist rationale that deemed Cubans simply incapable of effective self-government. By the turn of the twentieth century, the proportion of Cubans of African descent had declined to around thirty percent, but the racial composition of the population remained a significant concern.⁸⁹ Many North Americans saw it as the destiny of the United States to instruct Cubans in the customs of self-government until they proved themselves ready for full self-determination.⁹⁰ In July 1898 Major Alexander Brodie declared: “The Cubans are utterly irresponsible, partly savage and have no idea of what good government means.”⁹¹ North American military officials leading the occupation in Cuba acted under the firm belief in their cultural and racial superiority over

⁸⁷ Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba under the Platt Amendment, 1902-1934* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1986), p. 30.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

⁸⁹ Helg, *Our Rightful Share*, p. 13.

⁹⁰ Cathy Duke, “The Idea of Race: The Cultural Impact of American Intervention in Cuba, 1898-1912,” in *Politics, Society and Culture in the Caribbean: Selected Papers of the XIV Conference of Caribbean Historians*, ed. Bianca G. Silvestrini (San Juan: University of Puerto Rico, 1983), pp. 94-95.

⁹¹ Quoted in Pérez, *Cuba under the Platt Amendment, 1902-1934*, pp. 32-33.

Cubans.⁹² These racist beliefs extended to the general North American population as well. Before the last Spaniard even left the island U.S. newspapers began to describe Cubans as a people who were unfit for self-government. A virulent and explicit campaign to question the suitability of Cubans for full sovereignty spread across numerous U.S. newspapers. The *New York World* noted that anarchy would result if sovereignty were entrusted to what it called a group of “ignorant niggers, half-breeds and dagoes.”⁹³ Far from a cynical pretext for North American imperial designs, the questioning of Cuban capacity for full sovereignty was based on commonly held beliefs regarding the capabilities of different racial groups.

In response, many Cubans attempted to assert their own desires with invectives urging the United States to deliver sovereignty as quickly as possible. The racist logic underlying American intervention in the war meant that Cuban leaders sought to demonstrate to American occupiers that they were a civilized people capable of self-rule.⁹⁴ The same month that Major Brodie made his observation on Cuban knowledge of good government, General Calixto Garcia of the Cuban Liberation Army issued a circular urging all Cubans to do everything possible to respect and maintain order on the island. For Garcia, the matter was urgent, as only this respect for order would “prove to the world that we have full right to be free and independent” and convince North Americans that Cubans had a “right to occupy a place among the nations of the earth.”⁹⁵ In truth,

⁹² Duke, p. 87.

⁹³ Quoted in Philip Foner, *The Spanish Cuban American War*, 2 vols. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), vol. 2, pp. 393-394.

⁹⁴ Ferrer, p. 169.

⁹⁵ Quoted in Foner, p. 390.

North American occupiers subscribed to a logic that deemed Cubans as a whole unfit for self-rule.⁹⁶ North Americans had a tendency to extend their racial biases to all Cubans, even whites.⁹⁷ Nonetheless, Cuban leaders sought to find ways to promote men who could come as close as possible to racialized North American notions of civilization and modernity. Without exception, this meant the promotion of white Cubans to positions of power in the post-independence order at the expense of African-descended comrades-in-arms.⁹⁸ In addition, occupation policies designed to “civilize” Cuba, including attempts to eradicate traditions of African origin, also contributed to the marginalization of Afro-Cubans and denigration of the African component of Cuban heritage.⁹⁹

While the North American occupation certainly did not introduce racism and the association of blacks and African-derived culture with backwardness and savagery to Cuba, it did reinforce pre-existing anxieties about race and Cuban nationality. For establishing full sovereignty now meant proving to North American officials Cuban capacity for self-rule, and these officials had clear conceptions of who was fit for self-rule that were defined along unambiguously racial lines. During the occupation of 1899-1902, Cubans were convinced that North Americans would be scrutinizing them closely in order to determine whether they were fit for independence. As a result, proving fitness and capacity in the eyes of North Americans became a goal of critical and utmost importance. The emergence of this goal served to lend urgency to the race question in the

⁹⁶ Ferrer, p. 172.

⁹⁷ Helg, *Our Rightful Share*, p. 93.

⁹⁸ See Ferrer, pp. 178-187 for a discussion of this process.

⁹⁹ Helg, *Our Rightful Share*, pp. 93-98. Helg is quick to point out that these policies were successful because they drew on already existing patterns of racial discrimination and received endorsement from white Cuban elites.

minds of Cuban intellectuals and policy-makers. Such a development should not be surprising, as even before the North American intervention, many white Cubans shared North American assessments about the capacities of their non-white compatriots.¹⁰⁰

Intervention by the United States in the Cuban war for independence was not the original source for Cuban anxieties about race and the feasibility of Cuban nation building, but it played a significant role in the continued salience of the issue. Because they had assumed the role of the ultimate arbiters of Cuban sovereignty, North Americans and their racially based imperialism reinforced concerns about race and national progress.

When North American occupation forces left the island in 1902, the imposition of the Platt Amendment as a condition for their departure guaranteed the continued influence of the United States in Cuban politics as well as the continued frustration of full Cuban sovereignty.¹⁰¹ Article three of the amendment explicitly outlined the mechanics of this influence, stating, “the United States may exercise the right to intervene for the... maintenance of a government adequate for the protection of life, property and individual liberty.”¹⁰² The implication was clear; Cubans could not be trusted to maintain such a government on their own. Through the Platt Amendment, North American officials sought to present the United States as a bulwark against the danger of descent into political misrule and social chaos. The consequences for Cuban society were extensive. Through the amendment, which remained in effect until 1934, the United States exercised

¹⁰⁰ Ferrer, p. 201.

¹⁰¹ For a comprehensive analysis of the Platt Amendment and its impact on Cuban society and politics see Pérez, *Cuba Under the Platt Amendment*.

¹⁰² Quoted in Pérez, *Cuba under the Platt Amendment*, p. 52.

authority over Cuba “not unlike sovereignty,”¹⁰³ and converted the newly independent republic into a state whose survival depended on conducting itself in a manner consistent with North American interests.¹⁰⁴ In fact, many U.S. officials believed that Cubans would never be ready for self-government.¹⁰⁵ Thus from the perspective of North Americans, the imposition of the Platt Amendment was completely reasonable, a means of protecting Cubans from themselves and guaranteeing stability on the island.

For most Cubans, however, the Platt Amendment was a constant reminder of frustrated national ambition. North American domination of Cuban society through the Platt Amendment stymied aspirations for full sovereignty and guaranteed that discussions over the feasibility of Cuban nationhood would persist into the 1930s. The Platt Amendment unequivocally thwarted Cuban self-determination, and “served to transform the substance of Cuban sovereignty into an extension of the United States national system.”¹⁰⁶ By the late 1920s, Cubans were chafing at the continued existence of the Platt Amendment, which they viewed as an affront to their national honor and an “enduring injury to [their] national sensibilities.”¹⁰⁷ Cuban desires to eliminate the Platt Amendment and realize full sovereignty lent a sense of urgency to discussions regarding the significance of race in determining the viability of the Cuban national project.

In light of the continued frustration of full and uncompromised nationhood,

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. xvii.

¹⁰⁴ Jules R. Benjamin, *The United States and the Origins of the Cuban Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 63.

¹⁰⁵ Duke, p. 93.

¹⁰⁶ Pérez, Jr., *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, pp. 142-144.

¹⁰⁷ Pérez, *Cuba Under the Platt Amendment*, pp. 251-252.

Cubans increasingly sought ways to provide redemptive hope in the face of international currents of scientific racism and Social Darwinism that suggested that the presence of Cubans of African descent presented an obstacle to Cuban development.¹⁰⁸ Cuban intellectuals wrestled with the problem of how a significant African-descended population could be reconciled with the desire to achieve modernity and progress. Consequently, race became an “omnipresent theme in the writing of the Cuban Creole elite” in the early twentieth century.¹⁰⁹ Intellectuals and social scientists considered which policies would be most effective at managing the racial composition of the island and shaping social practices in a way that fostered their vision of modernity and development.¹¹⁰ During the early decades of the twentieth century, they marshaled the methodologies of anthropology, eugenics and criminology in order to address the race question and its impact on Cuban society.¹¹¹ Many, influenced to a great degree by social Darwinism, were pessimistic about the future of Cuba and the possibility of successful self-government. Mainstream newspapers continued to present Afro-Cubans as inferior and uncivilized, and repeatedly wrote as advocates of “civilization” against “barbarism.”¹¹² Officials pronounced African-derived religions a “social pathology,” and

¹⁰⁸ See Alejandra Bronfman, *Measures of Equality: Social Science, Citizenship and Race in Cuba, 1902-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), especially introduction and chapter 1.

¹⁰⁹ Aline Helg, “Race in Argentina and Cuba, 1880-1930: Theory, Policies and Popular Reaction,” in *The Idea of Race in Latin America*, ed. Richard Graham (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), p. 47.

¹¹⁰ Bronfman, *Measures of Equality*, p. 6.

¹¹¹ See Bronfman, chapters 1 & 2 for a discussion of the increased attention paid to race by Cuban social scientists in the first 2 decades of the twentieth century and chapter 5 for a discussion of the rising prominence of eugenics in Cuban intellectual circles.

¹¹² Helg, *Our Rightful Share*, pp. 103-108.

prominent figures of the 1910s called for the total prohibition of *Santería*.¹¹³ Many intellectuals and officials perceived these practices as obstacles to the implementation of the kind of republic they envisioned.¹¹⁴

The preoccupations of the *Cuba Contemporánea* group discussed earlier in this chapter very much fit into this pattern of concern over race and its implications for Cuban national aspiration. The contributors to *Cuba Contemporánea* had a positivist and Darwinist approach to race and social evolution, and sought to determine what would accelerate Cuba down a path of development along the North American model of liberal democracy and free trade capitalism. In light of this goal, much of the writing produced by the group concentrated on programs of public morality, civic decency and exhorting readers to be “better Cubans”¹¹⁵ They contemplated with consternation the impact the racial profile of the population would have on the possibility of nation-building along the path that they deemed desirable.¹¹⁶ The appearance in *Cuba Contemporánea* of articles such as “The Yellow Peril and the Black Peril,”¹¹⁷ “The Negro Problem”¹¹⁸ and “The Study of Eugenics”¹¹⁹ revealed the influence that prevailing global ideological currents and North Atlantic thinkers had on Cuban considerations of the issue of race. Indeed,

¹¹³ Moore, p. 31.

¹¹⁴ Alejandra Bronfman, ““En Plena Libertad y Democracia”: *Negros Brujos* and the Social Question, 1904-1919,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 82, no. 3 (August 2002), p. 553.

¹¹⁵ Wright, pp. 111-113.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹¹⁷ Pelayo Pérez, “El peligro amarillo y el peligro negro,” *Cuba Contemporánea* 9, no. 3 (1915), pp.251-259.

¹¹⁸ Carlos de Velasco, “El problema negro,” *Cuba Contemporánea* 1, no. 2 (1913) pp. 73-79.

¹¹⁹ A.F. Tredgold, “El estudio de la eugénica,” trans. Ramón de Armas y Colón, *Cuba Contemporánea* 3, no. 1 (1913), pp. 191-218.

“The Study of Eugenics” appeared in translation in *Cuba Contemporánea* as part of a series of articles published in the journal with the objective of facilitating “the awareness of some of the most important articles on economic and social questions that appear in the principal European and North American publications.”¹²⁰

Middle-class Afro-Cubans also sought to distance themselves from Afro-Cuban culture, viewing it as evidence of degeneration,¹²¹ though they would distinguish between notions of biological inferiority and cultural inferiority.¹²² Many middle-class Afro-Cubans sought to prove to the world their civility, sharing the assumption that such civility meant western values and culture. The Afro-Cuban publication *Previsión* stigmatized African dance and drumming as “barbarisms of bygone days,” while at the same time refuting theories of white supremacy.¹²³ The image of a racialized savage who presented the main obstacle to Cuban progress and modernity “posed a problem for everyone, including Cubans of color who were determined not to be included in that category.”¹²⁴ As a result, Afro-Cuban intellectuals also subscribed to a sense of racial anxiety, though they associated backwardness and primitivism with Africanness rather than blackness. Middle class Afro-Cuban organizations known as *sociedades de color* frequently forbade the use of drums or performances of genres, such as *son* and *rumba*,

¹²⁰ Ibid., pp. 191-192.

¹²¹ Aviva Chomsky, “Barbados or Canada? Race, Immigration and Nation in Early-Twentieth Century Cuba,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 80, no. 3 (August 2000), p. 429.

¹²² Karen Y. Morrison, “Civilization and Citizenship through the Eyes of Afro-Cuban Intellectuals during the First Constitutional Era, 1902-1940,” *Cuban Studies* 30 (1999), pp. 78-85

¹²³ Helg, *Our Rightful Share*, pp. 148-149.

¹²⁴ Bronfman, *Measures of Equality*, p. 83

that were associated with African culture.¹²⁵ University trained Afro-Cuban professionals who acted as advocates for the larger Afro-Cuban community were also often them same individuals who sought to ban what to them were “embarrassing Afro-Cuban cultural institutions.”¹²⁶

These concerns also manifested themselves in policies intended to manage the racial profile of the population. Given the political context and the existence of the Platt Amendment, “[a]t stake” in the implementation of racial policies was “proving to the rest of the world (and themselves) Cuban capacity for self-understanding and self-rule.”¹²⁷ Some went so far as to endorse whiteness as a precondition for stability and progress and lend support to racially defined immigration programs that would reduce the proportion of the population that had African ancestry.¹²⁸ Even Fernando Ortiz, who would later become famous as one of the leaders of the intellectual movement known as *afrocubanismo*,¹²⁹ initially subscribed to the whitening ideal. In 1906 Ortiz declared that whitening through immigration was a means of injecting “good and progressive people” into the island, and hastening Cuban ability to take “its rightful place among nations,” adding that, “race is perhaps the most fundamental aspect that should be considered in an

¹²⁵ Moore, p. 39.

¹²⁶ Vera Kutzinski, *Sugar's Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism* (Charlottesville, Virginia.: University Press of Virginia, 1993), pp. 139-140.

¹²⁷ Bronfman, *Measures of Equality*, p. 39.

¹²⁸ Alejandro De la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), pp. 45-53; Chomsky, p. 425.

¹²⁹ For a detailed discussion of the *afrocubanismo* movement and the role of Ortiz in that movement, see Moore, pp. 123-146.

immigrant.”¹³⁰ While Ortiz would ultimately become a major advocate for the valorization of Afro-Cuban culture, his initial interest stemmed from “a desire to better understand and remedy the social ills of the nation perpetuated by blacks.”¹³¹

In addition to advocating restrictions on immigration, officials continued to actively repress certain African cultural forms, particularly spiritual ones. Chief among these were the practice of *brujería*, defined as “the complex use of plants and animals, incantation and/or the exercise of supernatural powers to heal, protect, or harm people,”¹³² and *ñañiguismo*, the activities of a network of secret all-male societies with African based rituals and forms of dress whose origins have been traced back to the Niger Delta.¹³³ *Ñañigo* societies were officially outlawed in 1903.¹³⁴ In the first two decades of the 20th century, a series of sensational scares based on the association of *brujería* with the abduction and murder of white girls shook the country, sparking repressive campaigns against Afro-Cuban spiritual practices.¹³⁵ Authorities subjected *comparsas*, carnival processions derived from slave celebrations of the Feast of the Epiphany that featured percussive music and dance routines, to a widespread campaign of suppression

¹³⁰ The outlook held by Ortiz regarding the place of blacks and African culture in the Cuban nation would eventually radicalize, and by the 1930s he became an outspoken advocate for the value of Afro-Cuban culture. See Chomsky, pp. 425-427 and Moore, pp. 33-34.

¹³¹ Moore, p. 34.

¹³² Helg, *Our Rightful Share*, p. 108.

¹³³ Helg, *Our Rightful Share*, p. 29; Bronfman, “Negros Brujos and the Social Question” pp. 550-551.

¹³⁴ Moore, p. 31.

¹³⁵ For a fuller discussion of the *brujería* scare and resulting repression see Helg, *Our Rightful Share*, pp. 106-116 and Bronfman, “Negros Brujos and the Social Question”, pp. 549-587.

through the 1930s.¹³⁶ As late as 1925, President Gerardo Machado signed an ordinance outlawing any public activity that employed “drums or analogous musical instruments of African nature.”¹³⁷

In addition to shaping Cuban society according to a certain vision of modernity and progress, the repression of Afro-Cuban cultural forms served a psychological function as well. It emphasized the difference of beliefs between the ruling elite and members of the popular classes, especially those of African descent. Such repression helped to delineate its advocates as a part of the modern Western world. “For a new ruling class with an inferiority complex toward the United States and doubts about its own capacity to govern the country, such reassurance was not negligible.”¹³⁸ Thus repression of Afro-Cuban cultural forms not only served the function of making Cuban more modern and less backward, it also served to assuage the insecurities of elite white Cubans, and even middle class Afro-Cubans, about their own status as modern and civilized people.

Cuban concerns about race and national development were part of a larger pattern of debate in many Latin American countries where intellectuals and elites expressed unease about the mixed racial composition of their countries. This unease was due in large part to the racist scientific theories promoted by North Atlantic thinkers such as Louis Agassiz and Arthur de Gobineau. Nancy Leys Stepan argues that during the early twentieth century eugenic concepts were “taken up in a more or less systematic way” by

¹³⁶ See Moore, chapter 3 for a detailed discussion of the history of *comparsas* and government policies toward them in the early twentieth century.

¹³⁷ Moore, pp. 72 and 231-232.

¹³⁸ Helg, *Our Rightful Share*, p. 115.

intellectuals throughout Latin America.¹³⁹ Indeed, Cuban intellectuals and policy makers were not unlike thinkers throughout Latin America, or the world for that matter, in subscribing to theories of scientific racism that posited a hierarchy of racial and national groups, deeming some more fit than others.¹⁴⁰ The very first Pan-American conference of Eugenics and Homiculture took place in Havana in 1927, and received official government delegations from sixteen countries, including Argentina, Costa Rica, Mexico and Peru.¹⁴¹ Latin Americans not only absorbed eugenic concepts, but also made unique contributions to eugenic modes of thought.¹⁴² Thomas Skidmore has demonstrated how intellectuals in Brazil sought to reconcile European doctrines of scientific racism with the racial reality of the Brazilian population. Noting that Brazilian elites greatly admired North Atlantic civilization, he asserts that theories of scientific racism “influenced all Brazilians who thought seriously about race” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. “Social Darwinist works, in particular, had great influence in Brazil. Virtually every Brazilian social thinker before 1914 grappled with Social Darwinism.”¹⁴³ The contemplation of race and its impact on national development was a regional

¹³⁹ Nancy Leys Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics: Race, Gender and Nation in Latin America* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 2-3.

¹⁴⁰ For a discussion of the increasing attention to race paid by social scientists in the United States and Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries see Ivan Hannaford, *Race: The History of an Idea in the West* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), chapters 8-10. For discussion of this phenomenon in Latin America, see Richard Graham, ed., *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870-1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990); Thomas Skidmore, *Black into White: Race and Nationality in Brazilian Thought* (1974; reprint, with a new preface, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1993); and Stepan.

¹⁴¹ Stepan, pp. 176-182. Alejandro De la Fuente points to the convening of this conference in the Cuban capital as definitive proof of “the degree to which Cuban intellectuals had been influenced by North American ideas of race,” see de la Fuente, p. 43.

¹⁴² Stepan, pp. 2-3.

¹⁴³ Skidmore, p. 52.

phenomenon in Latin America in the early twentieth century.

The Turn to Sport as a Means of Proving Cuban “Fitness”

As Cubans contemplated how best to establish themselves as a modern and civilized nation, they became increasingly aware of the ways in which sport was becoming associated with debates on the relative capacities of racial and national groups. Indeed, in 1915 Cubans were directly exposed to one of the most infamous examples of the implications sport in general, and boxing in particular, had with respect to notions of racial hierarchy. In April of that year, African-American boxer Jack Johnson defended his world heavyweight title in a bout against Jess Willard at the Oriental Race Track just outside of Havana.

In his role as heavyweight champion and his refusal to conform to conventions of how a black man was supposed to behave in early twentieth century North America, Jack Johnson embodied a disturbing threat to the racial order on which North American society was based.¹⁴⁴ Most whites viewed Johnson as a menace to Anglo-Saxon civilization, and they were intent upon his destruction as a potent symbol.¹⁴⁵ Consequently, almost as soon as Johnson won the title, a frenzied search began for a white boxer that could defeat him. Since the world heavyweight boxing champion served as the epitome of courage, skill and manhood, it would not do for a member of an inferior race to be champion. During the heyday of social Darwinian emphasis on survival of the fittest, Johnson so clearly demolished his boxing opponents that whites began to doubt their superiority. As a result, they engaged in a messianic search for a ‘White Hope’ to

¹⁴⁴ Randy Roberts, *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes* (New York: The Free Press, 1983), p. 6.

¹⁴⁵ Jeffrey T. Sammons, p. 43. For a detailed discussion of reactions among blacks and whites to Johnson’s victory in the press, literature and the arts see Boddy, pp. 181- 208.

redeem their honor.¹⁴⁶

Writer Jack London coined the phrase “Great White Hope” in 1908 to refer to the anticipated savior who would take the title back from Johnson.¹⁴⁷ The search for a ‘white hope’ was so extensive that “well-muscled white boys more than six feet two inches were not safe out of their mother’s sight.”¹⁴⁸ One such white hope, an unidentified man who was coaxed to leave his job as a truck driver by an unscrupulous promoter, reminisced a decade later about the campaign to find someone who could best Johnson: “The White Hope craze spread over the land. Huskies were dragged away from good jobs, from the fields and the foundries, from offices and even colleges, all filled with the idea that they could get the title back for whites.”¹⁴⁹ When former champion Jim Jeffries came out of retirement in an attempt to defeat Johnson and was soundly beaten in July 1910, the results were so upsetting to white North Americans that riots erupted in every southern state as well as Illinois, Missouri, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Colorado and the District of Columbia. Contemporary estimates put the overall national toll of post-fight violence at eighteen dead and hundreds injured.¹⁵⁰ *The New York Evening Journal*

¹⁴⁶ Al-Tony Gilmore, *Bad Nigger! The National Impact of Jack Johnson* (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1975), p. 3. For a study that focuses on the search for a white boxer to defeat Johnson as a discrete social phenomenon in itself, see Graeme Kent, *The Great White Hopes: The Quest to Defeat Jack Johnson* (Gloucestershire, England: Sutton Publishing, 2005).

¹⁴⁷ Thomas Hietala, *The Fight of the Century: Jack Johnson, Joe Louis and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), pp. 14-30. London witnessed Johnson’s successful bid for the heavyweight title in 1908, and helped lead the effort to convince former champion Jim Jeffries to come out of retirement to fight Johnson.

¹⁴⁸ Roberts, p. 69.

¹⁴⁹ “The White Hope a Personal Portrait, by Himself,” *The Ring* 6 (May 1927), p. 5.

¹⁵⁰ Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 2-3. See Hietala, pp. 39-45 and Gilmore, pp. 59-71 for more detailed descriptions of post-fight violence across the United States.

reported rioting in “virtually every city and town in the United States,” observing that police were often powerless to suppress the disturbances.¹⁵¹ In the wake of the defeat of Jeffries, at least fifteen states and the District of Columbia passed legislation banning the showing of all prizefight films, and even England and South Africa agreed not to allow viewings of the Johnson-Jeffries fight film.¹⁵² Thus, when Johnson finally succumbed to a “white hope,” in the form of Jess Willard, in Havana in April 1915, white supremacists the world over could once again breathe easy. Willard became an instant hero, bringing “renewed confidence to the physical and moral strength of white America.”¹⁵³

Accounts of the fight and the days leading up to it that appeared in the Cuban and North American press indicate that it was a major news story within Cuba. One North American journalist described Havana as “fight mad,” observing, “[n]othing else but pugilism is being discussed in the clubs, hotels and homes by men and women of the city.”¹⁵⁴ The Havana daily *Diario de la Marina* observed that the presence of Jack Johnson in Havana was the most popular topic of discussion among Cubans, eclipsing all other current events.¹⁵⁵ Cubans also expressed a keen awareness of the racial dynamics of the fight. *La Lucha*, another Cuban daily, noted the arrival of Jess Willard in Havana with the headline “The White Hope has Arrived.”¹⁵⁶ The *New York Times* reported, “Cuban

¹⁵¹ Cited in Gilmore, p. 60.

¹⁵² Sammons, p. 41.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁵⁴ *New York Tribune*, March 30, 1915, p. 10.

¹⁵⁵ *Diario de la Marina*, March 2, 1915, p. 3.

¹⁵⁶ *La Lucha*, March 17, 1915, p. 8.

whites appear to be wild about Willard.”¹⁵⁷ On March 13, three weeks before the fight, *La Lucha* reprinted the statement by a Florida sports editor that “it is to be hoped by all true Americans that [Willard] will be able to eliminate Johnson from the ring forever.”¹⁵⁸

Any white Cuban reading these words undoubtedly would have noted that Willard was the favorite among most white North Americans and perhaps also taken this as license to cheer for Willard based on race. Indeed, some Cubans were so sensitive to the racial implications of the fight that at one point rumors circulated that the provincial governor threatened to ban the fight because it pitted men of two different races against each other.¹⁵⁹ These rumors proved to be unfounded and were laid to rest when the governor wrote an open letter stating, “I beg to say I will take no measures to prevent the boxing match . . . for the world’s championship. Like you, I am of the opinion that there does not exist in Cuba such a thing as race hatred.”¹⁶⁰ The professed absence of racial hatred notwithstanding, one North American journalist observed, “the white man is a great favorite among the Cubans and carries a considerable portion of their wagers.”¹⁶¹

Afro-Cuban fans were also anxious to attend the fight, but for the most part found the cost of entry prohibitive. The *New York Tribune* noted, “hundreds of negroes, the best sports on the island, are anxious to attend the fight, but cannot afford the admission charge. In many cases they are scraping every penny together in their eagerness to see the

¹⁵⁷ *New York Times*, March 17, 1915, p.12.

¹⁵⁸ *La Lucha*, March 13, 1915, p. 5.

¹⁵⁹ *New York Times*, March 14, 1915, p. 14.

¹⁶⁰ *New York Tribune*, March 24, 1915, p. 10.

¹⁶¹ *New York Tribune*, April 4, 1915, sec. 2, p. 4.

Samson Johnson facing the white goliath.”¹⁶² While Cubans of color may have been just as interested in the fight as white Cubans, in all likelihood material considerations excluded them from actually attending the event, thus resulting in a largely white and pro-Willard crowd at the match itself. Nonetheless, “about the training camps groups of Negro youths [spent] all day at sparring,”¹⁶³ suggesting that Johnson’s celebrity may have indicated to Afro-Cubans that boxing was a means of social mobility. The partisanship along racial lines extended to wagers, as it did in the United States. The *Chicago Defender*, a leading African-American newspaper remarked “[m]any of the [Havana] natives [were] laying money on Johnson, because he is of their color,” presumably referring to Afro-Cubans.¹⁶⁴

Over 30,000 fans attended the match, including Cuban President Mario G. Menocal, the governor of Havana Province and the mayor of Havana.¹⁶⁵ Press accounts estimated that 25,000 of the fans who attended the fight were Cuban.¹⁶⁶ Throughout the fight, the largely white crowd shouted words of encouragement to Willard such as “Kill the black bear!” and “Knock him out and let us go home!” Once Johnson finally succumbed:

The scene of jubilation which followed the victory of Willard was one that has never been equalled [sic] in America at any fight. Thousands crowded to the ring to hail the new champion. . . . The victory was so popular that the natives were eager to carry [Willard] home.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶² *New York Tribune*, April 2, 1915, p. 10.

¹⁶³ *New York Tribune*, March 30, 1915, p. 10.

¹⁶⁴ *Chicago Defender*, April 3, 1915, p. 7.

¹⁶⁵ *New York Tribune*, April 2, 1915, p. 10.

¹⁶⁶ See Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*, p. 176.

¹⁶⁷ *New York Times*, April 6, 1915, p. 8

After Willard's victory "crowds lined the streets . . . and the new white champion was loudly cheered. He was decidedly the favorite of the crowd all throughout the fight."¹⁶⁸ At the conclusion of the fight, fans shouted "*viva el blanco*" and flew white flags from their cars as they returned to Havana from the track.¹⁶⁹ According to *La Lucha*, "thousands of Cuban enthusiasts and admirers" came out to say goodbye to Willard when he left Cuba on a steamer bound for Key West.¹⁷⁰ Even if Cubans had not developed a racialized perception of the fight on their own, those who attended or had read or heard about it would certainly have been exposed to the racial significance and meaning that North Americans attributed to the contest. Given that the Johnson-Willard fight is currently understood to be the event that spurred the popularity of boxing as a spectator sport in Cuba,¹⁷¹ it is likely that many Cubans came to see boxing in racialized terms from the very moment they became interested in the sport. Indeed some may have even taken to boxing because of the racial significance it carried. Instead of being one possible interpretation of the outcome of boxing match, the affirmation or contestation of racial hierarchy may have become a central aspect of the sport in the minds of Cuban fans, intrinsic to its character as a cultural practice.

The fight between Johnson and Willard had lasting effects on Cuban understandings of the significance of boxing matches, especially if the world heavyweight championship was at stake. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Cuban

¹⁶⁸ *New York Tribune*, April 6, 1915, p. 1.

¹⁶⁹ Hietala, pp. 101-102.

¹⁷⁰ *La Lucha*, afternoon edition, April 7, 1915, p. 7.

¹⁷¹ Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*, p. 176. "Origen y desarrollo del boxeo cubano," in *Enciclopedia del boxeo cubano*, ed, Willy del Pino. (Miami: Manolo de la Tejera and Willy del Pino, 1988), p. 16.

sportswriters remained keenly aware of the particular significance boxing had as a metaphor for Darwinian competition and an indicator of the fitness of national or racial groups. When Argentine Luis Firpo met African-American Harry Wills in a heavyweight bout in 1924, the headline on the sports page of the Havana newspaper *El Imparcial* announced, “20 Latin Republics anxiously await the triumph of [Firpo],”¹⁷² insinuating that all Latin Americans had a stake in whether or not Firpo defeated his adversary. Indeed, Cuban sportswriters consistently alluded to Jack London’s phrase “Great White Hope.” By the middle of the 1920s, they had generalized the phrase to refer to whichever boxer proved to be the most promising heavyweight contender from a given racial group at the moment. Thus during the early 1920s, Firpo was referred to as the Latin Hope (“*la esperanza latina*”),¹⁷³ and in 1924 Harry Wills was referred to as “the black hope.”¹⁷⁴ The phrase was used repeatedly in the Cuban press, becoming common parlance. By 1927 Firpo would be replaced by Basque heavyweight Paulino Uzcundun as “*la esperanza de la raza latina*.”¹⁷⁵ After Joe Louis lost his first fight with Max Schmelling in June of 1936, the Afro-Cuban magazine *Adelante* noted that because of his youth they were still optimistic about Louis’ future as a boxer, and that as far as they were concerned Louis continued to be “the black hope.”¹⁷⁶

The symbolic significance of the career of African-American boxer Joe Louis was also evident in the Cuban sports pages. The popular magazine *Bohemia* also called Joe

¹⁷² *El Imparcial*, September 11, 1924, p. 9.

¹⁷³ *El Imparcial*, August 31, 1926, p. 7.

¹⁷⁴ *El Imparcial*, September 11, 1924, p. 9.

¹⁷⁵ *El Imparcial* February 25, 1927, p. 11.

¹⁷⁶ Salamar, “*Deportes: Joe Louis sigue siendo la esperanza negra*,” *Adelante* 2, no. 14 (July 1936), p. 21.

Louis “the Black Hope”, and noted that he was “the hope of Harlem” despite the fact that he was actually from Detroit.¹⁷⁷ When Joe Louis defeated James Braddock for the world heavyweight title in June 1937, *Bohemia* magazine ran an article titled ‘Long Live the Black King!’ declaring that “the white king had died” and “the crowd gave cries of joy for the black king” on that “memorable night for the history of sports and the colored race.”¹⁷⁸ When Louis defended his title by successfully defeating Max Schmelling in June 1938, the communist daily *Hoy* observed, “the Aryan philosophy now finds itself in a frightening crisis” since Louis had “provided the most formidable weapon” to those seeking to debunk the myth of Aryan superiority.¹⁷⁹ That day *Hoy* ran a cartoon on the front page that depicted Joe Louis knocking out Adolf Hitler and his Aryan theory (see fig. 1.1). Cuban journalists were fully aware of the larger ideological significance of boxing, and transmitted this significance to their readers regularly.

Cuban sportswriters took a particular interest in the fortunes of Spanish and Hispanic boxers. In the October 1927 issue of *Bohemia* an article titled “The Boxers of Our Race” opened by declaring: “The idea persists among us that North Americans are superior to us in physical strength.” In seeking to discredit this belief the article pointed to a recent heavyweight bout between Argentine boxer Luis Firpo and North American Jack Dempsey, in which Firpo knocked Dempsey out of the ring for a nine count before ultimately losing by knockout in the second round. The article went on to provide a litany of recent exploits by boxers from Latin America and Spain in order to demonstrate

¹⁷⁷ Captioned photo, *Bohemia* 28 (August 23, 1936), p. 39.

¹⁷⁸ “*Viva el rey negro*,” *Bohemia* 29 (June 27, 1937), p. 45.

¹⁷⁹ *Hoy*, June 23, 1938, p. 7.



Figure 1.1. "The End of a Fairy Tale." The above illustration appeared in the Cuban newspaper *Hoy* the day after Joe Louis won his rematch with Max Schmelling in June 1938. (*Hoy*, June 23, 1938, p. 1)

that “we, Spaniards and Hispanic-Americans are as strong as the strongest race.”¹⁸⁰ While none of these boxers was an actual world champion, the point was to prove that Spaniards and Latin Americans were equal in strength to other national groups and merited the same esteem. Cuban sportswriters agreed that the value of boxers was in proving the strength and fitness of Spaniards and Latin Americans relative to other national groups. Moreover, the article highlighted the multiple valences that the term race could have in Cuban discourse. While regularly understood to refer to distinct racial groups within Cuban society, it was also frequently used to refer to a Latin or Hispanic race. In addition, at times, journalists seemed to use the term interchangeably with nationality, making little substantive difference between the two categories.

The continuing interest in the careers of boxers from Spain and Latin America that Cuban sportswriters demonstrated suggested the belief that they had a stake in how these representatives of the “Hispanic race” performed in competition. One writer referred to Argentine Luis Firpo as “the most valuable hope for the Hispanic-American race in the virile sport of fists.”¹⁸¹ In February 1928, *Diario de la Marina* published a piece devoted especially to these boxers, insisting, “the day is near when Spanish-speaking boxers will conquer all the principal boxing championships.” The article betrayed a seeming confusion or lack of distinction between the categories of race and nation, referring to the French, English, Irish, Jews, Anglo-Saxons and Spanish speakers as races. The writer noted, “pugilism has varied considerably in recent years, witnessing a

¹⁸⁰ “Los boxeadores de nuestra raza,” *Bohemia* 19 (October 9, 1927), pp. 7, 58.

¹⁸¹ *La Noche*, July 9, 1922, p. 19.

diversity of races who have achieved supremacy in the sport.”¹⁸² As in the rest of the world, boxers had come to be understood in Cuba as proxies for the racial or national group to which they belonged, representing not just their own skill but the relative capacity of the collective they represented.

Moreover, discussions of the successes of these boxers indicated a conflation or analytical slippage between the categories of race and nation, highlighting the connection between racial hierarchies and national hierarchies. The sports pages of the Cuban press suggested that the category of race had a considerable degree of elasticity. In addition to the traditional categories of white, black, and mulatto used when referring to domestic Cuban society, national groups, such as the French or English, could be referred to as a race, as could Hispanics, belying an understanding that the Spanish-speaking peoples of the Americas and Spain constituted their own distinct race. At times even subgroups of the “white” race might be referred to as distinct races themselves. Thus, one Cuban magazine article on the 1936 Olympics in Berlin could observe that the Nazi regime had committed “all sorts of abuses against a portion of the German people, solely for the crime of being descended from the Jews, a race considered inferior to the ‘Aryan’ [race].” The writer went on to note that these abuses occurred despite the fact that this aforementioned Jewish race was composed of white individuals.¹⁸³

Cuban interest in the fortunes of Spanish and Latin American athletes extended beyond boxing. In the fall and winter of 1931, one magazine ran a series of articles that assessed the prospects of Latin American athletes at the upcoming summer Olympic

¹⁸² *Diario de la Marina*, February 10, 1928, p. 21.

¹⁸³ Salamar, “*Deportes: La XI Olimpiada Internacional*,” *Adelante* 1, no. 10 (March 1936), p. 21.

games. The first article noted that since the modern games had been reestablished in 1896, the status of a victorious or conquering nation was reserved for those countries that had achieved the most honors in these athletic competitions.¹⁸⁴ The focus on Latin American athletes could have been due to a dearth of Cubans headed to the games, but is also likely to be indicative of the adherence to a racialized Latin or Spanish American identity with respect to the athletic sphere, whereby sportswriters sought to determine how Latin Americans would fair in competition against their Anglo-Saxon counterparts.

By the 1920s, an awareness of the symbolic power of sport and the potential for it to help address Cuban anxieties about proving themselves a fit and capable people began to manifest itself regularly in the press. An examination of reporting in Cuban periodicals and newspapers demonstrates that Cuban sportswriters (and ultimately their readers) were well aware of the ideas regarding athletic competition and its relation to racial and national hierarchies that circulated internationally at the time. In December 1928, an article titled “Sport Does not Recognize Boundaries of Race, Creed or Nationality” noted that all races and nationalities had achieved some success in the sphere of athletics. “There is no race or nationality that possesses a monopoly on athletic ability, fortitude and courage.” The article went on to review the exploits of English, Japanese, Black, Native American and Filipino athletes. At the same time, however, the fact that the article grouped the various achievements based on racial or national categories carried a subtext of competition between groups.¹⁸⁵ While on the one hand athletics served as an open site of participation and competition with the potential for equality, the results of competition

¹⁸⁴ J. Olachea, “*América Latina ante las olimpiadas*,” *Nocaut* 1 (October 1931), p. 16.

¹⁸⁵ *Diario de la Marina*, December 16, 1928, section 3, p. 1.

along racial or national lines still had considerable significance

Cuban journalists came to recognize athletic accomplishment in general as a marker for civilization and modernity. “Which races,” one columnist asked, (in yet another conflation of the categories race and nation):

have provided in the modern struggles of intelligence the greatest portions of tenacity and knowledge if not the ones most physically rejuvenated by the cultivation of sport in its multiple manifestations? England, Germany, France... Italy, Belgium, the Anglo-Saxons of America, Danes and Swedes, the most well-muscled peoples are, by pleasant coincidence, the most intellectually virile.¹⁸⁶

So accepted was the notion that athletic achievement was a marker of development and an advanced level of civilization, that investment in sports programs could be taken as proof of the progressive and beneficial nature of a particular regime or political system. In 1928 one writer took a survey of recent world records to predict which countries would have the most success at the upcoming summer Olympics. The United States seemed to be the favorite, a fact that the author attributed to its “unbeatable training methods” insinuating that advanced training techniques fostered North American success.¹⁸⁷ Discussions of athletic success in the Cuban press carried a subtext of sport as a reflection of relative stages of advancement or progress. Sportswriters also highlighted the eugenic benefits that the development of sports would supposedly yield. *Bohemia* magazine declared that “participation in sports was beneficial for the population at large because of the “decisive influence it exercises on the formation of will and the affirmation of the most virile sentiments,” among the youth of the nation.¹⁸⁸ *El Mundo*

¹⁸⁶ F.L. Martin, “*Aire y Sol*,” *Record* 1 (November 1935), p. 37.

¹⁸⁷ *Diario de la Marina*, February 8, 1928, p. 21.

¹⁸⁸ Adolfo Font, “*Cuba y las olimpiadas Centro-Americanas*,” *Bohemia* 25 (December 10, 1933), p. 43.

agreed, “whichever nation dedicates itself to creating a sporting youth” would inevitably attain “a high proportion of discipline, good health and good habits.”¹⁸⁹ The sports magazine *Record* added, “thanks to sport” the youth of the world were “predisposed to heroism” and able to “confront physical and moral struggles.”¹⁹⁰ Sport not only reflected progress, it also fostered it through a positive eugenic impact on the population.

The newspaper *Hoy*, published by the Cuban Communist Party, also paid considerable attention to sport, recognizing its significance even in the context of its political and ideological program. In its inaugural issue, the editors ran an essay detailing the place of their sports section in the paper, announcing that among its objectives would be the documentation of the “enormous importance and significance” that sport had for the “development of the human spirit.”¹⁹¹ In 1938 the paper ran a four part series on sport in the Soviet Union. The series of articles detailed the resources that the Soviet Union was devoting to the promotion of sport in the country, noting that because of these resources the country was of the highest caliber in the world of international sport.¹⁹² The editors of *Hoy* expected that their readers would take this concern for sport as proof that the Soviet system was an appealing alternative.

The understanding that athletic accomplishment reflected progress and modernity extended to government officials as well. In early 1938, the Cuban minister in Panama reported on the abuse of Cuban athletes by Panamanian fans during the Central American games in Panama City. Fans had taunted Cuban as well as other foreign athletes, and a

¹⁸⁹ *El Mundo*, February 9, 1928, p. 30.

¹⁹⁰ “Aire y Sol,” *Record* 1, no. 3 (November 1935), p. 37.

¹⁹¹ *Hoy*, April 30, 1938, p. 4.

¹⁹² *Hoy*, June 3, 1938, p. 7.

fight between members of the Cuban delegation and Panamanian fans actually broke out during one boxing match. The minister explained the events by observing that Panama was a nation “in formation, composed of the most diverse kinds of races and types, where the sons of Jamaica and British India abound.” As a result, they expressed their partisanship in “rather primitive fashion.” The minister ascribed the crude demonstrations of hostility by Panamanians to a “lack of sporting preparation.” He went on to express a certain degree of pessimism regarding the suitability of such international competitions for the people of Central America and the Caribbean.

These [games] instead of uniting peoples... only serve to produce rivalries and hate, to no benefit. In Ancient Greece and among the Saxon peoples, it is possible that these competitions are useful, but for Spanish-Americans, I believe they are wholly prejudicial to the harmonious relations that should exist between nations of the same continent.¹⁹³

The pessimism of the consul notwithstanding, his correspondence indicated the perception that proper comportment in athletic competition and adherence to notions of sportsmanship and fair play was also dependent on a certain level of national progress and development. A degree of advancement was a prerequisite even for participation in athletic competition.

Based on their appreciation for the larger significance of sport, Cuban journalists increasingly touted the benefit of using athletic competition to gain favorable exposure abroad. When the Central American Olympic Games took place in Havana in 1930, an editorial in *Bohemia* magazine described the significance of hosting the games.

International athletic competition was not only a way of proving national fitness, but also a way of developing bonds with competing countries, “for Cuba - as with the other

¹⁹³ Minister Emilio Nuñez Portuondo to Secretaria de Estado Juan J. Ramos, February 23, 1938, Legajo 265, Expediente 4417, pp. 69-71, Fondo Secretaria de Estado, Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Havana, Cuba.

countries - the relations initiated in times of unforgettable competitions and youthful joy will be advantageous.” Competition provided a means of strengthening relations and affection between countries. The editorial closed with a simple directive: “Cuban athletes should consider that this is their slogan: For the Homeland and For Sport.”¹⁹⁴ In examining the significance of baseball in Cuba, Lou Pérez has observed that team sports have exercised a powerful grip on the national imagination, implying an expression of nationality and a representation of national aspirations.¹⁹⁵ In fact, articles by Cuban sportswriters suggest that they believed that any athlete who competed on the international stage always competed as a representative of his or her nation, embodying the hopes and aspirations of this nation, as well as a sense of pride, dignity and worth relative to other nations.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Cuban sportswriters explicitly addressed the link between sporting success and national pride and aspiration in their editorial content. Sportswriters figured as key protagonists in the explicit linkage of sport with nationalism. As a rule their writing tended to be extremely nationalistic, referring to “our boxing” or “our athletes” when discussing the state of Cuban boxing or the exploits of Cuban athletes abroad. Jess Losada, sports editor for *Carteles* magazine, observed:

Every athlete carries in his soul various motivations to compete, conscious and unconscious. The principal motivation represents the glory of his country. . . . [His] triumphs are the triumphs of [his country]. His nation helps him to overcome. It is a communion between athlete and nation that has the objective of providing the nation a shred of glory, the compensation of patriotic pride and public utility (the universal propaganda that victory grants).¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ “*Por la Patria y el Sport*,” *Bohemia* 22 (March 23, 1930), p. 23.

¹⁹⁵ Louis Pérez, “Between Baseball and Bullfighting,” pp. 494-495.

¹⁹⁶ Jess Losada, “*Olympiades*,” *Carteles* 18 (August 21, 1932), p. 34.

The athlete and his nation were bound together in a symbiotic relationship that provided motivation for the athlete and glory for the nation. In its summary of the year in sport for 1931, *Nocaut*, a monthly magazine devoted to sport and published in Havana, printed a list of world champions in sports ranging from rugby to billiards to ice-skating. For virtually every listed champion the editors provided the nationality of the listed individual or team, an indication that they viewed each athlete as a national representative.¹⁹⁷

Based on this understanding of the relationship between athletes and their country, it should come as no surprise that Cuban sportswriters lobbied passionately for the sending of Cuban delegations to the Olympic Games. In February 1928 *El Mundo* insisted that Cuba “as a progressive nation” should attend the summer Olympics in Amsterdam, for such a gesture would serve as an indication of “the high spirit and cultural ambition that permeates the current Cuban generation” and bring the nation “honor and prestige as a cultured and progressive people.”¹⁹⁸ *Diario de la Marina* agreed on the significance of the upcoming games, for sending a delegation would mean that Cuba would be “fully represented as a modern and progressive nation that appreciates the full value of physical culture.” It went on to insist that the government devote funds to the cause because such an effort would generate the highly desirable result that “peoples who failed to recognize our improvement” would become aware of “the place that Cuba occupies among nations that march at the head of progress in all its aspects.”¹⁹⁹

The 1932 summer Olympics in Los Angeles provided another opportunity for

¹⁹⁷ “Resumen del año deportivo,” *Nocaut* 1, no. 5 (January/February 1932), pp. 4-9. The title of the magazine was the phonetic Spanish spelling of the English word “Knockout.” See chapter three for a more involved discussion of this publication.

¹⁹⁸ *El Mundo*, February 9, 1928, p. 30.

¹⁹⁹ *Diario de la Marina*, March 21, 1928, p. 19.

sports journalists to extol the national benefits of athletic competition. Sportswriter Adolfo Font noted that “all the principal nations of the globe” would be attending the games and that athletics was a sphere to which “all governments that desired not only the political well being of the nation and the best diplomatic relations, but also the international exchange of affective bonds” devoted resources and attention. Font lamented the fact that the Cuban officials seemed “almost absolutely unconcerned” with the Olympics and the potential it had to bring “resounding success” for Cubans among the nations of the world.²⁰⁰ Ultimately, Cuba was not able to send a delegation to the Los Angeles Olympics, most likely because of financial considerations and deepening political crisis.²⁰¹ Only one Cuban athlete went to the 1928 games in Amsterdam, and the scarcity of resources caused by the worldwide depression virtually precluded any chance of improving this showing in 1932.²⁰²

Font expressed his disappointment in this state of affairs in unmistakably nationalist terms: “We have to suffer the consequences of the inaction of those who direct our sporting activities.” He pointed out that while the Brazilian government had not spent money to send a delegation, it at least provided transportation for athletes who could afford to go and participate on their own. This failure was particularly painful because of the strong showing Cuba had shown at the Central American games in Havana in 1930, where it finished first in medal count. Font noted that Mexico, which had finished second to Cuba in medal count at the Central American games in 1930, sent a “magnificent and

²⁰⁰ Adolfo Font, “*Cuba ante las olimpiadas de 1932*,” *Nocaut*, 1 (August 1931), p. 25.

²⁰¹ See chapter 3 for a discussion of these developments.

²⁰² J. Olachea, “*La América Latina ante las olimpiadas de Los Ángeles*,” *Nocaut* 1 (September 1931), p. 19.

large representation . . . to the Olympics in Los Angeles, proof of the development obtained by this sister nation in the last five years.” He went on to assert that the commitment of the Mexican government to send a large delegation was the product of “the constant and notable preparation to which it subjects its youth, having transformed it in little time into one of the most advanced.”²⁰³ Participation by a nation in the Olympics was also an indicator of the attentiveness of its government to the condition of the populace. The repeated use of words like modern, progress, and culture outlined the stakes in unmistakable terms. Sporting achievement on the international stage was important because it projected the image of a modern and developed Cuba to other nations of the world.

Given the favorable exposure that international athletic success garnered, the sports pages of the Cuban press covered the exploits of any national athlete who achieved such exposure, especially if it came in the form of that most incontrovertible form of proof of relative fitness, a world championship. From 1921 to 1927, Cuban chess master José Raúl Capablanca delivered such exposure, having held the title of world champion during those years. Newspapers like *Diario de la Marina* covered his career with regularity and detail, often using syndicated services like the Associated Press and United Press to report on his exploits abroad. Indeed, Capablanca proved popular in Cuba simply because he was a world champion, even though he played a sport, chess, that relatively few in Cuba followed at the time. “I follow the life and glories of Capablanca,” confessed columnist Eladio Secades, “not as a fan of the chessboard, but as a Cuban, simply as a Cuban.” In fact, there was a bit of a tension between the desire to fête Capablanca as a

²⁰³ Adolfo Font, “*El papelazo olímpico*,” *Bohemia* 24 (July 31, 1932), p. 48.

national hero and a relative lack of excitement in Cuba with regard to chess. Secades suggested that most Havana sportswriters failed to pay much attention to Capablanca “not because we are bad patriots, but because we don’t understand a single thing about chess.”²⁰⁴

When Capablanca lost his title in December 1927, Cuban sportswriters viewed the development as cause for concern. One writer wondered if Cuba had any hope of recovering this honor, an honor “of which all Cubans could be proud.”²⁰⁵ Another journalist decried the lack of support that Capablanca received from the government during his tenure as champion, insisting that Cuba had lost its “last global bulwark” and that “Capablanca fought for Cuba [while] Cuba did very little for Capablanca.”²⁰⁶ Eladio Secades of *El Mundo* declared, “I have lamented for days, in this very publication, that with the fall of [Capablanca] the only world championship that we had has escaped us.” He went on to insist that while Cuba did not have an official world champion, they could still point to one unofficial champion, Jai alai player José Maria Gutiérrez. He argued,

Cuba does not have an official sporting champion simply because the Cuban who should offer us this honor [Gutiérrez] is dedicated to the only sport in the whole world that ...[does not] denominate a champion [or] provide crowns or trophies that establish a distinction between aces and the mediocre... This is to say that Cuba still has a world champion, but one without a title.²⁰⁷

Secades found it necessary to highlight the achievements of Gutiérrez as moral compensation for the loss by Capablanca. The editors of *Bohemia* magazine agreed. In its

²⁰⁴ *El Mundo*, October 16, 1927, p. 33.

²⁰⁵ Juan Corzo, “Después de la derrota: Alekhine campeón: Posibilidades de revancha,” *Carteles* 10 (December 18, 1927), p.25

²⁰⁶ Lillo Jiménez, “Del momento sportivo,” *Bohemia* 19 (December 4, 1927), p. 47.

²⁰⁷ *El Mundo*, December 10, 1927, p. 30.

year-end review of sports for 1927, the popular publication noted that despite the loss Cubans should not despair as they still had one world champion remaining, an individual named only as Robledillo, who was a tightrope walker.²⁰⁸ The desire to point to at least one world champion who represented the country was so powerful, that writers deemed it fit to resort to the obscure and unofficial to fill the void.

Because boxing was at its peak in global popularity in the 1920s and 1930s, and was deeply imbued with the ideological subtext of Darwinian competition, it was especially suitable for promoting a favorable international image for Cuba. When Cuban boxer Jacinto Pérez Valdez was set to fight North American boxer Tiger Herman in September 1926, a column in the newspaper *El Imparcial* noted that Valdez would be facing someone of Italian, German and Canadian origin, meaning that Valdez would be facing the representative of “three distinct races.” The columnist saw this as a great opportunity for Valdez and Cuban sport in general: “What a triumph for Cuba! We will have defeated Italy, Germany and Canada in one blow!”²⁰⁹ At stake in the upcoming bout for Valdez was a measurement of Cuban national capacity and prestige relative to three different European nations. Moreover, the description of Italians, Germans and Canadians as distinct races highlighted the ongoing conflation of racial and national identity in Cuban sports pages.

Bohemia correspondent Adolfo Font insisted that the development of Cuban boxing was particularly important for “all those who see these sporting affairs as a suitable and lofty plane for our life as a cultured people and a prosperous and modern

²⁰⁸ Lillo Jiménez, “*Síntesis deportiva*,” *Bohemia*, vol. 20 (January 1, 1928), pp. 52-53.

²⁰⁹ *El Imparcial*, September 28, 1926, p. 6.

nation.” He went on to note that Cuban boxers in particular were well situated to bring honor and prestige to the nation. He saw in these young men a group that could serve “their fatherland [*patria*] as goodwill ambassadors” to the other nations of the world and continued:

In boxing . . . [Cubans] are well prepared to achieve an advantageous [outcome] in an international tournament, which would . . . portray us to those who only know us for our . . . tobacco and . . . sugar . . . and who visualize only an Indian, laden with feathers, sitting in a forest with a giant cigar in his mouth when they think of Cuba.²¹⁰

The calls to develop Cuban boxing did not fall completely on deaf ears. In the spring of 1928 the Interior Ministry (Secretario de Gobernación) announced plans to create a national boxing academy for the purposes of training young boxers. While the project was eventually abandoned due to lack of funds, columnist Guillermo Pi observed that a boxing academy that would instruct Cuban youth in a “scientific and harmonious” manner was precisely what the country needed. Pi was explicit in his emphasis on the scientific nature of such an academy and the benefits of development that it was sure to bring. Such a facility would be the “bedrock of boxing” in the capital. “An academy with a modern gym, [characterized by] the most adequate and up to date system, with showers and steam baths, a massage room, box office . . . and a library dominated by books related to boxing” was sure to help stimulating the growth of boxing on the island and emergence of talented competitors.²¹¹ In the late 1920s, at least some Cubans viewed the creation of such facilities as a matter of national importance.

During the 1920s and 1930s boxing was particularly linked to notions of national pride and aspiration and a sense of Darwinian competition between racial and national

²¹⁰ Font, “*Cuba ante las olimpiadas de 1932*,” p. 25.

²¹¹ *Diario de la Marina*, April 12, 1928, p. 18.

groups. While successful athletes in general were praised as effective ambassadors for the nation in the first few decades of the twentieth century, successful boxers had the most impact in such a role. Through Kid Chocolate, a boxer who gained success on an international scale during the “Golden Age” of the sport, Cuban sportswriters would be able to relate conversations regarding sport, racial ideology and national hierarchies directly to the Cuban condition.

In October 1927 columnist Eladio Secades commented in the Havana daily *El Mundo* on the career of boxer Cirilín Olano and his status as a sporting ambassador for Cuba. Secades opened by acknowledging that “[i]t has been said, by I cannot remember which great writer, that in modern times athletes are representatives of peoples and races.” However, while Olano had pursued a moderately successful career in South America, it seemed that he was not quite the national hero that Cuba needed. Apparently, Olano was so apathetic, careless and lacking in style that he was not suited to “represent Cuba in the field of sports.”²¹² Moreover, three months later Secades would insist that it was not in South America where a boxer could make the biggest name for Cuba, but in the United States. “In order to prevail in boxing matters, to [truly] give Cuba pugilistic triumph and prestige,” he opined, “one must head north and not south.”²¹³ Just as Kid Chocolate was to begin his meteoric rise, Cuban sportswriters were in fact looking for athletes, especially boxers, who would represent the nation well abroad. Kid Chocolate seems to have risen to fame at a time when Cuban journalists and sports fans were effectively waiting on him.

²¹² *El Mundo*, October 31, 1927, p. 26.

²¹³ *El Mundo*, January 3, 1928, p. 31.

Chapter 2: Rise of a Cuban Champion

The Boy Who Grew up in the Ring

The man the world would come to know as Kid Chocolate emerged from humble origins to embark on a career that would make him an international celebrity. Eligio Sardiñas was born in Havana in 1910, the youngest of four boys and two girls. His mother, the daughter of slaves, washed clothes for income, and his father worked as a public works laborer until his death, which occurred when Eligio was five years old. After the death of his father, he and his siblings did what they could to contribute to the family income. His sisters worked as domestic servants and, instead of going to school, young Eligio, like many poor youths who lived in Havana, “was forced to find daily sustenance in the streets performing whatever jobs were available.” Sardiñas shined shoes and sold newspapers, living and working in the Havana neighborhood of El Cerro where he was born.¹

The sport of boxing may have well grabbed the attention of the young Sardiñas when Jack Johnson and Jess Willard met in Havana in 1915 for the heavyweight championship of the world.² In the days leading up to the fight, Havana was “fight mad,” and the contest was a major topic of conversation “in clubs, hotels and homes”

¹ Elio Menéndez and Víctor Joaquín Ortega, *Kid Chocolate: El boxeo soy yo* (Havana: Editorial Obre, 1980), p. 11; Jorge Alfonso, “Campeón de campeones: Kid Chocolate,” *Bohemia* 66 (August 9, 1974), p. 43.

² According to biographers Elio Menéndez and Víctor Joaquín Ortega, the popularity of boxing took root in Sardiñas’ home neighborhood of El Cerro as a result of the Johnson-Willard fight. Menéndez and Ortega, pp. 12-13, 175.

throughout the capital.³ While in Havana, Jack Johnson and his wife were “made the object of the courtesy and attention of Havana’s colored society,”⁴ suggesting that he carried the sympathies of Afro-Cubans just as he did those of most African-Americans. The *New York Tribune* reported that “groups of Negro youths [spent] all day at sparring,” near the training camps of the two boxers.⁵ At the time of the fight Sardiñas was four years old, and while there is no evidence to indicate that he was one of the “Negro youths” who gathered outside the training camps, it is possible that he was aware of the fight itself. His older brothers, one of whom boxed as an amateur, almost certainly were. Given the considerable excitement that the fight generated in Havana, Sardiñas could very well have known about it and been impressed by the momentousness of the occasion, even at the tender age of four.

Sardiñas entered the boxing world at a very early age. As a young boy he regularly attended fights at the nearby *Arena Colón*, where his oldest brother often participated. At the arena, Eligio met North American welterweight Young “Chico” Wallace, who reportedly helped the youngster develop his skills as a boxer while Sardiñas carried his bags.⁶ Growing up poor, black and uneducated in Havana left him with few options for earning a living, the appeal of boxing was almost certainly to a large degree financial.⁷ The example of his brother and other neighborhood boys and the ever-

³ *New York Tribune*, March 30, 1915, p. 10.

⁴ *La Lucha*, March 1, 1915, p. 1.

⁵ *New York Tribune*, March 30, 1915, p. 10.

⁶ Jorge Alfonso, “*Campeón de Campeones*,” p. 43; Menéndez & Ortega, p. 12.

⁷ Biographers Menéndez and Ortega state flatly that “hunger was the primary impulse” into boxing for Chocolate. Menéndez and Ortega, p. 13. Observing that “an impoverished society... is fertile ground for a flourishing boxing industry,” Michael Messner has pointedly summarized the reasons why the poor and

pressing need to make money apparently induced Sardiñas to try his hand at boxing, and at the age of eleven he entered a boxing tournament for paperboys held by the Havana newspaper *La Noche* in 1922.⁸ The tournament fights attracted a significant following among local fans, and one such program attracted an estimated 2,000 spectators.⁹ The exact origins of the moniker Kid Chocolate are unclear, but Sardiñas had begun to use it by the time of his earliest recorded formal competition at the age of eleven. According to one account, his oldest brother Domingo had boxed under the name Chocolate, and thus the young Eligio adopted the name for the *La Noche* tournament.¹⁰

While the exact origin of his stage name may be lost to history, Chocolate attracted fans and established a reputation for himself as a skilled boxer even as a boy.¹¹ The speed and knack for defensive maneuvers that would become the hallmarks of his professional career were apparent at an early age. As early as July 1922, when he was

disadvantaged seemed to be overrepresented in the ranks of boxers. “[E]ven though nobody forces young boxers to enter the ring, it would be foolish to suggest that most of them freely choose boxing from a number of attractive alternatives.... In any society which restricts the opportunities of certain groups of people, one will be able to find a significant number of those people... willing to pursue very dangerous careers for the slim chance of ‘making it big.’” Michael A. Messner, “Why Rocky III?” in *Sex, Violence and Power in Sports: Rethinking Masculinity* ed. Michael A. Messner and Donald F. Sabo (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1994), p. 78.

⁸ Menéndez and Ortega, p. 13

⁹ *La Noche*, July 10, 1922, p. 12.

¹⁰ Menéndez and Ortega, p. 15. Enrique Encinosa notes that Eligio’s older brother competed under the name “Knockout Chocolate,” and while the elder brother was apparently mediocre in the ring, the younger brother would adopt his name. See Enrique Encinosa, *Azúcar y chocolate: Historia del boxeo cubano* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 2004), p. 53.

¹¹ Menéndez and Ortega report that Chocolate debuted in 1922 by beating a fifteen year old when he was only eleven. Cuban boxing historian Jorge Alfonso indicates that Chocolate went undefeated in the 1922 tournament as well as in the one held the following year, winning sixteen bouts in all. See Menéndez and Ortega, p. 15, and Jorge Alfonso, *Puños dorados: Apuntes para la historia del boxeo en Cuba* (Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 1988), pp. 52-53. The earliest mention of Kid Chocolate in the collection of *La Noche* available at the Instituto de Historia in Havana occurs in July 1922, and at that point the publication was already referring to him as a champion. See *La Noche*, July 3, 1922, p. 18.

eleven years old, the newspaper *La Noche* described Chocolate as a champion and emphasized his superior ability. On one Sunday that month he defeated two opponents in one night, forcing the first to quit before the fight was over and giving the second a “pitiful” beating. The reporter’s description of the performance by Chocolate ended with a simple, but clear declaration: “Chocolate has no equal.”¹² By February 1923 he reigned as the defending tournament champion in the 70-pound weight class.¹³ His ability became so renowned that when former heavyweight champion Jack Johnson returned to Havana in April 1923, he specifically asked to see Chocolate fight after having heard about the young phenom.¹⁴ Chocolate began to develop a trans-national fan base well before he even set foot in the United States.

The trans-national contacts forged by the world of spectator sport also manifested themselves in Kid Chocolate’s development as a boxer. Chocolate developed his style in part by observing films of Joe Gans and George Dixon, two African-American boxers who fought near the turn of the century and won championships during their careers.¹⁵ These films were shown at theaters in Havana, and the young Sardiñas attended screenings frequently. One particular film of two fights by Gans held the boy “fascinated,

¹² *La Noche*, July 3, 1922, p. 18.

¹³ *El Imparcial*, February 15, 1923, p. 11.

¹⁴ *El Imparcial*, April 30, 1923, p. 11.

¹⁵ *New York World*, September 16, 1928, p. 4S. Joe Gans boxed from 1891-1909, winning the world lightweight title in 1902. Loubet and Ort, p. 57. George Dixon boxed professionally from 1886 to 1906. Nicknamed “Little Chocolate, he won the world bantamweight title in 1890 and the featherweight title in 1892. He held the featherweight title for ten years and is described by *The Ring Boxing Encyclopedia and Record Book* as “one of the greatest fighters of all time.” Loubet and Ort, p. 55. Gans and Dixon were contemporaries and had a close personal friendship. For a detailed account of their lives and careers see Nat Fleischer, *The Three Colored Aces: Story of George Dixon, Joe Gans and Joe Walcott and Several Contemporaries*, vol. 3 of *Black Dynamite: The Story of the Negro in the Prize Ring from 1782 to 1938* (New York: The Ring Athletic Library, 1938), pp. 6-195.

in his seat.” The first time he saw the film he reportedly sat through five showings in one day, and returned the following day to view it again. Sardiñas “avidly drank in every detail of Gans’ remarkable style and...went home and rehearsed before the mirror,” attending screenings of the film every day for a week.¹⁶ Through the new medium of film two North Americans became heroes for a boy living in Cuba, and encouraged his own pursuit of a boxing career. The fact that the young Cuban consciously sought to imitate African-American boxers also suggests that identification and affinities along racial lines accompanied the diffusion of sport as a cultural form across national borders.¹⁷

After repeated success in the annual tournaments staged by *La Noche*, Chocolate went on to fight with irregular frequency through 1927, motivated more than anything by the immediate need to generate income.¹⁸ Estimates of the number of fights he fought during this time vary considerably, and the exact total may never be known with certainty.¹⁹ A semi-professional fight in Havana against the then undefeated Cuban

¹⁶ *New York Daily Mirror*, December 4, 1928, p. 29.

¹⁷ In her introduction to *Between Race and Empire*, Lisa Brock posits the existence of an African aesthetic that permeated the cultural expressions and athletic endeavors of African-Americans and Afro-Cubans. Brock argues that this aesthetic affinity points to the existence of a “cultural memory” which harkened back to West African origins. The fact that Chocolate consciously chose to imitate Gans and Dixon suggests that similarities in style between African-descended peoples in different countries in the Americas may have been due as much, if not more, to self-conscious identification and imitation along racial lines as to any atavistic tendencies. See Lisa Brock, introduction to *Between Race and Empire: African-Americans and Cubans before the Cuban Revolution*, ed. by Lisa Brock and Digna Castañeda Fuertes (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), pp. 18-29.

¹⁸ Menéndez and Ortega, pp. 16-17.

¹⁹ According to *The Ring Record Book and Boxing Encyclopedia*, Kid Chocolate fought in over 100 bouts as an amateur, winning all of them. Nat Loubet and John Ort, *The Ring Boxing Encyclopedia and Record Book* (New York: The Ring Book Shop, 1978), p. 53. On the other hand, Cuban boxing historian Jorge Alfonso states that only the victories of the *La Noche* tournament are verifiable. He contends that the record of 100 wins as an amateur was instead a fiction created by manager Luis “Pincho” Gutiérrez to make Chocolate a more appealing prospect to New York promoters during their first trip in 1928. Alfonso asserts that in actuality Chocolate fought rarely, if ever, in between his stint as a child boxer in the *La Noche* tournaments and his reappearance in the Havana boxing scene in late 1927. See Alfonso, “*Campeón de Campeones*,” pp. 43-44 and Alfonso, *Puños Dorados*, p. 54. Menéndez and Ortega state that Chocolate

Johnny Cruz in October 1927 propelled Chocolate on his path to boxing stardom. At that point Cruz was at the “apogee of his career,” having just won the metropolitan New York amateur boxing championship in the bantamweight division (118 pounds or less).²⁰

While the fight against Cruz seemed to be his first appearance in the ring in some time, his impressive accomplishments as an amateur left a lasting impression on at least one sportswriter. Upon learning that Chocolate was to fight Cruz, *El Mundo* reminded its readers of Chocolate’s boyhood exploits, going on at length about his career as an amateur and reputation as a young prodigy:

Kid Chocolate!!!... That marvel of a boy with gloves. First he was amateur champion at seventy pounds, then eighty, then ninety, and lastly at one hundred ten pounds he was able to maintain his glorious undefeated status. Fans saw him grow up inside the ropes of the ring... One day he disappeared, and I am absolutely certain that with the news today of his reappearance, flowers of admiration and praise will revive along the trail of memories and emotions that he blazed with his passage through the world of amateur boxing.²¹

Going into the fight, however, Cruz was the clear favorite, and was understood to be the most promising Cuban boxing prospect at the time. It was Cruz who was being touted as the best hope for international boxing glory for Cuba, something that had until then eluded the island nation. Eladio Secades of *El Mundo* lamented that “all, absolutely all, the Cuban boxers who have gone to the United States to seek immortality and riches

would occasionally fight in small prize fights to stay in shape. See Menéndez and Ortega, p. 17. Reports appearing in the newspaper *El Imparcial* indicate that Chocolate did fight in at least two fights in the fall of 1926, but missing issues make it impossible to fully reconstruct his record during this part of his life. See *El Imparcial*, October 15, 1926, p. 6 and *El Imparcial* November 27, 1926, p. 6.

²⁰ Jorge Alfonso, “*Campeón de Campeones*,” p. 44.

²¹ *El Mundo*, October 19, 1927, p. 27. The paper also reported a record of 64 amateur victories for Chocolate, suggesting that while the record of over one hundred wins as an amateur published in *The Ring Record Book* may be an embellishment, it is not far off the mark.

have returned to Cuba with neither,” noting the accomplishments of boxers from Spain and elsewhere in Latin America for the sake of comparison. “Argentina established itself pugilistically when [Luis Angel] Firpo fought for the world heavyweight title...Chile once enjoyed the unquestionable popularity of Luis Vicentini and Stanislaw Loyaza, Spain has Hilario Martinez.” In contrast, Cubans had “nothing to offer or say... no one can deny that for Cuba so far there have not been feats of international stature within the ring.”²² But Johnny Cruz offered hope and had a legitimate chance “to reach heights that, to date, have not yet been reached by a Cuban boxer.” After a few more fights in Cuba, Secades felt that Cruz was primed to head to the United States, “the capital of boxing,” to achieve the glory that to date had eluded Cuban boxers.²³

The defeat of Cruz at the hands of Chocolate spoiled these plans, and came as a shock to fans and sportswriters. *El Mundo* reported,

...one of the Cuban boxers who the sporting press of our country has praised and encouraged most ardently and enthusiastically, rapidly folded in front of a crowd that did not know whether to scream from excitement or grief. A young *negrito* who has been in the ring since he knew how to walk, who shined in the amateur tournaments of earlier days, and who until the moment of being called... to fight Johnny Cruz remained in silence and oblivion, reemerged magnificent, glorious and incredible.

Chocolate won the contest easily, knocking Cruz down for an eight count in the final round.²⁴ A rematch between Cruz and Chocolate the following February was the subject of considerable anticipation among Cuban fight fans.²⁵ At first Chocolate did not want to fight Cruz again, but he finally agreed after

²² *El Mundo*, October 22, 1927, p. 30.

²³ *El Mundo*, October 6, 1927, p. 30.

²⁴ *El Mundo*, October 23, 1927, p. 27.

²⁵ *El Mundo*, Feb. 11, 1928, p. 29; *Diario de la Marina*, February 11, 1928, p. 21.

considerable effort by Cruz' manager, Luis "Pincho" Gutiérrez, to arrange the fight.²⁶ In that contest, Chocolate dominated from start to finish before knocking Cruz out in the fifth round in front of a capacity crowd.²⁷

In the immediate aftermath of his second defeat of Cruz, Cuban journalists began to declare Chocolate the best boxer in Cuba. The daily *Diario de la Marina* observed, "a star has appeared on the Cuban boxing horizon. This star that was born and raised in the ring will be without a doubt the one that shines the brightest." The paper compared him favorably to boxers Black Bill and Kid Charol, who had already achieved moderate success abroad.²⁸ In addition, writers seized on the defeat of Johnny Cruz as proof that Cuban boxers were on par with, if not better than those in the United States. "It is not the same thing," one observed, "to be the metropolitan Champion of New York as it is to be the Champion of Cuba, where there are boxers the caliber of... Kid Chocolate."²⁹

The Sensation of New York

By April 1928, Luis "Pincho" Gutiérrez, would take over as Kid Chocolate's manager,³⁰ offering Chocolate the opportunity to box in the United States. Gutiérrez had already cultivated a number of contacts in New York City through his representation of Black Bill.³¹ After appearing in several fights in Havana in the first half of 1928,³²

²⁶ *Diario de la Marina*, February 10, 1928, p. 20.

²⁷ *Diario de la Marina*, February 12, 1928, p. 19; Menéndez and Ortega, pp. 17-18; Alfonso, *Puños Dorados*, p. 54.

²⁸ *Diario de la Marina*, March 7, 1928, p. 18.

²⁹ *El Mundo*, December 16, 1927, p. 27.

³⁰ *Diario de la Marina*, April 4, 1928, p. 16.

³¹ Menéndez and Ortega, p 22.

³² The details of Kid Chocolate's professional career in Cuba between the second fight with Johnny Cruz and his departure for New York City are also disputed. *The Ring Boxing Encyclopedia* states that he went

Chocolate left with Gutiérrez in June for the boxing Mecca of New York City to test his mettle.³³ Upon their arrival they stayed in Harlem and trained at the St. Nicholas ring on the west side of Manhattan.

Initially, Chocolate had difficulty attracting the interest of fight promoters, but within months, he established himself in New York boxing circles as a talent to be reckoned with. After a number of quick and impressive victories at rings in the outer boroughs and Long Island, Chocolate finally secured an engagement at the St. Nicholas. The *New York Daily Mirror* commented on the roundabout way in which Chocolate secured fighting engagements at the very gym where he trained. “Though Chocolate trained for a month at the St. Nick, he didn’t get a tumble from that club... But when he bowled over his first four opponents in clubs out in the sticks, the St. Nick suddenly wised up to his ability.”³⁴ Chocolate soon caught the eye of Jess McMahon, a New York based-boxing promoter, and Gutiérrez and McMahon scheduled Chocolate in a succession of fights for the rest of the calendar year.³⁵

By September sportswriters began to take note of Chocolate’s abilities. Pundits began to compare him to former lightweight champion George Dixon, most likely a

undefeated in 21 professional bouts in Cuba before beginning his first campaign in New York. See Loubet and Ort, p. 53. Jorge Alfonso insists that he only fought in seven bouts in Cuba between March and August of 1928. Alfonso instead suggests that Gutiérrez also fabricated the record of 21-0 so that Chocolate would look more impressive to promoters in the United States. See Alfonso, *Puños Dorados*, p. 55. Menéndez and Ortega support Alfonso’s account, claiming that Chocolate fought five more fights in Cuba after signing with Pincho Gutiérrez (winning four by knockout and the fifth easily by decision) before leaving for New York in June 1928. See Menéndez and Ortega, p. 23.

³³ *Diario de la Marina*, June 22, 1928, p. 19.

³⁴ *New York Daily Mirror*, November 30, 1928, p. 27.

³⁵ Alfonso, *Puños Dorados*, p. 57.

manifestation of the fact that Chocolate studied Dixon's style as a boy.³⁶ Chocolate was said to have "the speed, the generalship and the assortment of punches that made the original 'Little' Chocolate, George Dixon, so popular."³⁷ The *New York World* observed, "Kid Chocolate's rise makes the Negro a menace in numerous weight] classes."³⁸ That month he impressed fans by putting one boxer on the brink of a knockout in the first round.³⁹ His opponent was supposed to be of a higher caliber than the boxers that Chocolate had encountered so far in New York, but in the words of one observer, Chocolate "looked all over a world better."⁴⁰ Two weeks later another win indicated that Chocolate had "stamped a potential menace for the featherweight title."⁴¹ Within four months of his arrival in the United States, observers suggested that he was a championship caliber fighter and a threat to win a title in multiple weight classes.⁴²

Chocolate also quickly established himself as a fan favorite. When he entered the ring against Johnny Erickson in early October, the five thousand fans in attendance formed the largest crowd at the St. Nicholas arena to date that year, and greeted him with

³⁶ *New York Times*, September 18, 1928, p. 26; Milton Baron, "Boxing in Cuba," *The Ring* 7 (November 1928), p. 23.

³⁷ Nat Fleischer, "Nat Fleischer Says," *The Ring* 8 (September 1929), p. 12.

³⁸ *New York World*, September 17, 1928, p. 8.

³⁹ *La Prensa*, September 19, 1928, p. 8.

⁴⁰ *New York World*, September 18, 1928, p. 10.

⁴¹ *New York Times*, October 2, 1928, p. 28.

⁴² Chocolate first fought in the United States as a bantamweight (118 pounds or less) but over the course of his career he would compete in two other major weight classes, the featherweight (126 pounds or less) and lightweight (135 pounds or less) divisions. His first world title was in the junior lightweight division (130 pounds or less), an intermediate between the featherweight and lightweight classifications that was recognized by the National Boxing Association but not the New York State Athletic Commission.

“thunderous applause.”⁴³ After the fight fans crowded around the ring to cheer Chocolate, resisting efforts by police to disperse them. Several attempted to make their way to the ring to shake his hand.⁴⁴ By early October, manager Pincho Gutiérrez, who at first struggled to schedule fights for Chocolate, was now turning them down on a daily basis.⁴⁵ By the end of the month, a “succession of exciting ring conquests” earned Chocolate a designation as “the ring’s negro bantamweight sensation.”⁴⁶ He became “one of the best drawing cards” in the city,⁴⁷ and “enormous enthusiasm” over his fights developed among boxing fans.⁴⁸ As the New York Spanish language daily *La Prensa* observed, “if ... there is a bantamweight in the country with better prospects than Kid Chocolate... critics as well as fans are oblivious to his existence.”⁴⁹ Chocolate had become the darling of North American fans and sportswriters alike.

The renown generated by the exploits of Chocolate during the fall of 1928 was enough to warrant in depth coverage of his life in at least one New York daily newspaper. Beginning in late November, the *New York Daily Mirror* ran a 13 part series on his life. The first article traced his beginnings as a newsboy in Havana, asserting that Chocolate began boxing because he had to fight other neighborhood paperboys for the right to sell papers on a particular street corner. The article went on to summarize the childhood of

⁴³ *La Prensa*, October 3, 1928, p. 8.

⁴⁴ *Diario de la Marina*, October 1, 1928, p. 17.

⁴⁵ *Diario de la Marina*, October 9, 1928, p. 17.

⁴⁶ *New York Times*, October 30, 1928, p. 32.

⁴⁷ *La Prensa*, October 8, 1928, p. 5.

⁴⁸ *La Prensa*, October 10, 1928, p. 8.

⁴⁹ *La Prensa*, October 3, 1928, p. 8.

Eligio Sardiñas in ways that emphasized his blackness, incorrectly noting that his home neighborhood of *El Cerro* was the Harlem of Havana.⁵⁰ According to the *Mirror*, the young Sardiñas led a life identical to “the other pickaninnies in the El Cerro district up to the time he was ten. He played in the brilliant sunshine, went to school now and then and led the carefree existence of the negro [sic] in his natural element, the tropics.”⁵¹

The series itself seemed to be targeted more towards glorifying the persona of Kid Chocolate and his manager Pincho Gutiérrez, and contained a number of embellishments and inaccuracies regarding his early career in Havana. It described Gutiérrez as the Havana sports page editor who discovered Chocolate and began training “his young protégé for two hours a day in the finer points of the game” when Chocolate was ten.⁵² In fact, Havana newspapers indicated that Gutiérrez did not start managing Chocolate until February 1928 at the earliest. In all likelihood Gutiérrez shaped the story given to the *Mirror* to make it more compelling for the purposes of generating publicity for Chocolate. The paper stated that as a young child Chocolate regularly defeated opponents thirty to forty pounds heavier than he, a dubious assertion at best.⁵³ While the inaccuracy of several details called the reliability of the series into question, the fact of its publication was a testament to the growing popularity of Chocolate in New York.

⁵⁰ *New York Daily Mirror*, November 22, 1928, p. 23. Biographer Elio Menéndez asserts that in the first few decades of the twentieth century, *El Cerro* was quite a large neighborhood populated by whites as well as blacks, and well to do as well poor residents. Elio Menéndez, interview by author, tape recording, Havana, Cuba, April 20, 2007. Indeed, in January 1928, the Havana daily *El Mundo* documented the existence of a Cerro Sport Club that included a Jai Alai team, suggesting that the neighborhood was also home to elite white Cubans with Spanish cultural affinities. *El Mundo*, January 20, 1928, p. 30.

⁵¹ *New York Daily Mirror*, November 22, 1928, p. 23.

⁵² *New York Daily Mirror*, November 22, 1928, p. 23 and November 24, 1928, p. 29.

⁵³ See *New York Daily Mirror*, November 24, 1928, p. 29 and November 26, 1928, p. 27.

In late November Chocolate confirmed his status as a top attraction by making his debut at Madison Square Garden in front of 19,000 fans. Despite being knocked down by the very first punch thrown by his opponent, Joey Scalfaro, Chocolate fought to a draw.⁵⁴ He had apparently suffered “a serious attack of nerves” and was so awed by the momentousness of the occasion that he would later relate not remembering anything that happened in the first round.⁵⁵ Even in near defeat, Chocolate left an impression as an exciting and skillful boxer among fans and pundits. The *New York Daily Mirror* declared, “those who saw the scrap... left the Garden convinced that the Kid is a marvel.”⁵⁶ News of his appeal as an exciting fighter spread beyond the New York City limits. When Chocolate went upstate to Buffalo to fight hometown favorite Johnny Helstein in December, he drew a crowd of 10,000 fans, many of whom stayed on their feet for the duration of the bout.⁵⁷ The next day, Buffalo fight promoter Charles Murray tried to convince Chocolate to return to Buffalo (to no avail) because Chocolate had made such a favorable impression.⁵⁸

Over the course of the summer and fall of 1928 Kid Chocolate had taken New York City by storm and become a top box office draw. During his six months in the United States he went undefeated in seventeen bouts, the one blemish on his record being the draw with Scalfaro,⁵⁹ and ten of his sixteen victories were by knockout. The praise of

⁵⁴ *New York Daily Mirror*, December 6, 1928, p. 27; *Diario de la Marina*, December 1, 1928, p. 17.

⁵⁵ *Diario de la Marina*, December 2, 1928, p. 19.

⁵⁶ *New York Daily Mirror*, December 3, 1928, p. 27.

⁵⁷ *Diario de la Marina*, December 11, 1928, p. 15.

⁵⁸ *Diario de la Marina*, December 12, 1928, p. 15.

⁵⁹ Menéndez and Ortega, pp. 30-31.

his accomplishments in the North American press was effusive. *The Ring* magazine, the self-proclaimed bible of boxing, called him “the sensation of New York.”⁶⁰ The *New York Times* described him as one of the “scintillating stars among the new material.”⁶¹ *La Prensa* hailed him as “undoubtedly the most sensational discovery of the year.”⁶² Chocolate also became the first Cuban boxer to be internationally ranked. At the age of eighteen, he was ranked fourth in the bantamweight and sixth in the featherweight divisions respectively by *The Ring*.⁶³ The United Press summarized the whirlwind year that 1928 was for Kid Chocolate. He had arrived in New York in June “without a penny and unknown,” and left in December as “the idol of New York fans.”⁶⁴ This popularity and demand also translated into a considerable amount of income for the young boxer. Over the course of six months he earned over \$20,000.⁶⁵

After two and a half months in Havana, Chocolate returned to New York in March 1929 to pursue a schedule of more formidable opponents in an attempt to earn a chance to compete for the world featherweight title.⁶⁶ Over the course of the year he fought in a number of high-profile contests that contributed to his growing celebrity. Chocolate continued his habit of not only defeating his opponents, but also demonstrating considerable superiority. When he fought Al Rackow in Buffalo, the referee stopped the

⁶⁰ Milton Baron, “Boxing in Cuba,” *The Ring* 7 (December 1928), p. 33.

⁶¹ *New York Times*, December 30, 1928, p. 126.

⁶² *La Prensa*, October 30, 1928, p. 5.

⁶³ Alfonso, *Puños Dorados*, p. 57.

⁶⁴ *Diario de la Marina*, December 22, 1928, p. 19.

⁶⁵ *New York Times*, December 17, 1928, p. 33; *Chicago Defender*, December 29, 1928, p. 9. The Defender would later revise the figure down to \$15,000. *Chicago Defender*, January 12, 1929, p. 8.

⁶⁶ *Chicago Defender*, March 9, 1929, p. 9.

bout after Rackow went down for the fourth time in two rounds.⁶⁷ Four days later he beat Johnny Vacca at the Boston Garden, giving his opponent a “masterful lesson in the art of self-defense” in a contest that was “too one-sided to be called a great battle.”⁶⁸

In April Chocolate fought his most high-profile fight to date when he met Bushy Graham at the newly built New York Coliseum in the Bronx. The fight was to be the inaugural boxing event at the new arena of over 18,000 seats, and both the promoter and Coliseum owners hoped to use the fight to help establish it as a large professional boxing venue in the Bronx.⁶⁹ That they chose Chocolate to participate in such an event was a testimony to his ability to draw crowds. Indeed, the fight was said to have generated “enormous interest” throughout the country, as it featured “two of the quickest and most scientific of modern gladiators.”⁷⁰ Graham had earned recognition by the New York State Athletic Commission as world bantamweight champion the previous spring,⁷¹ and promoters submitted a request that the commission sanction the bout as a title fight, though the commission refused.⁷²

Calling the upcoming fight “one of the best bantamweight attractions of the year,” the *Chicago Defender*, a prominent African-American newspaper, insisted that “the winner will be looked upon as the real bantam champion,” and accused the New York

⁶⁷ *New York Times*, March 19, 1929, p. 38.

⁶⁸ *Chicago Defender*, March 30, 1929, p. 8.

⁶⁹ *New York Times*, March 18, 1929, p. 31.

⁷⁰ *La Prensa*, April 8, 1929, p.5.

⁷¹ Loubet and Ort, p. 31. Graham never defended his bantamweight title and had outgrown the weight class by June 1929.

⁷² *New York Times*, April 3, 1929, p. 39.

State Athletic Commission of racist motivations for not designating it a title contest, insisting,

[T]he boxing commission booted a good chance to clear up the muddled situation that prevails in [the bantamweight] class, besides giving the impression that it draws the color line... it is the general opinion that they fear the Race [sic] lad [Chocolate] may win the crown.⁷³

On the other hand Hype Igoe, writing for the *New York World*, expressed disbelief that such motivation existed, declaring, “The commissioners...couldn’t be that unfair. They wouldn’t be that unsportsmanlike. They wouldn’t make boxing look that cheap!” Igoe was confident that racial prejudice played no part in the decision, though he did not offer an alternative explanation. He invoked a notion of fair play and competition that he was confident would overcome any sense of racial bias, though he conceded that several promoters did exhibit a tendency to shun the scheduling of inter-racial bouts.⁷⁴

Commentary on the Graham fight indicated a degree of controversy and disagreement as to whether racist motivations superseded the ideals of merit and equal opportunity that were supposed to govern sport.

The lack of a world title notwithstanding, the fight drew a crowd of over 18,000 to the New York Coliseum, and thousands of spectators were reportedly turned away.⁷⁵ Ringside wires had been set up for cables to South America,⁷⁶ and the fight was also scheduled to be broadcast by two local New York City radio stations.⁷⁷ Among those

⁷³ *Chicago Defender*, April 13, 1929, p. 9.

⁷⁴ *New York World*, April 9, 1929, p. 10.

⁷⁵ *New York Times*, April 13, 1929, p. 16.

⁷⁶ *New York Times*, April 12, 1929, p. 30. The *Times* did not specify which Havana daily had sent a correspondent.

⁷⁷ *New York Times*, April 12, 1929, p. 30; *La Prensa* April 12, 1929, p. 5.

attending was New York City mayor James J. Walker, and the crowd was so loud that the ring announcer struggled to make himself heard as he introduced the fighters.⁷⁸ The first five rounds were said to have held “more action than is ordinarily crowded into the average ten-round battle.”⁷⁹ Chocolate won when Graham was disqualified in the seventh round for low blows. The commentary by *New York Times* columnist James P. Dawson on the disqualification highlights the degree to which prizefighting had become a site for contained or sanitized violence. Dawson observed, “there could be no dissent with the disqualification, because Graham had violated the rules of warfare and was deserving of punishment.”⁸⁰

Even in the most seemingly primal and violent of sports, rules structured the terms of interaction and provided a notion of what was just and unjust. This rationalized structure helped link sports to a modern sense of logic, laws and fair play that also formed the basis for an understanding of liberal capitalism as a fair and efficient system. Sport gave people a sense that objective rules and “fairness” structured life chances, and that operating outside of those rules entailed retribution. Such logic not only provided a subconscious ideological justification for the model of capitalism and liberal democracy, but could also be used to challenge notions of racial or national hierarchies as archaic and contrary to notions of objective measures and fair play.⁸¹ Thus boxing incorporated an

⁷⁸ *New York Times*, April 13, 1929, p. 16.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁸¹ Historian Allen Guttman has argued that equality is a central distinguishing characteristic of modern sport. By definition, modern sport “requires, at least in theory, that no one be excluded from participation on the basis of ascriptive traits (such as race or ethnicity) and that the rules of the game be the same for all participants.” See Allen Guttman, *Games and Empires: Modern Sports and Cultural Imperialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 2-3. For a more involved discussion of the concept of equality

appeal to savage and primal urges of hand-to-hand combat, but also to modern notions of rules and structured social interaction.

Over the course of 1929 Chocolate would continue to fight in marquee contests that drew impressively large crowds to prominent arenas. In May he defeated Fidel La Barba in front of a crowd of between 15,000 and 17,000 fans at the New York Coliseum.⁸² Two weeks later he beat Spaniard Vidal Gregorio at Shibe Park in Philadelphia in front of a crowd of 20,000, the largest crowd to date to attend a Chocolate fight. In July a fight with Filipino Ignacio Fernández marked the inauguration of Ebbets Field in Brooklyn as a boxing venue.⁸³ The event was broadcast on WABC radio⁸⁴ and drew between 15,000 and 18,000 fans.⁸⁵ Again, Chocolate proved victorious, as Fernández was “badly punished” over the course of the fight.⁸⁶

A fight with Al Singer in August 1929 represented the height of Chocolate’s popularity in New York and highlighted many of the aspects of the Kid’s celebrity in the “Mecca of boxing.” Singer was a Jewish ex-newspaperboy from the Bronx,⁸⁷ and the Polo Grounds was chosen as a site in order to take advantage of Chocolate’s growing popularity among the Latino population of New York as well as the popularity of Singer

as it relates to modern sport, including the disjuncture between ideals and practice, see Allen Guttman, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), pp. 26-36.

⁸² *New York Times*, May 23, 1929, p. 37; Nat Fleischer, “Nat Fleischer Says,” *The Ring* 8 (July 1929), p. 19.

⁸³ *New York Times*, July 7, 1929, p. 133.

⁸⁴ *New York Times*, July 10, 1929, p. 33.

⁸⁵ *New York Times*, July 11, 1929, p. 28; *La Prensa*, July 11, 1929, p. 5. The *Times* estimated a crowd of 15,000 while *La Prensa* estimated 18,000.

⁸⁶ *New York Times*, July 11, 1929, p. 28.

⁸⁷ *La Prensa*, August 15, 1929, p. 5.

among Jews. The strategy worked, as the bout, which seemed “assured of a position as a history-making event,” generated considerable anticipation and interest.⁸⁸ *La Prensa* noted that the fight was the subject of discussion among thousands of fans in New York City, the whole state, and even across the country, and declared the two fighters the “men of the hour.” The paper also noted that loyalties to each boxer fell along ethnic lines warning its readers to be careful about expressing support for Singer north of 116th street or for Chocolate anywhere on the east side if they “valued their hide.”⁸⁹ Promoters were correct in their presumption that ethnic affiliation would generate fan interest and stoke passions with respect to the contest. Given the position boxers held as racial or national heroes in the 1920s, it was simply inconceivable to suppose otherwise.

Both Singer and Chocolate were considerably popular among boxing fans, and the encounter was dubbed the “fight of the year.” The *New York Times* observed, “[n]ot since the days of Benny Leonard, perhaps the greatest individual ring drawing card the city of New York ever has known, has there been manifest such tremendous [sic] interest in a match between the so-called little fellers of the ring.”⁹⁰ Advance sales reached \$125,000 the day before the fight,⁹¹ and total gate receipts paid by over 37,000 fans grossed upwards of \$215,000 dollars, setting a world record for a non-heavyweight bout.⁹² In comparison, the total gate receipts for game one of the 1928 World Series between the

⁸⁸ *La Prensa*, August 26, 1929, p. 5.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁹⁰ *New York Times*, August 29, 1929, p. 29.

⁹¹ *New York Times*, August 28, 1929, p. 32.

⁹² Menéndez and Ortega, p.7; Marty Berg, “New York Boxing Gossip,” *The Ring* 8 (October 1929), p. 24.

New York Yankees and Saint Louis Cardinals were \$224,000.⁹³ Chocolate received a purse of over \$44,000,⁹⁴ and he himself recognized in an interview that the fight was the most important in his career so far.⁹⁵ Chocolate won by decision after “one of the most exciting and spectacular fights that have been seen in a long time,” a spectacle which justified the “indescribable enthusiasm that reigned over fans across the country” in the preceding days.⁹⁶ The *New York Evening Graphic* observed that the fight “throbbed with action of such blazing hue in the 11th and 12th rounds that 50,000 fans were whipped into a wild holocaust of emotion.”⁹⁷

Despite the considerable excitement that the fight generated, the fact that it was a lightweight match engendered limits to its ideological significance. As one reporter observed,

...after all, the lads are less than lightweights. It is only a heavyweight championship that calls for deep thinking, denunciations from the pulpit, interference by Attorneys General and race riots in the suburbs.⁹⁸

The fact that the bout was an inter-racial contest most likely stimulated the veiled reference to Jack Johnson.⁹⁹ While it seemed to discount the fight to some degree, the comment also pointed to a reason why North American crowds might have been so comfortable responding as positively as they did to Kid Chocolate. Because he was not a

⁹³ Jess Losada, “Records deportivos,” *Carteles* 17 (July 19, 1931), p. 26.

⁹⁴ Berg, “New York Boxing Gossip,” p. 24.

⁹⁵ *La Prensa*, August 9, 1929, p. 5.

⁹⁶ *La Prensa*, August 30, 1929, p. 5.

⁹⁷ Cited in *New York Times*, August 22, 1971, p. S5.

⁹⁸ *New York Times*, August 29, 1929, p. 29.

⁹⁹ See chapter 1 for a detailed discussion of the career of Jack Johnson.

heavyweight, his superiority as a fighter did not represent the ultimate metaphor for racial superiority. Thus fans and journalists could more readily embrace and admire his success and ability without having to be as worried about their ideological implications. In all likelihood, white fans felt comfortable cheering Chocolate because he was a lightweight, and thus did not engender the same threat to white masculinity and dominance that he would if he were a heavyweight fighter.

Historian Jeffrey Sammons credits Joe Louis for making white North Americans comfortable with inter-racial bouts twenty years after the heyday of Jack Johnson. An examination of the career of Kid Chocolate suggests that such an assessment is not fully accurate and belies an overstated emphasis on the heavyweight division.¹⁰⁰ The appeal of Kid Chocolate also helped to reintegrate the world of big time prizefighting in the United States, and the height of his popularity preceded the career of Joe Louis by five years. Observations by one North American journalist help support this line of reasoning. The writer gave credit to middleweight Tiger Flowers and Kid Chocolate for reducing the aversion to inter-racial bouts in the United States that was the legacy of Jack Johnson's career. Before these two boxers appeared inter-racial bouts were "both unprofitable and dangerous." Tiger Flowers was the first African-American to receive a title opportunity in any division after the demise of Jack Johnson, and his "church-going reputation, piety, and humility made an impression on the American public that greatly benefited his race and its fighting men."¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ In his preface, Sammons notes that his study focuses on the heavyweight division by design. See Jeffrey T. Sammons, *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), p. xiv.

¹⁰¹ Ted Carol, "Sepian Sockers Supreme," *The Ring* 17 (March 1939), p. 26. For a detailed discussion of the career of Theodore "Tiger" Flowers see Andrew M. Kaye, *The Pussycat of Prizefighting: Tiger Flowers and the Politics of Black Celebrity* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004).

It was Kid Chocolate, however, “the satiny Cuban with the vivid personality,” who “dispelled the last traces of the bitter feeling of the Johnson era.” According to the writer, “[t]he glossy headed hero of Havana captured the American public like no little man had since the days of Dixon. He drew tremendous gates in his all too brief career . . . and was one of the greatest sporting idols of his day.” It was with the rise of Kid Chocolate that “bans on mixed bouts were lifted in practically all Northern cities” and “the lean and hungry days for the dusky gladiators” came to an end.¹⁰² Writing almost a decade later, legendary boxing pundit Nat Fleischer¹⁰³ reiterated the view that Chocolate played a key role in helping to eliminate residual fears of inter-racial bouts that dated back to the Johnson era. “In Kid Chocolate, the sport of pugilism had its first big Negro money-maker since the halcyon days of Jack Johnson. . . . The Keed [sic] was instrumental in convincing promoters that mixed-matches could draw enough money to warrant their promotion.”¹⁰⁴ Through his overwhelming popularity Kid Chocolate helped erase, or at least allay, the anxieties over inter-racial violence that Jack Johnson had etched in the North American psyche.

After a brief stay in Cuba following the fight with Singer, Chocolate returned to the United States in October,¹⁰⁵ and manager Pincho Gutierrez received numerous

¹⁰² Ted Carrol, “Sepian Sockers Supreme,” p. 26.

¹⁰³ One of the most prominent boxing commentators in the twentieth century, Nat Fleischer became a known personality in his own right through his dedication to boxing journalism. In 1922 he founded *The Ring* magazine, the oldest magazine devoted to boxing that is still in print. He also wrote several books on the sport. See Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), p. 212.

¹⁰⁴ Nat Fleischer, *Sockers in Sepia: A Continuation of the Drama of the Negro in Pugilistic Competition*, vol. 5 of *Black Dynamite: The Story of the Negro in the Prize Ring from 1782 to 1938* (New York: The Ring Athletic Library, 1947), p. 148.

¹⁰⁴ Nat Fleischer, “Nat Fleischer Says,” *The Ring* 8 (September 1929), p. 12.

¹⁰⁵ *New York Times*, October 24, 1929, p. 40; *La Prensa*, October 22, 1929, p. 5.

demands to sign Chocolate to fight as soon as they arrived back in the United States.¹⁰⁶ During the ensuing two-month stay in the United States Chocolate fought in six contests, winning all of them and knocking out his opponents in three. The highlight of the brief stint in the United States was a defeat of Dominick Petrone in front of a crowd of 15,000 that again included Mayor James Walker.¹⁰⁷ Chocolate followed that effort with a second round knockout of Johnny Lawson before returning to Cuba for the holidays.¹⁰⁸ The fight against Lawson was part of a series of fights titled “Cuba against America” by promoters, in which Cuban fighters fought against North American counterparts. In an attempt to highlight the nationalist dimension of the event in their publicity efforts, fight promoters put up posters with Cuban and North American flags in strategic locations throughout the city.¹⁰⁹ As with the Singer fight, promoters cast boxers as racial or national representatives to stimulate interest, a strategy which reflected but also reinforced prevailing notions of the symbolic significance of sport in general and boxing in particular. Chocolate ended 1929 as he had 1928, undefeated and enjoying tremendous popularity in the United States. Over the course of the year he won 22 bouts, 10 of them by knockout. Though he had yet to obtain a world championship, North American critics and fans were hailing him as the best fighter in his division.

Dimensions of Celebrity

Through his accomplishments in the ring Kid Chocolate became a genuine American celebrity, acquiring considerable fame and notoriety in the United States. The

¹⁰⁶ *La Prensa*, October 24, 1929, p. 5.

¹⁰⁷ *New York times*, December 19, 1929, p. 35.

¹⁰⁸ *New York Times*, December 22, 1929, p. S5.

¹⁰⁹ *La Prensa*, December 10, 1929, p. 5.

fact that he achieved success in New York lent additional weight to his celebrity status as a boxer. His rise coincided with the peak of boxing popularity in general throughout the world. And during this time, the United States, especially New York City, was undoubtedly the center of the pugilistic universe. After prize fighting was legalized in the state in 1920, New York “quickly assumed a place as the capital of pugilism.”¹¹⁰ The United States was the home of the biggest purses, the largest fan base, and the most able competitors.¹¹¹ Any boxer who was successful in New York could truly consider himself at the top of the game. And fighters came to the city from around the world to achieve precisely this end. Chocolate attained this goal with impressive success.

As boxing became highly commercialized in the 1920s, promoters and sportswriters paid more attention to the ability of boxers to generate revenue.¹¹² Chocolate proved to be superlative in this aspect as well. Boxing had become “big business,”¹¹³ and Kid Chocolate was what today one might call a top performer. He had earned only sixty dollars for his first fight in the United States, but by December 1928 was commanding \$2,500 per fight and by January 1929 he was described as the best drawing card among bantamweight boxers.¹¹⁴ In April of that year he generated sold-out engagements at the New York Coliseum, St. Nicholas Ring [sic] and New Broadway

¹¹⁰ Sammons, p. 66.

¹¹¹ Nat Fleischer, “Europe in Throes of Boxing Craze,” *The Ring* 6 (April 1927), pp. 8-9.

¹¹² Sammons, p. 87.

¹¹³ James P. Dawson, “Boxing Big Business: William F. Carey Tells of Ring Investments and Growth of the Game,” *The Ring* 9 (February 1930), p. 31.

¹¹⁴ *Diario de la Marina*, January 5, 1929, p. 15.

arena.¹¹⁵ By the end of the year his drawing power was so considerable that promoters at Madison Square Garden were willing to sign him for two fights at the venue without even specifying an opponent.¹¹⁶ He had become “the most powerful magnet in boxing.”¹¹⁷

His particular appeal had larger implications for boxing more generally. The worldwide depression had a significant affect on boxing revenue throughout the United States. Professional boxing apparently remained profitable at least in some venues through the first half of 1930. In June of that year the *New York Times* reported that the period between June 1929 and May 1930 was one of the most profitable boxing periods in the history of Madison Square Garden Corporation.¹¹⁸ By the end of the year, however, the situation had changed dramatically. Events that ordinarily drew ten and twelve thousand dollars gates were considered successful if they drew five.¹¹⁹ Kid Chocolate however seemed to be immune from the affect of deteriorating economic conditions, and sports writers credited him with helping to sustain the commercial viability of the sport in the midst of the downturn. Even during the “height of depression” he managed to fill arenas because of “his natural ability, his glistening body and his rapier-like slashes that held the attention of the fans.”¹²⁰ In the summer of 1931 the Associated Press confirmed the persisting lucrative nature of his popularity by flatly stating “[t]here is not a boxer in

¹¹⁵ Sam Taub, “New York Boxing Gossip,” *The Ring* 8 (June 1929), p. 24.

¹¹⁶ *New York Times*, December 3, 1929, p. 38.

¹¹⁷ *La Prensa*, November 19, 1929, p. 5.

¹¹⁸ *New York Times*, June 4, 1930, p. 33.

¹¹⁹ Eddie Borden, “Broadcast from New York,” *The Ring* 9 (December 1930), p. 49.

¹²⁰ Nat Fleischer, “Nat Fleischer Says,” *The Ring* 12 (January 1934), p. 47.

any weight class who brings as many people to the stadium as Kid Chocolate.”¹²¹ He continued to draw thousands of fans to major fights until his decline as a top contender in 1933, and was one of a handful of fighters who maintained a “fair following” despite the slump in boxing revenue brought on by the depression.¹²²

A major reason for the box office success and enthusiastic praise from boxing critics that Kid Chocolate enjoyed was the style and technique he demonstrated in the ring. From very early on in his career in the United States he developed a reputation as both an exciting and skillful boxer. Descriptions suggest that simply watching him move generated a degree of pleasure for spectators. Chocolate was a great attraction “because he [was] one of the most colorful of present day scrappers . . . a beautiful boxer, a sharp shooter and hard hitter – the kind of pleasing fighter that draws well regardless of his opponent’s ability.”¹²³ One journalist called him “the most colorful fighter of the ring today.”¹²⁴ *The Ring* magazine declared that his “clever footwork” inspired wonder in those who observed him, and “he was so graceful in his movements, [that] he presented a picture only an artist could paint. His was a marvelous exhibition of perfect body balance.” The magazine punctuated its praise by concluding, “[s]uch fighters as Chocolate are developed but once a decade.”¹²⁵ The grace of his movements not only contributed to his success as a boxer, it also inspired a degree of appreciation in its own right.

¹²¹ Associated Press article printed in *Diario de la Marina*, July 7, 1931, p. 14.

¹²² *New York Times*, March 21, 1930, p. 39.

¹²³ “Box-Office Attractions,” *The Ring* 11 (May 1932), p. 41.

¹²⁴ *Chicago Defender*, July 20, 1929, p. 8.

¹²⁵ Nat Fleischer, “Marvelous Body Balance by Kid,” *The Ring* 9 (February 1930), p. 25.

His speed, described by one observer as “bewildering,”¹²⁶ constituted another important facet of his appeal to boxing fans. *The Ring* described him as “Cuba’s speed marvel.”¹²⁷ One observer explicitly described the affect that Chocolate’s speed had on fans that witnessed him:

...at times he resembles a machine. And it is precisely in moments of rapid attack that the crowd, drunk from bloodlust, yells and applauds with considerable delirium. This speed makes Chocolate a powerful magnet and... opens the doors of financial success.¹²⁸

His style of constant motion appealed to New Yorkers who were “delighted when a boxer stays in perpetual activity from the sound of the bell.”¹²⁹ In one fight he was said to have punched his opponent so quickly that at times it was “impossible” to keep track of all his punches.¹³⁰ His speed not only delighted fans, but also contributed to his effectiveness as a boxer. For example, it was “a clean right to the jaw that traveled with meteoric speed” which allowed him to notch one of the many first round knockouts that punctuated his impressive record.¹³¹ Indeed, effectiveness and popularity went hand in hand, as another reason why he was such a popular attraction was the fact that he won so many of his early fights with knockouts. In his first thirty fights in the United States and Canada he knocked out sixteen of his opponents. During that stretch four never made it out of the

¹²⁶ *New York World*, September 27, 1928, p. 13.

¹²⁷ Milton Baron, “Boxing in Cuba,” p. 33.

¹²⁸ *Diario de la Marina*, October 9, 1928, p. 17.

¹²⁹ *Diario de la Marina*, October 16, 1928, p. 17.

¹³⁰ *Chicago Defender*, July 20, 1929, p. 9.

¹³¹ *New York Times*, June 25, 1929, p. 32.

first round.¹³²

Aesthetic appreciation and exciting spectacle aside, boxing was after all a competitive endeavor, and competence and ability also factored in as major aspects in the designation of Chocolate as an exceptional specimen. Writers touted Chocolate for his skill as a boxer and not just his brute physicality as a puncher or fighter. Chocolate prevailed through intelligence, strategy and quickness. He was “a willing, cagey, clever opponent.”¹³³ One writer called him “the most able fighter that boxing has seen”¹³⁴ The most experienced pundits and boxing veterans were unanimous in their observation that the Kid was one of the best fighters of his day. Harry Muldoon, a member of the New York State Athletic Commission, declared that Chocolate was “the most brilliant fighter of our time.”¹³⁵ One sportswriter observed that he was “rated highly even by the most critical veterans, who have watched the fistic parade go by for forty years.”¹³⁶

The technical skill that Chocolate displayed also carried larger symbolic significance. Assessments of his skill as a boxer carried a subtext of commentary on the abilities of Cubans as a whole. One correspondent declared, “[h]e is quick as a whip and knows how to box, which is rare among fighters from outside the United States and Great Britain.”¹³⁷ The comment reflected an implicit understanding that the national origins of

¹³² *New York Times*, May 22, 1929, p. 25. Over the course of his professional career he executed 11 first-round knockouts.

¹³³ Fleischer, “Nat Fleischer Says,” *The Ring* 8 (October 1929), p. 21.

¹³⁴ Associated press article printed in *Diario de la Marina*, July 7, 1931, p.14.

¹³⁵ *La Prensa*, December 10, 1929, p. 5.

¹³⁶ Wilbur Wood, “Negro Boxers Revive Glories of Dixon Heyday,” *The Ring* 9 (July 1930), p. 20.

¹³⁷ *Diario de la Marina*, December 24, 1928, p. 17.

North American and British boxers were a determining factor in their competence. As a representative of Cuba, Chocolate was put on a par with these boxers, and by extension Cuba was put on par with two of the leading powers and most “developed” countries of the day. Sports correspondents regularly indicated their understanding that Chocolate’s abilities stood as a proxy for Cuban capacity more generally. When three other Cuban boxers joined Chocolate on a program in Brooklyn, the *New York Times* observed that the fights would provide an “illustration of Cuba’s boxing strength.”¹³⁸ National identity formed an inextricable part of the overall identity of a boxer, and his accomplishments reflected not only his merits as an individual, but also the merits of the country he represented.

As a result, Kid Chocolate was not only making a name for himself, but also convincing North Americans that Cuba was capable of producing competitive athletes in the field of pugilism. Chocolate proved that Cuban athletes could not only be competitive, they could be superlative. Even referees joined the chorus of praise. One proclaimed, “[i]f he is a sample of the boxers being developed in Cuba, then a lot of our ring boys should go down there and take lessons.”¹³⁹ When he defeated Emil Paluso through technical knockout in December 1928, Chocolate was reported to have given Paluso “a lesson in the art of hitting with force and precision.”¹⁴⁰ Chocolate displayed enough mastery and skill as a boxer to distinguish himself as someone fit to give lessons to his opponents. At a time when the need to tutor Cubans in the ways of self-governance

¹³⁸ *New York Times*, November 20, 1929, p. 42.

¹³⁹ “Timely Gossip and News from Greater Boston,” *The Ring* 8 (May 1929), p. 29

¹⁴⁰ *La Prensa*, December 19, 1928, p. 5.

was used as a justification for North American hegemony on the island, such language could have powerful metaphorical resonance. If boxing was indeed a means of proving the relative fitness of racial or national groups, then Kid Chocolate was demonstrating to North Americans in convincing fashion that Cubans were as fit as any other group in the world.

Though his fame in the United States emerged initially from his athletic performance, over time North Americans became enamored with other aspects of Kid Chocolate's public persona, and the basis for his celebrity grew beyond his abilities as a boxer. Chocolate also captured the imagination of North American fans by exemplifying the potential for a rapid rise to wealth that boxing allowed. The sizable purses he earned were repeatedly cited in North American publications. By one estimate, he had earned \$129,000 by the end of October 1929.¹⁴¹ He also developed a reputation as an ostentatious consumer. Right before the fight with Al Singer in 1929 one report noted that he had a "magnificent car" in Havana and intended to buy an airplane with the proceeds from the upcoming bout.¹⁴² While it is unlikely that Chocolate ever actually bought an airplane, stories continued to appear in the press describing his tendency to spend lavishly. He also bought large quantities of gifts for friends and family back home in Cuba. The amount of gifts that Chocolate planned to bring home with him in 1929 was so large that one close friend declared, "there is no plane capable of carrying all the baggage that the formidable little gladiator has packed."¹⁴³ The luxury goods that he

¹⁴¹ *La Prensa*, November 7, 1929, p. 5.

¹⁴² *La Prensa*, August 28, 1929, p. 5.

¹⁴³ *La Prensa*, December 23, 1929, p. 5.

acquired highlighted the “rags-to-riches” element of his life story, which seemed to endear him to members of a public who increasingly had to confront their own deteriorating financial condition.

Chocolate’s physical appearance also constituted a significant feature of his public image. The *New York Daily Mirror* described him as “one of the most picturesque figures in the prize ring today.”¹⁴⁴ With his earnings he amassed an impressive wardrobe that became a regular topic of discussion in the press. The *New York Times* described the wardrobe at length, noting how it highlighted his rapid rise to fame:

With Kid Chocolate haberdashery is an acquired taste. A few years ago, he was dashing barefooted through the streets of Havana yelling at the top of his voice: ‘El Mundo! El Mundo!’ . . . Just recently he opened the door of a clothes closet with a lordly gesture and disclosed forty suits of various shades and designs.¹⁴⁵

Similarly *The Ring* observed,

Kid Chocolate is an extremist. . . . I’ve never seen so many ties in or out of a store. He has a suit for every ten minutes of the day. Silk hats, felt hats, opera hats, shoes, shoes, shoes, shoes, and the spats for them! I’ll challenge any man in the world to keep pace with Kid Chocolate’s wardrobe.¹⁴⁶

The *Defender* observed that Chocolate had a wardrobe that “would make the Prince of Wales turn green with envy.”¹⁴⁷ Journalists seemed especially attracted to the contrast that the refinement of his wardrobe provided to his brutal line of work.

Though he reportedly spoke very little English, his charisma and demeanor also endeared him to North American fans. The consistent expression of “optimism, joviality

¹⁴⁴ *New York Daily Mirror*, November 27, 1928, p. 31.

¹⁴⁵ *New York Times*, August 7, 1930, p. 29.

¹⁴⁶ Hype Igoe, “Beau Brummels of the Beak Busters,” *The Ring* 9 (November 1930), p. 29.

¹⁴⁷ *Chicago Defender*, September 27, 1930, p. 9.

and happiness” constituted one of his “principle characteristics.”¹⁴⁸ Even as he mowed through competitors and knocked out rivals he reportedly did so with “characteristic joviality and modesty,”¹⁴⁹ as well as a sense of sportsmanship that charmed spectators. During one fight, Chocolate “won the crowd [over] when he smilingly assisted his foe back to the ring” after he had fallen through the ropes.¹⁵⁰ When another opponent slipped to the ground during a match, Chocolate helped him to his feet, refusing to throw a punch until he recovered.¹⁵¹ Reporters often pointed to his persistent smile as proof of his agreeable disposition, referring to him as “the smiling little Cuban gladiator.”¹⁵² His consistently pleasant demeanor may very well have allayed anxieties of white fans regarding the success of a black boxer. Thus in addition to his size, his personality may have been especially suited to facilitating comfort with his fame among whites. In addition to his success in the ring, Chocolate’s popularity was based on an aura of charisma, style and luxury that enhanced his status as a star athlete.

Racial Identities and National Identities

As with all boxers of the era, both racial and national identity formed important components of Chocolate’s persona as described in the North American press. On numerous occasions, the North American press highlighted his racial identity. In an article titled “Black Were Their Skins but Bright Their Deeds,” *The Ring* listed Chocolate as the featherweight representative among an “all-time team of great colored fighting

¹⁴⁸ *La Prensa*, August 28, 1929, p. 5.

¹⁴⁹ *La Prensa*, May 22, 1929, p. 5.

¹⁵⁰ *New York Times*, April 13, 1929, p. 16.

¹⁵¹ *Chicago Defender*, May 4, 1929, p. 9.

¹⁵² *La Prensa*, March 6, 1929, p. 5.

men.” Another article on the same page of the magazine printed Jack Dempsey’s “Selection of Negro Champions” for 1929. Kid Chocolate was awarded the honor for the featherweight division.¹⁵³ The apparent need to create a separate category of “colored” or “negro” boxers for the purposes of ranking reflected the substantial salience of race in the realm of sport. For boxing journalists, Chocolate was the latest heir to a legacy of great Africa-American boxers. Ed Sullivan of the *New York Evening Graphic* observed, “Pugilistic ghosts of the great black champions of the prize ring... peered out of the murky darkness... and cheered Kid Chocolate,” as he climbed up the boxing ranks.¹⁵⁴

Correspondents also regularly used poetic language to highlight his physical features and thus convey his racial identity without explicitly mentioning it. At times they used culinary metaphors, as when *Evening Graphic* dubbed him a “long, lean Cuban stick of licorice,”¹⁵⁵ a practice undoubtedly encouraged by his own moniker. In other instances references to his complexion sufficed, as when the *New York Times* observed that his “wide ivory smile [worked] overtime in a face as black as polished marble.”¹⁵⁶ Though he was a foreigner, his appearance and unmistakable phenotype encouraged writers to engage his racial identity. Indeed, it may have been impossible for them to do otherwise.

Nonetheless, his status as a foreigner also proved significant, and the North American press regularly referred to his nationality as well. The degree to which national and racial identity figured in descriptions of Chocolate was quite variable and often both identities were mentioned. At times publications described him as a “negro fighter” from

¹⁵³ Jack Dempsey, “Jack Dempsey Ranks Boxers for 1929,” *The Ring* 9 (February 1930), p. 2.

¹⁵⁴ Cited in *New York Times*, August 22, 1971, p. S5.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. S5.

¹⁵⁶ *New York Times*, January 4, 1929, p. 24.

Cuba,¹⁵⁷ and at others they simply referred to him as a “Cuban” boxer.¹⁵⁸ The identification of foreign boxers by national origin in the North American press was a common practice, and racial identity was also included when discussing boxers more often than not. Professional boxers were repeatedly situated within a racial or national grouping that was cast as a central aspect of their identity as competitors. Even native-born, white boxers of certain backgrounds were consistently identified by their ethnicity, such as Italian-American, Jewish or Irish-American, perhaps because their whiteness needed to be qualified or because even among whites a hierarchy of nationalities or ethnicities needed to be established. Racial or national identity was an essential component of a boxer’s popular persona given the significance boxing held as a metaphor for competition between racial and national groups. Kid Chocolate was a relatively rare case in which both race and nationality were relevant. Thus his career highlighted the degree to which sportswriters were preoccupied by the significance of both categories.

An examination of the African-American and Latino press can shed further light on the relevance that race and nation had for the significance of sport as well as the ways in which the two categories related to each other. The *Chicago Defender* paid close attention to Kid Chocolate, casting him as a representative of all African descended peoples. In describing one fight the publication observed, “Chocolate had a chance to put the white boy away in the third round, but passed it up.”¹⁵⁹ In fact, the paper repeatedly used the term “white boy” to describe the opponents Chocolate faced.¹⁶⁰ Like mainstream

¹⁵⁷ See for example, *New York Times*, September 17, 1928, p. 28.

¹⁵⁸ See *New York Times*, November 25, 1928 p. S8 and *New York Times*, November 29, 1928, p. 33.

¹⁵⁹ *Chicago Defender*, December 8, 1928, p. 9.

¹⁶⁰ For another example see *Chicago Defender*, June 6, 1931, p. 9.

media outlets, the paper portrayed him as the heir to the legacy of George Dixon, the African-American who boxed at the turn of the century, calling him “the closest approach to George in the present era of Colored fighters.”¹⁶¹ Reports of an opportunity to compete for the world lightweight championship prompted a headline announcing “Kid Chocolate May Bring Tenth Title to the Race.”¹⁶² Chocolate stood as a representative of blacks more generally regardless of national background.

The broader African-American community in New York also adopted Chocolate as a hero. In Harlem he was “invariably accompanied” by “a horde” of young admirers. On one occasion he walked through the neighborhood surrounded by a “swarm of boys of his race” who cheered him on with loud screams. Harlemites “greeted him with enthusiasm” whenever he appeared in public in the neighborhood.¹⁶³ The investment that African-Americans had in Chocolate’s success indicated that identity and sympathy along racial lines transcended boundaries of nationality in the world of athletic competition.

For his part, Chocolate reciprocated by consciously engaging the African-American community in the United States. While in Chicago for a fight in the summer of 1929, he visited the *Chicago Defender* printing plant.¹⁶⁴ Several days before a fight in Philadelphia, he attended Negro League baseball game on the outskirts of the city. Chocolate was likely drawn to the game by the fact that fellow Cuba Martín Dihigo

¹⁶¹ *Chicago Defender*, May 4, 1929, p. 9.

¹⁶² *Chicago Defender*, August 8, 1931, p. 8.

¹⁶³ *Diario de la Marina*, December 20, 1928, p. 17.

¹⁶⁴ *Chicago Defender*, August 3, 1929, p. 1. A photo documenting his visit appeared in the newspaper.

played for one of the teams.¹⁶⁵ That Chocolate could attend a racially defined event in the form of a segregated baseball game and come into contact with another Afro-Cuban athlete pursuing his career in the United States was testimony to the degree to which sport constituted a cultural realm that could transcend national borders, but also to the ways in which racially defined social practices and codes of behavior also crossed those borders.¹⁶⁶ While certainly at times these athletes were defined by their national identities, at other moments their racial identities were of greater relevance. Athletes such as Dihigo and Chocolate navigated a cultural terrain where the relative importance of racial and national identity ebbed and flowed in relation to each other, contingent upon specific circumstances.

The Spanish-speaking community also showed particular interest in the career of Kid Chocolate and adopted him as a hero. At one outdoor fight “hundreds of Cubans living in New York” attended despite poor weather and applauded Chocolate “with enthusiasm.”¹⁶⁷ Two weeks later a “major crowd in which a large part of the Cuban colony predominated” cheered Chocolate on at another fight and carried him off to his

¹⁶⁵ *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 11, 1931, section 2, p. 5; *Chicago Defender*, July 11, 1931, p. 9. Described by one author as “the best Cuban baseball player of all time,” Dihigo played for 12 years in the American Negro leagues, but also played and managed in Cuba and Mexico. He starred as a pitcher but could play every position, and is enshrined in the American, Mexican and Cuban baseball halls of fame. See Roberto González Echevarría, *The Pride of Havana: A History of Cuban Baseball* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 26 & 180-182.

¹⁶⁶ As in the United States, baseball in Cuba was at times segregated along racial lines. Roberto González Echevarría has observed that “early Cuban baseball practiced an apartheid that would be perpetuated by Cuban amateur baseball during the years of the Republic.” While professional, semi-professional and teams associated with sugar mills became open to Afro-Cubans after the Spanish-American war, amateur baseball “systematically excluded” players of African descent until 1959. See González Echevarría, pp. 102-103, 115, & 189-191.

¹⁶⁷ *United Press* article in *Diario de la Marina*, September 1, 1928, p. 19.

dressing room on shoulders after his victory.¹⁶⁸ Cuban establishments in New York where Chocolate dined were “full of admirers” anxious to greet him.¹⁶⁹ The community seemed particularly enthusiastic of his defeat of Al Singer in August 1929, holding a banquet in his honor at the Cuba Athletic-Social Club in Harlem.¹⁷⁰ Throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s Spanish Harlem was the site of several events in his honor. Through his success Kid Chocolate became a hero to the Latino and Cuban-American community in New York as well as the African-American community across throughout the country.

Another indicator of the particular interest that Latinos took in Kid Chocolate was the coverage of his career that appeared in the New York Spanish language daily *La Prensa*. Like the *Chicago Defender*, *La Prensa* provided consistent and dedicated coverage of Chocolate’s career that was based on a sense of ethnic or racial solidarity. The publication touted his accomplishments as proof positive that Spaniards and Latinos were as “fit” and capable as any other group. *La Prensa* recognized Chocolate as a representative of Hispanics as well as African-descended peoples. Staff writer Julio Garzón observed, “it cannot be forgotten that the white race is not the only one that [participates] in sports. I thus claim for Cuba the credit of producing the best sporting ‘material’ of the black race.”¹⁷¹ The paper repeatedly pointed to the exploits of Chocolate as proof of the “important role that our boxers play...in the Mecca of the

¹⁶⁸ *United Press* article in *Diario de la Marina*, September 18, 1928, p. 17.

¹⁶⁹ *Diario de la Marina*, December 20, 1928, p. 17.

¹⁷⁰ *La Prensa*, September 3, 1929, p. 5; *La Prensa*, September 5, 1929, p. 5.

¹⁷¹ *La Prensa*, October 27, 1928, p. 5.

sport.”¹⁷² The implicit corollary to such a statement was that Latinos themselves could make meaningful contributions to civilization outside the world of sport.

Coverage of the career of Kid Chocolate in the pages of *La Prensa* fit in with a larger pattern of coverage of Hispanic or Latino athletes more generally. Such coverage reflected the salience of a Latino identity that transcended more restrictive identities such as Cuban or Chilean. The paper regularly ran a column on the sports page titled “Of Our Sportsmen” that detailed the exploits of Spanish-Speaking athletes in New York, and habitually reported on the accomplishments of promising or successful boxers or athletes. When Cuban chess master José Raúl Capablanca competed at a chess tournament in Germany, *La Prensa* included a report on tournament results.¹⁷³ When Spanish heavyweight Paulino Uzcundún predicted he would win his upcoming fight with Max Schmelling by knockout, the story made front-page headlines.¹⁷⁴ Coverage of the career of Kid Chocolate reflected an understanding by the editors at *La Prensa* that their readership would identify with Spanish-speaking athletes from throughout the world and would be interested in their exploits. This coverage indicated not only an acceptance that sporting accomplishment provided a symbolic shorthand for the broader abilities of racial and national groups, but also a consciousness of a Latino or Hispanic identity that was just as significant as national identity or more conventional racial identities.

The inclusion of Kid Chocolate in this reporting on Spanish-speaking athletes also revealed the ambiguous and nebulous quality of the very concept of race itself. While *La*

¹⁷² *La Prensa*, April 12, 1929, p. 5.

¹⁷³ *La Prensa*, August 16, 1928, p. 5.

¹⁷⁴ *La Prensa*, June 28, 1929, p. 1.

Prensa might on one occasion describe Chocolate as belonging to the black race (*la raza negra*) on other occasions the paper would describe him alongside Argentine Luis Angel Firpo (see fig. 2.1) and Spaniard Paulino Uzcundún (see fig. 2.2) as boxers of the Hispanic race (*gladiadores de la raza*).¹⁷⁵ The fact that boxers as different in physical appearance as Chocolate (see fig. 2.3) and Firpo or Uzcundún could be said to belong to the same “race” served as an indicator of the variable nature of the meaning of the word. Moreover, the reporting of *La Prensa* indicated the ways in which different aspects of the identity of Kid Chocolate would be highlighted at different times, even within the same group of observers.

Variations in the characterization of Chocolate as black or Latino occurred even for one individual observer, depending on the circumstances. In November 1931, *La Prensa* staff writer Julio Garzón wrote a column titled “From Joe Gans to Kid Chocolate” that placed Chocolate squarely in the line of great African-American boxers of the early twentieth century. Garzón went on to note that Chocolate’s considerable popularity was significant given the aversion to African-American boxers that he felt persisted in the United States.¹⁷⁶ The column was striking in light of the fact that about a month earlier on Columbus day, Garzón had written a piece titled “the generous contribution by our race to the world of sport,” that discussed Chocolate in the context of Hispanic athletes who had made a name for themselves and thus followed in the steps of Columbus in bringing prestige to Spanish-speakers around the world. The earlier piece noted that Spanish-speaking athletes were blessed with the “initiative, nobility and courage” of the Spanish

¹⁷⁵ *La Prensa*, November 2, 1929, p. 5.

¹⁷⁶ *La Prensa*, November 19, 1931, p. 5.



Figure 2.1. Luis Angel Firpo, Argentine heavyweight.



Figure 2.2. Paulino Uzcundún, Basque heavyweight.



Figure 2.3. Kid Chocolate. According to the Spanish language New York newspaper *La Prensa*, along with Firpo and Uzcundún, Chocolate was one of the “gladiators of the race.”

conquistadors who had colonized the Americas in the sixteenth century. As a tribute to these athletes, who were described as “champions of the race,” *La Prensa* ran a special section on Columbus Day documenting their accomplishments.¹⁷⁷

That the descendant of African slaves could be said to belong to the same “race” as the Spanish conquistadors when race was the very category used to distinguish his ancestors from those conquistadors underscores the historical contingency of the category. Used during the colonial project to divide members of Spanish colonial societies into discrete castes, by the 1930s the term race was often being used to refer to the entire collective of people who were part of those societies. By the early twentieth century a new racial category had emerged which overlapped the categories of white and black, and united Spanish-speakers throughout Spain and the Americas.¹⁷⁸ This identity undoubtedly assumed even greater salience for those individuals who had moved to the United States and regularly interacted with non-Spanish speakers. The meaning of race thus evolved to accommodate new social developments. As historical circumstances shifted and brought different groups of individuals into contact, historical actors recalibrated the concept to help them make sense of these shifts. Language used to describe Kid Chocolate reflected the ways in which sport could provide a cultural site for

¹⁷⁷ *La Prensa*, October 12, 1931, section 2, p. 2.

¹⁷⁸ In a discussion of the potential language has to provide the basis for what he calls fictive ethnicity, Etienne Balibar provides an explanation for the emergence and persistence of a pan-Hispanic identity, as is clearly seen in the pages of the New York publication *La Prensa*: “The language community... connects individuals up with an origin which may at any moment be actualized and which has as its content the common act of their own exchanges, of their discursive communication... even if it were the case that individuals whose social conditions were very distant from one another were never in direct communication, they would be bound together by an uninterrupted chain of intermediate discourses. They are not isolated - either de jure or de facto.” Balibar also notes that language can serve to root historical populations “in a fact of ‘nature,’” and give meaning to “their continued existence.” See Etienne Balibar, “The Nation Form: History and Ideology,” in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, eds. Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 96-97.

the articulation of a variety of notions regarding the significance and meaning of the concepts race and nation.

The Quest for a Championship

Having captured the imagination of fans and journalists through his remarkable rise, Chocolate pursued the one goal that had yet to be accomplished. After spending the winter of 1929-1930 in Cuba, Chocolate returned to the United States in March of 1930 to renew his campaign for the featherweight championship of the world.¹⁷⁹ Gutiérrez scheduled a series of fights that culminated in an August showdown with Jack “Kid” Berg at the Polo Grounds. In his first fight after returning to New York he defeated Al Ridgeway by technical knockout in the second round in front of 18,000 fans at Madison Square Garden after “five minutes and twenty-nine seconds of sensational fighting” in which he knocked Ridgeway down a total of four times.¹⁸⁰ Both his ability to draw large crowds and his success in the ring continued.

The August confrontation with Jack “Kid” Berg at the Polo Grounds was deemed “[o]ne of the most eagerly awaited boxing matches of the outdoor season.” One venue in New York charged admission for people to come and listen to details of the fight through direct transmission from ringside.¹⁸¹ A number of prominent individuals were present at the fight itself to witness the action, including the mayor, police commissioner, and former boxing greats James Corbett and Benny Leonard.¹⁸² While neither fighter held a title, the fight itself was deemed a “natural,” a matchup of unusual quality in terms of the

¹⁷⁹ *New York Times*, March 21, 1930, p. 37.

¹⁸⁰ *New York Times*, March 22, 1930, p. 24; *La Prensa*, March 22, 1930, p. 5. *La Prensa* estimated the crowd at 15,000.

¹⁸¹ *La Prensa*, August 7, 1930, p. 5.

¹⁸² *New York Times*, August 8, 1930, p. 20.

caliber of boxers who were to compete. The winner would be “universally regarded” as the leading contender for the lightweight title. Berg won the fight in a controversial split decision in front of a crowd of over 36,000 spectators,¹⁸³ ending Chocolate’s status as an undefeated fighter. Several commentators argued that Chocolate been robbed in the decision.¹⁸⁴ The *New York Times* observed that the fight was “close all the way,” with differences of opinion over who the victor was being determined by taste in fighting style. “Those who like boxing thought that Chocolate won. Those who dote on fighting and slam-bang tactics were sure that the [Berg] was in front all the way.”¹⁸⁵

The decision generated charges of ethnic bias and corruption. Accusations of dishonesty and ethnic preference were leveled at the referee based on the fact that both he and Berg were Jewish.¹⁸⁶ Days after the fight, *La Prensa* would belabor the point, insinuating that the decision bordered on being fraudulent, and insisting that Berg had as much right to be declared the winner as he had to be “proclaimed emperor of Palestine.” The paper noted that Benny Leonard, a former lightweight champion who was also Jewish and had predicted that Berg would win the fight, also called the decision a “great injustice,” and that even the announcer of the fight felt Chocolate won, as he was

¹⁸³ *New York Times*, August 9, 1930, p. 12. In all likelihood the impact of the Great Depression resulted in far lower attendance than initially anticipated by Madison Square Garden Corporation.

¹⁸⁴ Menéndez and Ortega, p. 56; *New York Times*, August 8, 1930, p. 20; *La Prensa*, August 8, 1930, p.5; *La Prensa*, August 9, 1930, p. 5. Among those who thought Chocolate won the fight was prominent boxing commentator Damon Runyon. Jack Berg would reportedly admit in 1950 during a visit to Havana that he also believed that he lost the fight, see Menéndez and Ortega (1981), p. 108.

¹⁸⁵ *New York Times*, August 9, 1930, p. 15.

¹⁸⁶ Menéndez and Ortega, p. 62.

prepared to lift Chocolate's arm in victory before reading the decision by the judges and having to quickly reverse his action.¹⁸⁷

Chocolate himself also believed the decision to be unjust and reportedly cried in the ring when Berg was declared the winner. He later commented, "I never believed that I would suffer such an injustice... I believe that no honorable boxer would be able to laugh after such a decision."¹⁸⁸ Chocolate invoked a notion of injured honor and injustice to defend the seemingly unmanly act of crying. Though he lost, Chocolate earned a purse of \$37,000 for the fight. Moreover, even in defeat Chocolate was again credited with contributing to an exciting spectacle. The fight was described as a quality contest that "helped to take away the sour taste of other sad spectacles that have been seen in this sector of late."¹⁸⁹ In subsequent days films of the fight were shown daily in at least one local theater.¹⁹⁰ At the end of the year the bout was named one of the 10 boxing highlights for 1930, a contest that "lifted boxing at a time when it was under serious fire" due to lagging fan attendance.¹⁹¹

Three months after the loss to Jack Berg, Chocolate lost again, this time to Fidel La Barba, whom he had beaten in their first meeting. The fight itself was cast as "the best featherweight bout available right now," as it was widely accepted that both boxers were superior to Christopher "Battling" Battalino, the featherweight champion at the time.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁷ *La Prensa*, August 9, 1930, p. 5.

¹⁸⁸ *La Prensa*, August 9, 1930, p. 5.

¹⁸⁹ *New York Times*, August 9, 1930, p. 15.

¹⁹⁰ *La Prensa*, August 8, 1930, p. 5.

¹⁹¹ Jack Dempsey, "Boxing Highlights for Year 1930," *The Ring* 10 (February 1931), p. 4.

¹⁹² *New York Times*, November 3, 1930, p. 26.

In accordance with this characterization, over 17,000 fans, the largest of the 1930 indoor season came to see what turned out to be a one-sided affair. In contrast to the Berg match, observers agreed that Chocolate's loss to La Barba was indisputable. The decision in favor of La Barba was unanimous, lending emphasis to "the clean-cut margin by which La Barba conquered one of the greatest of present-day fighters."¹⁹³ Several critics attributed the loss to a lack of preparation on the part of Chocolate, as he seemed slower, weaker and less agile than usual¹⁹⁴

Despite the loss to La Barba, plans were set in motion to pit Chocolate against Christopher "Battling" Battalino for the featherweight championship in December 1930. Chocolate would finally get the chance to conquer a world championship "for himself and for his country."¹⁹⁵ Battalino, despite being the reigning featherweight champion, did not hold as much prestige as La Barba or Chocolate at the time, and Chocolate actually entered the contest a favorite in the betting.¹⁹⁶ The fight took place at Madison Square Garden, and was broadcast on the radio by the National Broadcasting Company.¹⁹⁷ In all, over 17,000 spectators came to Madison Square Garden to witness the contest.¹⁹⁸ Among those expected to attend was Connecticut governor John H. Trumbull, presumably in support of Battalino, who was from Hartford.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹³ *New York Times*, November 4, 1930, p. 38.

¹⁹⁴ *La Prensa*, November 5, 1930, p. 8.

¹⁹⁵ *La Prensa*, December 12, 1930, p. 5.

¹⁹⁶ *New York Times*, December 9, 1930, p. 39.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁹⁸ *La Prensa*, December 15, 1930, p. 5; *New York Times*, December 13, 1930, p. 26.

¹⁹⁹ *New York Times*, December 12, 1930, p. 34.

Though he knocked Battalino down for an eight count and put him “on the verge of a knockout,” in the first round, Chocolate lost in a unanimous decision.²⁰⁰ While Chocolate seemed to have been quite superior in skill, at times making Battalino seem like “a novice” and “an amateur,” Battalino pursued the same strategy that worked for Berg and La Barba by continually pressuring Chocolate and not giving him a chance to get into proper position and land his punches cleanly. Despite its unanimity, the decision in this bout was also controversial. Several fans in attendance expressed their displeasure through “a storm of jeers, and a flood of torn newspapers and programs.”²⁰¹ The Associated Press correspondent who witnessed the fight gave ten out fifteen rounds to Chocolate, and the *New York Mirror* had the same verdict.²⁰² *The Ring* magazine also came out in favor of the Cuban, declaring that he “scored the cleaner blows, boxed brilliantly and flashed an array of bewildering punches that played havoc with Battalino’s features. He did everything that could be expected from a winner yet lost the verdict because of Bat’s aggressiveness. . . . The decision from my point of view was wrong.”²⁰³

As it had done in the aftermath of the Berg fight, *La Prensa* denounced the decision as indefensible and was explicit in attributing it to racial and national bias, declaring, “to believe that two local judges and a referee would find in favor of a black foreigner and give him a world championship is, simply put, to be guilty of naiveté.” The Spanish language daily criticized North Americans for letting racial bias cloud their sense of fairness and sportsmanship, taking the decision as an indictment of North American

²⁰⁰ *New York Times*, December 13, 1930, p. 26.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²⁰² Menéndez and Ortega, pp. 71-73.

²⁰³ “Broadcast from New York,” *The Ring* 10 (February 1931), p. 50.

hypocrisy:

Before we came to live in the United States, we had the impression that this was a country where general honesty was emphasized in the field of sports. We believed that the word 'sportsmanship' was a sacred one for the good Yankees. But it is clear that since then boxing has fallen to the point where it currently finds itself in the hands of utter 'crooks' who have converted a sport that was once steeped in etiquette into something nauseating that now disgusts us.

La Prensa highlighted an understanding that fairness and objectivity were inviolable ideals in the world of sport, but racial or national affinities often undermined these ideals. The paper insinuated that because a championship was at stake, the arbiters of the contest were reluctant to decide in favor of a black foreigner. Instead the desire to preserve a sense of white and North American superiority clouded their judgment and led to an unjust decision. The commentary revealed the ways in which the racial and national symbolism of athletic competition might conflict with a sense of sport as an objective measure of ability.

The three losses in five months caused many to believe that Chocolate was beginning to lose some of the talent that had made him so popular in the previous two years. One writer observed "Chocolate is no longer the same sure and effective hitter" and advised that his manager "send Chocolate to the mountains for a good stretch so he can lead the slow and healthy life."²⁰⁴ Chocolate did just that, making a conscious decision after the loss to Battalino to take several months off from boxing in an attempt to rest and return to his previous form. He resumed training in February 1931,²⁰⁵ and returned to the ring in May, winning his next four bouts with relative ease to set up a July

²⁰⁴ *La Prensa*, December 16, 1930, p. 5.

²⁰⁵ *La Lucha*, February 17, 1931, p. 7.

title confrontation with junior lightweight champion Benny Bass.²⁰⁶

Bass was favored by most North American sports writers and by at least one Cuban writer as well, in part because of the three high profile losses of 1930 and prevailing doubts about Chocolate's physical condition.²⁰⁷ Gutiérrez himself conceded that Bass was "perhaps the hardest hitter [in his weight class] among boxers of the present era,"²⁰⁸ an observation confirmed by one reporter who noted that as a junior lightweight Bass had "the punch of a middleweight."²⁰⁹ Moreover, as one Cuban writer noted, Bass was fighting in his hometown of Philadelphia, which put more pressure on Chocolate to win decisively.²¹⁰ One writer conditioned his prediction for the fight on whether or not Chocolate had rested sufficiently. The writer argued, "if the kid of less than 21 years is really burned out by firing the candle from both ends, then Bass will have been in just another fight." On the other hand, if Chocolate had "rested sufficiently to regain his original physical condition... and has learned anything from his bouts with Berg, La Barba and Battalino, then Bass is in for a licking."²¹¹

Chocolate responded to doubts about his status by pummeling Bass for six rounds before winning with a technical knockout in the seventh in front of a crowd of 15,000.

²⁰⁶ Alfonso, *Puños Dorados*, p. 60.

²⁰⁷ *Heraldo de Cuba*, July 4, 1931, p. 15.

²⁰⁸ July 7 Letter from Pincho Gutiérrez to sports writer Guillermo Pi, printed in *Diario de la Marina*, July 12, 1931, p. 16. See also Jess Losada, "Chocolate: Un enigma," *Carteles* 13 (July 19, 1931), p. 14 for a summary of other predictions on the fight.

²⁰⁹ *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 11, 1931, section 2, p. 4. The middleweight class consists of boxers weighing 160 pounds or less, thus the observation suggested that Bass was about twenty-five percent stronger than most boxers his size.

²¹⁰ *Diario de la Marina*, July 9, 1931, p.13.

²¹¹ *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 11, 1931, section 2, p. 4.

One writer described Chocolate's performance as "a marvelous exhibition of technical and agile boxing" in which he devastated the face of his adversary with both hands."²¹² According to another account, Chocolate made Bass look like a "novice." By the time the referee stepped in to stop the fight, even fans at ringside were crying for an end to the punishment.²¹³ Chocolate had finally won a world championship, and was so elated about the accomplishment that he danced for joy in his corner as the crowd roared its appreciation and acclaim²¹⁴ and "cameras clicked to carry a picture of the new ruler to the ends of the world."²¹⁵

Four months after winning his first world title, Kid Chocolate and manager Pincho Gutiérrez would pursue another by challenging lightweight champion Tony Canzoneri. Between the fights against Bass and Canzoneri, Chocolate had effectively "confined his efforts ... to some minor engagements" which served as preparation for the Canzoneri fight.²¹⁶ In fact after his fight with Bass, Chocolate took another three months off to recover from what manager Gutiérrez described as a joint disorder.²¹⁷ Chocolate and Canzoneri met in Madison Square Garden in November 1931 to battle for the lightweight and junior welterweight titles. The Garden Corporation hoped that the fight would help break a recent string of disappointments in terms of attendance,²¹⁸ a testament

²¹² *La Prensa* July 16, 1931, p. 5.

²¹³ *Pittsburg Courier*, July 18, 1931, section 2, p. 5.

²¹⁴ *New York Times*, July 16, 1931, p. 6.

²¹⁵ *Pittsburg Courier*, July 18, 1931, section 2, p. 5.

²¹⁶ *New York Times*, November 15, 1931, p. S11.

²¹⁷ *La Prensa*, August 10, 1931, p. 5.

²¹⁸ *La Prensa*, August 1, 1931, p. 5.

to Chocolate's persisting popularity among fans. *La Prensa* noted that such a pairing was actually critical to the general health of boxing as a commercial enterprise, noting that a Chocolate-Canzoneri matchup constituted the most "natural and attractive" paring at the time, and that boxing needed such a bout to "restore its much weakened health."²¹⁹ Advanced sales were brisk, and Madison Square Garden anticipated one of its best gates of the season, "depression or not."²²⁰ One report suggested that for the first time since the onset of the Depression there was a real chance that the Garden would be filled to maximum capacity of 20,000.²²¹

Chocolate did not disappoint and seemed to have reverted to the form that had amazed fans and observers during his first two years in the United States. The fight itself came to be described as "one of the greatest lightweight championship battles in local ring annals"²²² and "an exhibition of boxing worthy of figuring among the best in the annals of the art of self-defense."²²³ Writers credited Chocolate with having contributed to "one of the classic [fights] of contemporary boxing."²²⁴ The *Brooklyn Eagle* declared, "It is possible that in the history of boxing there have been better fighters than [Canzoneri and Chocolate]. But I doubt that in the old days or in modern times has there been an exhibition of greater valor, action and enthusiasm than Friday night . . . at Madison

²¹⁹ *La Prensa*, October 3, 1931, p. 5.

²²⁰ *La Prensa*, November 18, 1931, p. 5.

²²¹ *Heraldo de Cuba*, November 20, 1931, p. 9.

²²² *New York Times*, November 21, 1931, p. 26.

²²³ *La Prensa*, November 21, 1931, p. 5.

²²⁴ *La Prensa*, November 23, 1931, p. 5.

Square Garden.”²²⁵ *The Ring* called the fight “the greatest boon that boxing has had in months.”²²⁶ The crowd of over 19,000 at Madison Square Garden was the largest gathering for a boxing match in two years, and it remained fully excited “from the sound of the first bell until... the last.”²²⁷

In another controversial outcome Chocolate lost to Canzoneri in a split decision. Immediately after the decision was announced, the crowd gave “one of the noisiest and most disorderly demonstrations the arena ever has witnessed.” Irate fans threw papers and hats in the air, and some even tossed cigarette and cigar stubs into the ring. One went so far as to throw an apple in disapproval.²²⁸ The degree of controversy engendered over the decision was such that it “sen[t] friends away in furious debates as to the real winner.”²²⁹ So heated was the controversy over the decision, that the showing of the fight film in subsequent days reportedly provoked fights in some theaters between supporters of the two boxers.²³⁰

La Prensa again argued that the decision was unjust and that Chocolate should have at least obtained a draw. The paper cast the decision as further proof that foreign boxers who came to New York to fight against local boxers for championships should

²²⁵ Quoted in Menéndez and Ortega, p. 98.

²²⁶ Eddie Borden, “Along the Great Fite [sic] Way,” *The Ring* 10 (January 1932), p. 48.

²²⁷ Quoted in Menéndez and Ortega, pp. 96-97. Reports of attendance varied. While *La Prensa* reported 18,000, the *New York Times* and *The Ring* magazine reported as many as 19,000. *La Prensa*, November 21, 1931, p. 5; Borden, “Along the Great Fite [sic] Way,” p. 48; *New York Times*, November 21, 1931, p. 26.

²²⁸ *New York Times*, November 21, 1931, p. 26.

²²⁹ *New York Times*, November 24, 1931, p. 34.

²³⁰ *Heraldo de Cuba*, November 27, 1931, p. 9.

give up all hopes of “equity and justice.”²³¹ Days later *La Prensa* attributed the victory by Canzoneri to “pure anti-hispanism,” comparing the bout to what it considered to be a similarly unfair decision in a recent fight between Paulino Uzcundún and Tommy Loughran.²³² The staff of the publication saw what it deemed the injustice of the decision in purely racial terms. In their view, there was no other possible explanation for the result. Closely contested and controversial decisions were, and are, far from uncommon in boxing, and there is no way to definitively determine if prejudice played a part in the decision. But the fact that *La Prensa* unequivocally saw race or nationality as the dominant underlying theme indicated the degree to which the sport was imbued with considerable implications for debates regarding racial and national hierarchy.

The *Chicago Defender* joined *La Prensa* in its assessment of the reasons behind the outcome of the fight. The African-American newspaper went on at length about the unlikelihood that a boxer of color could ever win a championship by decision. The paper insisted that the loss should come as no surprise, advising its readers “there is little chance for one of your boys to gain a title on the decision of three men.” The paper pointed out that the crowd attending the fight was overwhelmingly white, a fact it suggested influenced the decision of the judges:

Nineteen thousand fans saw this fight, the greatest in 20 years. Of that total less than 200 were you and me, if you get what I mean. Now how can you expect anything else but a win for the champion where no knockout is present? We may be wrong, but asking Nordic judges and referees to decide against a majority like that is stretching the point. Only a knockout can map a clean path for the officials who would dare say to a gathering

²³¹ *La Prensa*, November 21, 1931, p. 5.

²³² *La Prensa*, November 23, 1931, p. 5.

where we were greatly outnumbered like that ‘I hated to give the fight to the Cuban, but he was the better man.’²³³

Like *La Prensa*, the *Defender* was quite pessimistic that fair play consistently overcame racial bias, and indeed indicated that it was naive to think that this would ever happen. At the same time, it used a notion of fairness that was understood to be a central tenet of sport to conduct a critique of current racial practices. If sport did in fact exemplify modernity and development, writers in the African-American and Latino press used the sporting ideal to imply that racial bias was decidedly un-modern.

After the loss to Canzoneri, Chocolate set his sights on a second bid for the world featherweight championship. A second controversial loss to Jack Berg in July 1932 seemed to have little impact on his status as a top contender. By the fall the featherweight title was left vacant after Christopher Battalino renounced it because of his inability to make weight.²³⁴ In early October the New York State Athletic Commission agreed to designate the winner of a fight between Chocolate and Lew Feldman as the new champion.²³⁵ Chocolate won the fight with relative ease, scoring a technical knockout in the twelfth round without ever having been “seriously extended.”²³⁶ One month later he successfully defended both his junior lightweight and featherweight titles against Fidel LaBarba in a rematch attended by 14,000 fans, proving his continued status as a major

²³³ *Chicago Defender*, November 28, 1931, p. 8.

²³⁴ *New York Times*, October 9, 1932, p. S9.

²³⁵ *New York Times*, October 13, 1932, p. 27; *La Prensa*, October 11, 1932, p. 6. The National Boxing Association, the other major North American institution governing the sport, did not recognize the fight as a title bout, but instead recognized Tommy Paul as its featherweight champion. Because Feldman had soundly defeated Paul in a recent fight, many felt that the winner of the Feldman-Chocolate bout would be the legitimate champion. Most observers felt that Paul was clearly inferior as a boxer to both Feldman and Chocolate.

²³⁶ *New York Times*, October 14, 1932, p. 28.

attraction.²³⁷ Chocolate had added a second championship to his impressive record and successfully defended it against a top contender, solidifying his status as an elite boxer. He ended 1932 as a champion in two weight classes and stood atop the boxing world as one of its most heralded personalities. His exploits generated reams of commentary in numerous media outlets in the United States, and his career exemplified the ways in which celebrity athletes came to assume a larger than life presence in the early twentieth century.

²³⁷ *New York Times*, December 19, 1932, p. 22; *La Prensa*, December 10, 1932, p. 6.

Chapter 3: Iconography of a National Hero

As Kid Chocolate travelled across the United States garnering fame and earning fantastic amounts of money, Cubans confronted troublesome conditions at home that were worsening at an accelerating pace. Fewer than thirty years removed from independence, Cubans conducted the business of the polity under the shadow of North American interference in their political affairs as authorized by the Platt Amendment. In addition, by the fall of 1930 struggles over political power erupted into violent confrontation after President Gerardo Machado extended his electoral mandate through extra-legal means and faced opposition from growing sectors of the population. By the summer of 1931, when Kid Chocolate won his first world championship, Cuba had become a police state facing open rebellion as arrests, torture, assassinations and kidnappings became commonplace.¹

To make matters worse, in the late 1920s and early 1930s the Cuban economy withered in a collapse of catastrophic proportions. A sharp decline in the price of sugar, the dominant export of the island's economy, and increased competition in the world sugar market brought about economic stagnation, growing unemployment and shrinking real incomes. All sectors of the economy suffered as the relative prosperity of the first twenty years of the republican era gave way to a decade of pronounced deterioration in living standards. The onset of global depression in the 1930s further exacerbated the

¹ Louis A. Pérez, Jr. *Cuba Under the Platt Amendment, 1902-1934* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1986), pp. 282-284; Jaime Suchiliki, *Cuba From Columbus to Castro* (Washington: Brassey's Inc., 1990), pp. 101-102.

decline and made a grave situation critical. Economic calamity threatened the well-being of a vast number of Cubans and combined with political crisis to create a climate of misery and despair.²

Northern Exposure – Sport as a Cultural Contact Zone

Such were the conditions under which news about Kid Chocolate made its way back to Cuba. Because of the close links in communication between the two countries, Cubans learned of his exploits in the United States through a variety of forms. Newspaper reports on his career appeared in Cuba almost as soon as he arrived in New York. In June 1928, *Diario de la Marina* announced his departure for the United States along with manager Pincho Gutiérrez and three other Cuban boxers.³ The paper also reported on his first fight in the United States through the use of a short syndicated article.⁴ By August the Havana daily was running syndicated articles on Chocolate fights with regularity, often adding headlines announcing fight results across the lead sports page.⁵ The articles noted the impression that Chocolate was making on the North American boxing world as well as his popularity among Cubans living in New York City. Full-page headlines announcing Chocolate fight results became common by late November.⁶

Other publications also began to take note of the impression the Kid was making

² Jorge Ibarra, *Prologue to Revolution: Cuba, 1898-1958*, trans. Marjorie Moore (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), p. 176; Louis A. Pérez, Jr. *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 190-192.

³ *Diario de la Marina*, June 22, 1928, p. 19.

⁴ *Diario de la Marina*, July 12, 1928, p. 19.

⁵ See for example *Diario de la Marina*, October 2, 1928, p. 17.

⁶⁶ See for example the announcement of his fight with Sammy Tisch, *Diario de la Marina*, September 12, 1928, p. 19.

in the United States. In early November the popular magazine *Bohemia* ran a full-page photograph of Chocolate and manager “Pincho” Gutiérrez with a short byline stating “the triumphs of the small boxer constitute the most interesting item not just in Cuba, but also in the United States, where the boy is considered one of the top box office draws.”⁷ In its next issue the magazine ran another photo of Chocolate, acquired from an international newsreel service and displayed as proof of the place that Chocolate “occupie[d] in Yankee sports.”⁸ Fans in Cuba could find out not only the results of Chocolate fights, but also the latest information on negotiations to sign contracts for fights, as announcements of agreements also appeared regularly in the sports pages.⁹ Newspapers publicized the announcements of upcoming Chocolate fights with full page headlines on their sports pages, helping to create a sense of anticipation with regard to pending engagements.¹⁰ North American news services like the AP and UPI provided special round by round summaries of his fight, which were regularly printed in Havana newspapers.¹¹ Even postponements of the Kid’s fights in the United States were announced.¹² Through the syndicated press, reports on items as mundane as the sparring sessions of the young boxer made their way back to Cuban fans.¹³

⁷ Captioned photo, *Bohemia* 20 (November 4, 1928), p. 50.

⁸ Captioned photo, *Bohemia* 20 (November 11, 1928), p. 49.

⁹ See for example *Diario de la Marina* April 11, 1929, p. 17.

¹⁰ See for example *Diario de la Marina*, October 19, 1928, p. 17.

¹¹ Elio Menéndez and Victor Joaquín Ortega, *Kid Chocolate: El boxeo soy yo* (Havana: Editorial Orbe, 1980), p. 108.

¹² This was the case with the postponement of a scheduled fight with Mickey Dunn, which ultimately never took place. See *Diario de la Marina*, August 31, 1928, p. 19.

¹³ See for example *Diario de la Marina*, September 27, 1928, p. 19.

The use of the North American syndicated services by Havana newspapers meant that Cuban readers had direct exposure to the praise that North American sportswriters lavished on the young boxer. Because of the access that Cubans had to the North American media, news of the impression Kid Chocolate made in the United States made its way to the island almost instantaneously. Through syndication, Cubans could read comments like those of Associated Press correspondent Walter Douglas, who called Chocolate, “the most able fighter that boxing has seen.”¹⁴ In mid-September *Diario de la Marina* published two United Press articles about Kid Chocolate under the headline “the ebony pugilist Kid Chocolate causes a sensation in the United States.” The paper reprinted the assertion by the *New York World* that “[w]hat is certain is it has been some time since we have seen a boxer who attracts as much attention as [Chocolate].”¹⁵ The consistent publication of Associated Press and other syndicated items in newspapers like *Diario de la Marina* meant that Cuban readers could read for themselves comments about how outstanding a boxer he was judged to be by North American sportswriters and fans.

In addition to using syndicated services, Cuban newspapers often reprinted entire articles from New York on the career of Kid Chocolate. In September 1928 *Diario de la Marina* ran the full text of a *New York World* column written by famous North American boxing commentator Hype Igoe. The column opened with the statement “[a] young Cuban boxer has arrived in this metropolis to revolutionize the pugilistic world.” Igoe compared Chocolate directly to former African-American great George Dixon and observed that he was the object of considerable praise from North Americans. Among

¹⁴ *Heraldo de Cuba*, July 7, 1931, p. 13.

¹⁵ *Diario de la Marina*, September 14, 1928, p. 17.

those who Igoe quoted were fight promoter Eddie McMahon, who called Chocolate “the best boxer in the world today.”¹⁶ Two months later Cuban readers could note New York state boxing commissioner William Muldoon’s declaration that Chocolate was “the most intelligent boxing machine in the world today.”¹⁷ A few days later those same readers could learn that his fame as “one of the best aces in the North American ring” was continuing to grow.¹⁸

By the end of 1928 the degree of popularity that Chocolate had amassed in the United States was clear to anyone who read Havana sports pages with any regularity. Readers of the Cuban sports pages knew that Chocolate had become “the center of the spotlight of international pugilistic fame.” They were fully aware that he had come to New York “unknown and without a penny,” and left five months later as the second ranked boxer in his class and idol of North American fans, so popular that promoters quarreled over the right to book him on a given date.¹⁹ Such exposure was noteworthy, for recognition in the United States, considered by many Cubans to be the epitome of civilization and development, conferred its own degree of significance on the career of Kid Chocolate. The fact that North Americans were interested enough in Kid Chocolate to write and read about him in their own newspapers formed a major reason why Cubans would do the same, for North American attention constituted validation of his distinction.

In addition to frequently using the syndicated press, Havana newspapers also used

¹⁶ *Diario de la Marina*, September 23, 1928, section 3, p. 1.

¹⁷ *Diario de la Marina*, November 20, 1928, p. 15.

¹⁸ *Diario de la Marina*, November 22, 1928, p. 15.

¹⁹ *Diario de la Marina*, December 22, 1928, p. 19.

reports by special correspondents in New York to provide details on his career.²⁰ In October 1928 readers could find out through special correspondence from New York that North American fans gave him a “delirious ovation” before his fight with Eddie O’Dowd, for example, and that Chocolate had been “very well received” in the three arenas in which he had fought to date.²¹ For some of Chocolate’s more high profile fights, Havana dailies might even send a staff correspondent to New York for a period of time to cover the event. When Chocolate fought Jack “Kid” Berg in August 1930, four journalists came up from Havana to cover the event.²² When he fought Tony Canzoneri in November 1931 for the world lightweight title, *El Mundo*, *Heraldo de Cuba*, *La Lucha* and *Diario de la Marina* all sent correspondents to New York.²³

Radio was another medium through which Cubans were exposed to the career of Kid Chocolate, and sporting events more generally. Details on boxing matches in Spain as well as the United States were regularly broadcast on the radio in Cuba. *Diario de la Marina* also invited readers to come down to its offices to hear fight details transmitted from ringside correspondents read aloud through a loudspeaker. Correspondents for a syndicated service such as United Press were stationed ringside and transmitted details to the editorial offices. These details were then read aloud over loudspeakers for the benefit of those who did not own a radio.²⁴ The Cuban Telephone Company also transmitted

²⁰ See for example *Diario de la Marina*, October 9, 1928, p. 17.

²¹ *Diario de la Marina*, October 16, 1928, p. 17.

²² *La Prensa*, August 6, 1930, p. 8.

²³ *Heraldo de Cuba*, November 11, 1931, p. 9; *La Prensa*, November 18, 1931, p. 5.

²⁴ *Diario de la Marina*, July 7, 1928, p. 17.

radio broadcasts of high profile boxing matches.²⁵

By December 1928, “round-by-round” descriptions from ringside of Kid Chocolate fights were being transmitted in Cuba on the radio.²⁶ These transmissions provided Cuban listeners a level of proximity to the career of Kid Chocolate that would not have been possible without the relatively new medium. Historian Susan Smulyan has noted that radio transformed sports fans “relationship to time and space” in the 1920s. By providing “prompt reports of the outcomes of sport events, detailed descriptions of the events themselves, and the ability to hear them as they happened,” radio broadcasts allowed fans to “follow their favorites in a way that rivaled attendance at the ballpark.”²⁷ Thus the new technology facilitated the ability of Cubans to follow the career of Kid Chocolate despite the distance and national boundaries that might have once formed obstacles to accessing that celebrity.

Yet another medium through which Cuban fans learned about the career of Kid Chocolate in the United States was motion pictures. Fight films from the United States regularly made their way to Cuba. By the time Kid Chocolate began to box professionally in the United States, Cuban boxing fans had regular access through film to numerous high profile matches that took place in the United States. In July 1927, footage of the heavyweight bout between Harry Wills and Paulino Uzcundún could be seen at both the Payret and Prado theaters in Havana.²⁸ Three months later they could see a film of Gene

²⁵ *Diario de la Marina*, July 26, 1928, p. 17.

²⁶ *Diario de la Marina*, December 16, 1928, p. 19. Chocolate’s December 17, 1928 fight with Emil Paluso at the Saint Nicholas Arena in Manhattan was broadcast in this manner.

²⁷ Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920-1934* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), p. 27.

²⁸ *El Imparcial*, July 20, 1927, p. 4.

Tunney's October 1927 defense of his heavyweight crown against Jack Dempsey at venues such as the Campoamor theatre in Havana.²⁹ One week after Tunney defended his heavyweight title against Tom Heeny in New York, fans could go to the National Theater to see the fight.³⁰

Once Chocolate himself became a boxing celebrity in the United States, films of his fights were also accessible to Cuban fans. In January 1929, the Payret Theatre showed a film of his fight with Pancho Dencio, which had taken place just two weeks prior in New York. Chocolate and Gutiérrez were expected to attend one screening, and tickets for the show ranged from seventy cents to one dollar. At the same function, the theater played a film titled "The Kings of the Ring," which contained footage of the "culminating rounds of the biggest fights in boxing."³¹ By August 1929 a film on "the life and training" of Chocolate was being shown at the Payret.³² In December 1931, film footage of the lightweight title fight with Tony Canzoneri at Madison Square Garden could be seen at the Payret within three weeks of the fight itself.³³ In addition to newspapers and radio broadcasts, fight films formed a significant venue through which Cuban sports fans could follow the career of Kid Chocolate as it developed and remain informed about the progress of his career. These films not only facilitated another form of access to Chocolate's exploits in the United States, they also confirmed the perception that he was making a favorable impression in North American society. His appearance in

²⁹ *El Mundo*, October 15, 1927, p. 9.

³⁰ *Diario de la Marina*, August 1, 1928, p. 19.

³¹ *Diario de la Marina*, January 5, 1929, p. 18.

³² *La Lucha*, August 31, 1929, p. 5.

³³ *Heraldo de Cuba*, December 9, 1931, p. 9.

films produced in the United States was further proof that North Americans considered his accomplishments significant, a signal that prompted Cubans to take particular note.

Together, the media of print, radio and film helped to constitute the world of sport as a cultural contact zone between the United States and Cuba.³⁴ The frequent appearance of North American syndicated columns in Cuban newspapers meant that Cubans were often reading the exact same copy as North American sports fans and thus were fully aware of the fame and interest that Kid Chocolate generated in the United States. A fan living in Havana who wanted to follow his career had little disadvantage relative to a fan in Atlanta or Washington, D.C.³⁵ He or she could often read the same articles about his exploits, hear the same blow-by-blow descriptions of his fights on the radio, and also see the same films of his fights and training sessions. There was more difference between the exposure of fans living in New York City and Atlanta than between those living in Atlanta and Havana. Exposure to the career and celebrity of Kid Chocolate was unaffected by national borders.

³⁴ The concept of the contact zone comes from literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt, who defines it as “social space where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination.” An alternative formulation of the contact zone is “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations.” She notes that transculturation, or the ways in which “subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture... is a phenomenon of the contact zone.” In the case of sport in Republican Cuba, the contact zone is helpful in apprehending the ways in which Cubans absorbed global sport culture, and its attendant notions of racial hierarchy and social Darwinism and infused their own meaning into this culture, particularly through narratives of the career of Kid Chocolate. In another sense, sport and sports journalism can be said to form a site of cultural contact in the neo-colonial relationship between Cuba and the United States where Cubans and North Americans maintained ongoing and often asymmetrical relations. See Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 4-7.

³⁵ Both the *Atlanta Constitution* and the *Washington Post* also used Associated Press articles to provide readers with information on the career of Kid Chocolate. See for example *Atlanta Constitution*, May 22, 1929, p.9; May 23, 1929, p. 17; July 11, 1929, p. 19; August 30, 1929, p. 21 and *Washington Post*, May 22, 1929, p.13; August 6, 1929, p. 13; August 29, 1929, p. 17; December 19, 1929, p. 17.

Seeing the Self through the Eyes of the Other – North American Praise and Popularity as Validation

Cubans were quite invested in the success Kid Chocolate had in the United States. They were aware that he had “generated the rise . . . of a delirious multitude, which viewed the small ebony Hercules as a representative of a country that is also small, but vigorous and full of color just like its sporting emissary.”³⁶ As the Cuban sporting press adopted him as a national hero, they pointed to his popularity and fan attraction in the United States as markers of success. The “continuous and enthusiastic praises”³⁷ of North American sportswriters became a regular news item in Cuba. He was celebrated by Cubans precisely because he achieved stardom and popularity among North Americans. Cubans were as preoccupied with the celebrity of Kid Chocolate in the United States as they were with his defeat of North American opponents.

It was also widely known that his appeal to North American fans and writers also translated into success as a box office attraction. Those who read newspapers were well aware that he was

...the best attraction in Fistianana and in the market of big-time boxing... His name was such a large box-office attraction, that he broke all the attendance records for boxers in the lighter divisions and the critics have given him a prominent spot on the altar of posterity.³⁸

One sportswriter informed his readers that Chocolate was such a colossal attraction that

³⁶ Berny Jimmy, “Chocolate, vencedor o vencido, es nuestro Chocolate,” *Bohemia* 22 (August 17, 1930), p. 49.

³⁷ Llillo Jiménez, “The Chocolate Kid; he’s the best one!” *Bohemia* 21 (March 3, 1929), p. 49.

³⁸ Eladio Secades, “Reacciona el deportismo Cubano bajo nuevas esperanzas de gloria,” *Bohemia* 30 (October 30, 1938, p. 26.

only two heavyweight fights in 1929 had a larger gate than the bout with Al Singer.³⁹ After his 1931 fight with Tony Canzoneri, *Heraldo de Cuba* observed that Chocolate was currently the greatest boxing box office attraction in the United States despite the loss, and his fight with Canzoneri drew the biggest crowd at Madison Square Garden in two years.⁴⁰ The next month *Heraldo de Cuba* reminded its readers that Chocolate was “the biggest attraction in New York” even going so far as to state that he was more popular in New York than in his own country “to which he has delivered so much prestige in the virile sport of fists.”⁴¹ Two weeks later the paper would emphasize the point with poetic language by noting that Chocolate was “the most precious jewel for the richest promoters in the universe.”⁴²

Perhaps most important was the fact that he was convincing North Americans and others that Cuba was capable of producing competitive athletes in the field of pugilism. If boxing was indeed a means of proving the relative fitness of racial or national groups, then Kid Chocolate was demonstrating in convincing fashion on a highly visible stage that Cubans were as fit as any other group in the world. Success in New York City was significant not only because it attracted the attention of North Americans, but also because New York was the “center of the planet earth with respect to matters concerning the manly sport.”⁴³ Chocolate’s fame had spread beyond New York, and there was

³⁹ Lillo Jiménez, “Venció el mejor preparado y el mas estudioso: La Barba,” *Bohemia* 22 (November 9, 1930), p. 49.

⁴⁰ *Heraldo de Cuba*, November 29, 1931, p. 9.

⁴¹ *Heraldo de Cuba*, December 8, 1931, p. 9.

⁴² *Heraldo de Cuba*, December 24, 1931, p. 9.

⁴³ *Heraldo de Cuba*, November 17, 1931, p. 9.

significant interest in Chocolate in other cities in the United States as well as in Europe.⁴⁴

The United States had come to represent the pinnacle of achievement broadly defined, but especially in the boxing world. As one writer noted,

Kid Chocolate makes us proud as Cubans with his marvelous triumphs in precisely the country that produces the best boxers, that monopolizes all the titles and holds all the records. Becoming a great boxer in the United States requires more work than becoming a great mathematician in Germany, and transforming oneself into the most scientific of all boxers and being proclaimed as the marvel of the ring by the most famous experts in that same Yankee-land (“*Yanquilandia*”) is something that goes beyond the pale and takes on fantastic proportions.⁴⁵

Carteles magazine noted that because Kid Chocolate was Cuban and was considered “the current marvel of boxing” by foreign critics, it was “logical” that he was a topic of conversation among Cubans.⁴⁶ The opinion that North American sportswriters held of Kid Chocolate was a newsworthy topic in and of itself. After he won the world junior lightweight title one magazine cited an article in a Philadelphia newspaper, which declared “Kid Chocolate has shocked the boxing world, beating world champion Benny Bass in such decisive fashion that there was no room for any doubts,” and continued by observing, “the rest of the American press agrees.”⁴⁷

That Cubans became excited over the success of Chocolate in the United States should come as no surprise given the influence of North American culture in Cuba in the first half of the twentieth century. The proximity, economic prosperity and dynamism of the colossus to the north translated into considerable cultural influence, and often caused

⁴⁴ *Heraldo de Cuba*, July 14, 1931, p. 13.

⁴⁵ *Diario de la Marina*, August 30, 1929, p. 15.

⁴⁶ Jess Losada, “Chocolate vs. Kid Berg,” *Carteles* 16 (July 13, 1930), p. 42.

⁴⁷ Jess Losada, “Chocolate y Bass,” *Nocaut* 1 (August 1931), p. 6.

Cubans to seek self-validation through a North American lens; “the north represented success of consequence.”⁴⁸ Kid Chocolate was able to attain this “success of consequence” without leaving Cuba completely. With his trips back and forth between the United States and Cuba, he personified the transnational nature of boxing and sport in general as a cultural realm, accessing the wealth and celebrity available in the United States while still remaining available to Cubans as a local hero.

The way in which the Cuban print media closely followed the career of Kid Chocolate in the United States fit into a pattern of close reporting on sport in the United States more generally. Havana newspapers regularly covered North American sporting events. Coverage of North American major league baseball included the printing of box scores along with Associated Press reports summarizing the games. *Diario de la Marina* even provided reports on the training camps of major league baseball teams, briefing its readers on the fortunes of these teams before the official season even began. Columnists wrote editorials on major North American events, such as the “long count” Dempsey-Tunney fight of 1927.⁴⁹ Dailies reprinted entire articles from the pages of North American newspapers, as well as the columns of famous commentators like

⁴⁸ Louis A. Pérez, Jr. *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality, Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), p. 412.

⁴⁹ *El Mundo*, October 2, 1927, p. 32. The “long-count” fight between Gene Tunney and Jack Dempsey is one of the most famous boxing matches in history. According to Randy Roberts the fight generated interest in cities across the world, including London, Paris, Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, Lima and Cape Town, South Africa. In the bout, Gene Tunney successfully defended his world heavyweight title against Jack Dempsey after being knocked down in the seventh round. Controversy arose from the fact that the referee waited five seconds to begin counting Tunney out as he argued with Dempsey to go to a neutral corner as the rules required. That Tunney benefitted from the delay and went on to win was cause for considerable discussion among fight fans and in newspapers. The *New York Times* noted that “There was hardly as much arguing over the result of the late World War as there is over the more recent Tunney-Dempsey quarrel in Chicago. Despite the loss, Dempsey was said to have emerged from the fight as “the greatest and most beloved sports hero the [United States] has ever known.” For a detailed account of this fight see Randy Roberts, *Jack Dempsey: The Manassa Mauler* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1979), pp. 254-263.

Damon Runyon,⁵⁰ and *New York Times* columnist John Kieran.⁵¹ When Jack Dempsey retired, *El Mundo* announced the news with a full-page headline.⁵² Likewise, when famous North American boxing promoter Tex Rickard passed away, *Diario de la Marina* passed the news on to its readers with a full front-page headline.⁵³ Other items that were printed through the use of syndication included obituaries of famous North American athletes,⁵⁴ which allowed Cubans to develop considerable familiarity with North American sports heroes. The use of syndicated services was extensive at times, as when *Diario de la Marina* printed three separate United Press articles on the same day to cover the announced heavyweight title fight between Gene Tunney and Tom Heeney.⁵⁵

Cuban coverage of baseball and boxing in the United States might not come as much of a surprise. Baseball had been played in Cuba for decades and boxing was at its peak of global popularity. However reporting on the world of North American sport was so extensive that even college football was reported on with considerable detail. Indeed, in the late 1920s and early 1930s it was possible to follow the North American college football season by reading dailies printed in Havana. In addition to its coverage of the sport, *Heraldo de Cuba* ran a regular column titled “Football ABC’s” which explained its

⁵⁰ See for example *El Mundo*, January 12, 1928, p. 29. Damon Runyon was a syndicated columnist for the Hearst newspapers in the United States. According to Kasia Boddy, Runyon was one of a number of sports writers who through their work in newspapers would help create “the celebrity cult of sportsmen and movie stars” in the United States, while ultimately transitioning to careers writing fiction. See Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2008), pp. 209-214.

⁵¹ See for example *Diario de la Marina*, July 11, 1928, p. 19.

⁵² *El Mundo*, February 2, 1928, p. 29.

⁵³ *Diario de la Marina*, January 7, 1929, p. 1.

⁵⁴ See for example the Associated Press obituary of African-American boxer Tiger Flowers that appeared in *Diario de la Marina*, December 5, 1927, p. 21.

⁵⁵ *Diario de la Marina*, April 1, 1928, p. 19.

strategy.⁵⁶ In 1931 the paper went so far as to publish the names of those who had been selected to the Big Ten all conference team.⁵⁷ When legendary football coach Knute Rockne came to Havana in 1927 he visited the editorial offices of *El Mundo* and spoke at the Vedado Tennis Club, suggesting that American football was popular with at least a portion of the Cuban population.⁵⁸

This condition of exposure to and familiarity with the world of North American sport became understood as the normal state of affairs for readers of the Cuban press, such that it took on a normative quality. Cuban sportswriters seemed to expect their readers to know that Damon Runyon and Hype Igoe were prominent North American sportswriters; such was the familiarity with North American popular culture that was presumed.⁵⁹ *Diario de la Marina* regularly ran a quiz column called Sportfolio, which asked numerous trivia questions on North American sports figures, belying an expectation that their readers would be able to answer at least some of the questions, and showing the familiarity with events in the United States (and internationally) that readers were expected to have. The column included queries such as: “Where did the [New York] Yankees and [Saint Louis] Cardinals hold training camp last year?” “Has Ty Cobb ever hit three home runs in one game?” “Who was the first U.S. amateur golf champion?” and “Who is the [current] welterweight boxing champion of the world?”⁶⁰ Readers who did

⁵⁶ See for example, *Heraldo de Cuba*, November 3, 1931, p. 10.

⁵⁷ *Heraldo de Cuba*, December 6, 1931, p. 10.

⁵⁸ *El Mundo*, December 13, 1927, p. 27 and December 14, 1927, p. 29.

⁵⁹ In a July 1930 article, writer Jess Losada referred to these two writers without any reference or description, indicating an expectation that readers would know who they were. Losada, “Chocolate vs. Kid Berg,” p. 44.

⁶⁰ *Diario de la Marina*, March 28, 1928, p. 19 and April 2, 1928, p. 19.

not already know the answers to these questions might certainly have felt compelled to look them up, and the very appearance of the questions in print suggests that editors expected that at least some of their readers would know the answers or at least derive satisfaction from the act of attempting to answer them.

Extensive coverage of North American sport in the Cuban press meant that Cubans competing in the United States were sure to receive media attention. In fact, any Cuban athlete who competed abroad, particularly in the United States, was likely to be subject of reporting, if not headlines in the sports pages of the Havana press. In the late 1920s *Diario de la Marina* also regularly reported on the career of chess master José Raúl Capablanca and major league pitcher Adolfo Luque, as well as other Cuban boxers fighting in the United States, often using the tactic of relying on North American syndicated services to provide detailed information. *El Mundo* used the Associated Press to report on the activities of chessmaster José Raúl Capablanca in an October 1927 tournament in Argentina, and used headlines on the lead sports page to highlight the story.⁶¹ The use of syndicated news services itself was cast as evidence of a sign of advancement and connection with news from the modern outside world. In January 1929 *Diario de la Marina* proudly announced its renewed partnership with the Associated Press (it had used the United Press over the course of 1928) by noting that over 13,000 media outlets including some of the “most important” ones in the hemisphere also used the service.⁶²

Any praise heaped on a Cuban athlete by the North American press was liable to

⁶¹ *El Mundo*, October 14, 1927, p. 23.

⁶² *Diario de la Marina*, January 1, 1929, p. 1.

be announced with great pride in the pages of local newspapers. In the spring of 1928 *Diario de la Marina* noted that Catcher Mike González was “the topic of conversation” in the United States and “rare is the day in which North American journalists are not praising his accomplishments.” To support its statement the Havana daily reprinted copy from the *New York Herald-Tribune* and *New York Times* before ending its article with the following statement. “In short, readers: MIKE IS THE MAN.”⁶³ Praise by North Americans served as incontrovertible proof that Mike was “the man.” In addition the final, capitalized sentence was printed in English, further emphasizing the fact that North American praise was newsworthy and the expectation that Cubans would be familiar enough with North American culture to understand the meaning of the sentence in English. Reporting on the career of Kid Chocolate in Cuba was part of a larger pattern of close reporting on North American sport in general and on the international exploits of Cuban athletes.

An analysis of *Nocaut* magazine demonstrates the contribution that international standing, particularly success in the United States, made to the popularity of Kid Chocolate in Cuba. *Nocaut* magazine first appeared on Cuban newsstands in August 1931, shortly after Kid Chocolate won the world junior lightweight championship. Published by the same company that distributed the popular general interest magazine, *Carteles*, *Nocaut* was the brainchild of sports writer José “Jess” Losada, and was subtitled “International Sporting Magazine.” The very name of the magazine suggests the transnational orientation of its content as well as the ways in which sport could become a vehicle for cultural assimilation of North American forms, particularly language. The title

⁶³ *Diario de la Marina*, May 20, 1928, p. 19.

Nocaut is a phonetic Spanish spelling of the English term “knockout.” A brief introductory mission statement in the first issue used several English words without translation. Words such as “punch”, “sprint”, “spirit” and “sportsmanship” were placed directly in the text with the understanding that the reader would be familiar enough with these English terms to follow along.⁶⁴ Predictably, given the very title of the magazine, boxing was covered more than any other sport, with (North American) baseball a close second. There was very little to no mention of local Cuban baseball leagues or teams.

Given the international orientation of *Nocaut*, the prominence of Kid Chocolate in the pages of the magazine is a testimony to the process by which he became a hero for many Cubans, namely by virtue of his success abroad. While *Nocaut* certainly devoted some attention to Cuban sports figures, the focus of its content was largely on international, especially North American, sporting events and personalities. More often than not, Cuban athletes were featured insofar as they had accomplished feats on the international stage. The cover of the premier issue shows a full head shot of Kid Chocolate set against background of crowds of adoring fans in the streets of Havana, with an inset picture showing headshot of manager Pincho Gutiérrez. (See figure 3.1) In the twelve issues the magazine released in its first year of publication no other Cuban personality appeared once on the cover. Instead the likes of Jack Dempsey, Babe Ruth and Helen Wills graced the cover. Chocolate was actually featured on the cover twice in one year, a feat unmatched by any other athlete, Cuban or foreign born. The combination

⁶⁴ “La arrancada,” *Nocaut* 1 (August 1931), p. 5. Joseph Arbena has done work that more generally addresses how sports can act as a vehicle for what he terms cultural imperialism and the increased usage of English words in Latin American countries. See Joseph Arbena “Sports Language, Cultural Imperialism, and the Anti-Imperialist Critique in Latin America,” *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 18 (1999), pp. 129-141.

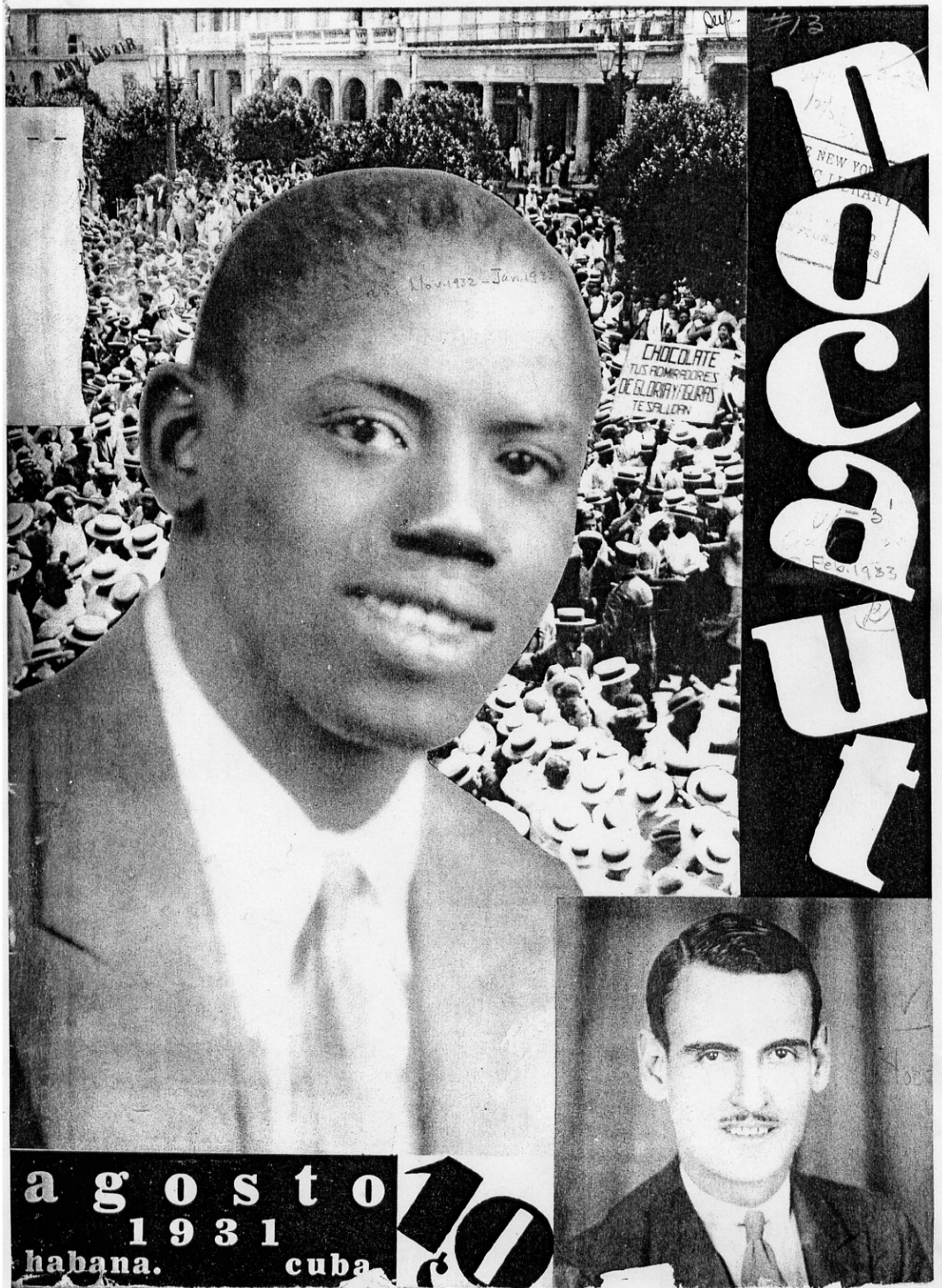


Figure 3.1. Cover of the Inaugural Issue of *Nocaute* Magazine. Kid Chocolate appears on the cover with a photo of the crowds greeting him Havana in the background. Manager Luis Gutiérrez appears in the inset. Courtesy New York Public Library.

of his status as a local hero and international celebrity elevated him above all other sporting personalities, local or foreign born.

North American culture profoundly influenced Cuban society beginning as early as the mid-nineteenth century. Lou Pérez observes, “Cubans happened to have been among the first people outside the United States to come under the influence of American material culture,” and notes that during the first half of the twentieth century “U.S. culture spread rapidly across the island and emerged as one of the most accessible means by which to aspire to well being.”⁶⁵ Moreover, the ways in which sport, North American culture and modernity were linked extended beyond Cuban shores. Barbara Keys has noted that this was in fact an international phenomenon. North American cultural influence in sport “paralleled the powerful inroads that U.S. culture, technology and goods made in many parts of the world during the interwar period,” and in sport, as in other areas, observers in other countries saw the United States “as the exemplar of modernity, technology and progress,” and North American sport techniques and styles “inspired emulation and envy.”⁶⁶ Cuban exposure to the world of North American sport constituted a harbinger of a more general global process of North American cultural ascendancy.

Kid Chocolate as a Source of International Prestige and National Pride

Kid Chocolate’s career as a top boxer was heavily invested with meaning and significance for Cuban national aspiration. Many Cubans were privy to the symbolism that boxing matches held as metaphors for national or racial competition. His

⁶⁵ Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*, pp. 10-11.

⁶⁶ Barbara J. Keys, *Globalizing Sport: National Rivalry and International Community in the 1930s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 68-69.

accomplishments as a boxer served as proof positive of Cuban abilities in general and provided redemptive hope that the emergence of a modern and prosperous Cuba was possible. *Heraldo de Cuba* dubbed him “the boy hero who [demonstrated] to the whole world that that our nation is prepared to obtain the highest success in all sectors of civic life.”⁶⁷ The conservative *Diario de la Marina* agreed, declaring that he provided a “magnificent affirmation of the sporting capacity of Cubans... and raised the name of the nation to immeasurable heights.”⁶⁸ That *Diario de la Marina*, a highly conservative and unabashedly pro-Spanish newspaper, cast Chocolate as a national hero spoke to the extent to which he inspired admiration across a wide range of social groups on the island.

Chocolate achieved broadly accepted status as a national hero by virtue of his success in North American rings because of the symbolism that success carried for Cuban self-esteem and confidence in the nation-building project. Just as Joe Louis and Max Schmelling became the “symbolic representation of [their nations’] values and aspirations,”⁶⁹ Kid Chocolate would take on an identical role for Cuba, while at the same time putting Cuba on a par with modern powers such as the United States and Germany. Once Kid Chocolate emerged as a top-ranked boxer, Cuban sportswriters would be able to relate conversations regarding boxing, racial ideology and national hierarchies directly to the Cuban condition. Words such as progress, capacity, fitness and ability permeated references to Kid Chocolate’s achievements, reflecting the concern with Darwinist notions of racial and national hierarchy that his career addressed.

⁶⁷ *Heraldo de Cuba*, July 24, 1931, p. 9.

⁶⁸ *Diario de la Marina*, September 15, 1929, section 3, p. vi..

⁶⁹ Lewis Erenberg, *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation: Louis vs. Schmelling* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 4.

Journalists also highlighted the degree to which Kid Chocolate promoted Cuban prestige abroad. He was understood to be a national symbol, a sporting ambassador who presented an image of national strength and achievement abroad. He had become “a compatriot who... knows how to bring prestige to the Cuban flag, raising it to immense heights.”⁷⁰ With each high profile contest, he came to be seen more and more as a national resource. Shortly before his title fight with Tony Canzoneri in November 1931 *Heraldo de Cuba* called him “the pride of our little island.”⁷¹ He carried “the entire weight of the honor of Cuban sports” on his shoulders,⁷² and the press repeatedly referred to him as “our champion.”⁷³ Even poets confirmed his role as a national representative. In his ode to the boxer, José Stevens Romero encapsulated the effect Chocolate had of generating international prestige for Cuba: “With your knockouts of such pure technique, you are the most prominent diplomat of the hour!” Romero declared that Chocolate had even outdone Columbus in his attempts to bring glory to Spain, noting “you without men, nor boats, nor a cross, you with your hands! You bring worldwide fame to Cuba when you climb in the ring.”⁷⁴

In an era when athletic achievement was viewed across the globe as a proxy for the overall fitness or capacity of national or racial groups, Kid Chocolate’s success loomed large for a nation seeking to establish its capacity for self-governance in the face

⁷⁰ *Heraldo de Cuba*, July 24, 1931, p. 10.

⁷¹ *Heraldo de Cuba*, November 16, 1931, p. 9.

⁷² Antonio Arroyo Ruz, “La primera derrota de Kid Chocolate,” *Bohemia* 22 (November 16, 1930), p. 49.

⁷³ *Heraldo de Cuba*, December 8, 1931, p. 9.

⁷⁴ José Stevens Romero, *Kid Chocolate*, in *Aves y risas: poesias* (Santiago de Cuba: Tipografía Arroyo Hermanos, 1930), p. 57.

of North American interference justified in large part by racist ideology that cast Cubans as an inferior people. As a representative of the Cuban nation, his accomplishments in the ring subverted North American pretensions to superiority and, by extension, claims to legitimate political hegemony in Cuba. The fact that this success was being achieved by a Cuban individual of unmistakably African descent further emphasized the challenge to the racist ideology undermining Cuban claims to self-determination that his career posed. Through his success Cubans were able to cite evidence that they did in fact compare favorably to other racial and national groups and that the large proportion of Cubans of African descent did not condemn the island to backwardness and dominance by other nations.

Cubans were also aware that it was technique and talent, not brute force, which formed the basis of his international acclaim. One Cuban sportswriter listed Chocolate as one of the era's "stylists of the ring," a boxer who took an approach that required "a scientific knowledge of anatomy" and sought effectiveness by targeting certain key areas of their opponents bodies rather than trying to simply out-pummel them.⁷⁵ Readers of the Cuban print media knew that North American sportswriters cited "science, ability and brains" as the three characteristics that had catapulted him to international boxing fame.⁷⁶ One article noted that on a trip to Spain Chocolate "had shown the Spanish the meaning of scientific boxing."⁷⁷ That a poor Afro-Cuban could be said to be instructing foreigners on scientific technique carried considerable significance for a country seeking to establish

⁷⁵ Georges Andrés, "Los golpes de nocaut al cuerpo," *Nocaut* 1 (September 1931), p.5.

⁷⁶ Jess Losada, "Kid Chocolate en una crisis saludable," *Carteles* 16 (November 16, 1930), p. 18.

⁷⁷ Jess Losada, "Desde España: El pugilismo hispano," *Bohemia* 25 (August 27, 1933), pp. 39, 44.

status as modern and developed in an era when science increasingly served as a justification for racial and national hierarchies. Cubans knew that Kid Chocolate was more than just a brutish physical specimen. His success was based on superior ability and aptitude, thus casting him as an especially suitable representative in the arena of international athletic competition where theories of Social Darwinism were assessed and articulated.

For his part, Chocolate himself seemed to embrace this role as a national hero. *Carteles* magazine praised him as the young man “who constantly thinks of his country and offers all his victories to his flag,” noting that Chocolate preferred the minor commentary of a Cuban journalist to the “greatest praises” of prominent North American writers.⁷⁸ Shortly after his homecoming in September 1928, Chocolate noted in a letter to one veterans organization that “I am completely satisfied... with having raised fairly high the name of Cuba and the satisfaction that I have brought to [boxing] fans.”⁷⁹ When asked in late 1929 if he might spend the winter holidays in New York he reportedly stated that “as long as Havana was in reach by train or airplane, [Christmas Eve] would find him in ‘El Cerro’ eating lots of *lechón* and doing the rumba.”⁸⁰ After failing in his bid for a lightweight title against Tony Canzoneri, he declared, “I want to tell the Cuban fans... that I entered the ring with hopes of conquering two more championships to offer my homeland,”⁸¹ demonstrating an awareness and embrace of his status as a national hero. Manager Pincho Gutiérrez also saw the link between the success of Chocolate and

⁷⁸ Jess Losada, “Chocolate vs. Kid Berg,” p. 42.

⁷⁹ *Diario de la Marina*, September 13, 1929, p. 16.

⁸⁰ *La Prensa*, December 4, 1929, p. 8.

⁸¹ *Heraldo de Cuba*, November 21, 1931, p. 9.

the success of Cuba, declaring in an interview: “I am Cuban and my triumphs are Cuban triumphs.”⁸² Before Chocolate’s junior lightweight title fight with Benny Bass, Gutiérrez declared that the fight was “of great importance for Cuban sport.”⁸³ Both Chocolate and Gutiérrez repeatedly acknowledged their symbolic status as representatives of Cuba. Chocolate’s persisting affection for his country in the face of immense success in the United States endeared him to Cubans and enhanced his status as a national hero.

Kid Chocolate also bolstered a sense of national pride and unity among Cubans. Through his success Chocolate was said to “influence to an unlimited degree the general feeling of nationalism” in Cuba.⁸⁴ Kid Chocolate’s success was so bound up with national pride that even supporting him was cast as patriotic duty. He was “a Cuban athlete who deserve[d] the support of all Cubans.”⁸⁵ Both he and Gutiérrez were described as “deserving of all the sympathy and admiration of their fellow citizens, who are obliged to sincerely view the Kid as an emblem of triumphant effort.”⁸⁶

Because of its communal nature, the very act of listening to Kid Chocolate fights on the radio itself fostered a sense of national community. One columnist noted how in response to the famous fight against Al Singer, “the entire nation, congregated in public plazas in all of our cities, attentively listening to the loudspeakers which disclosed

⁸² José Antonio Losada “Una entrevista a larga distancia con ‘Pincho’ Gutiérrez,” *Carteles* 14 (July 28, 1929), p. 38.

⁸³ *Heraldo de Cuba*, July 9, 1931, p. 13.

⁸⁴ Lillo Jiménez “La significancia del triunfo de ‘Chocolate’,” *Bohemia* 21 (September 8, 1929), pp. 50, 54.

⁸⁵ Jess Losada, “Actualidad deportiva,” *Carteles* 20 (March 2, 1934), p. 36.

⁸⁶ Jimmy, “Chocolate, vencedor o vencido, es nuestro Chocolate,” p. 49.

blow-by-blow the development of this grand battle.”⁸⁷ That night *Diario de la Marina* transmitted details of the fight live throughout the country through the affiliated radio station C.M.W., as well as loudspeakers outside of its main offices. While the city of Havana and other radio stations placed speakers in various parts of the city for the benefit of the general population,⁸⁸ a large number of fans nonetheless came to the offices of the newspaper to hear live coverage of the bout. “Thousands upon thousands” of fans gathered outside the offices of *Diario de la Marina*, spilling out onto the grounds of the *Capitolio* and the *Parque de la Fraternidad*.

The paper estimated that over 15,000 individuals congregated outside its offices, reportedly the largest gathering of people ever in Havana.⁸⁹ Individuals who congregated in the streets of Central Havana to hear details of the fight were informed of every detail as if they were “part of the 45,000 fans who had paid \$200,000” to attend.⁹⁰ The atmosphere in Cuba as one journalist read the details of the fight for listeners across the country reflected a “healthy nationalism that vibrated in the collective spirit. It was a blooming of erstwhile inactive feelings that stirred in response to the boy representing the nation in the great metropolis. An enthusiasm and pride over being Cuban.”⁹¹ The transmission of details of the fight over the radio also meant that fans learned about his achievement simultaneously, further emphasizing the degree to which excitement about

⁸⁷ *Diario de la Marina*, September 15, 1929, section 3, p. vi.

⁸⁸ *Diario de la Marina*, August 30, 1929, p. 1.

⁸⁹ *Diario de la Marina*, August 30, 1929, pp. 1, 15.

⁹⁰ *Diario de la Marina*, August 30, 1929, p. 15.

⁹¹ Jiménez “La significancia del triunfo de ‘Chocolate’,” pp. 50, 54.

Kid Chocolate helped to foster a sense of national community and identity.⁹²

While his success in the United States and the ways in which he generated international prestige formed one source of his popularity in Cuba, his success *against* North Americans in the violent world of boxing also provided many Cubans with an outlet for the frustration and resentment held with respect to North American influence and power on the island, and thus was another reason for his exalted status. Since North American writers themselves were understood to be writing about Kid Chocolate's rivals with "ridiculous patriotisms and enormous 'ballyhoo,'"⁹³ it stood to reason that Cubans would react to his victories over North Americans with comparable patriotic fervor. Since the United States was viewed as the major source of the frustration of Cuban nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s, the fact that Kid Chocolate often fought and beat North Americans was surely significant to most Cubans. The blow-by-blow descriptions of fights that were printed in the press and read aloud on the radio ensured that Cubans were able to visualize the violent encounters that Chocolate had with North Americans on a regular basis. Cheering for Kid Chocolate in his fights against North American rivals entailed a form of nationalist expression for Cubans but also served as a means of relieving the frustration of North American political tutelage and economic dominance.

By the time Kid Chocolate began his professional boxing career, North Americans had exercised considerable economic and political influence in Cuba for

⁹² Susan Smulyan notes that in the United States, the spread of radio helped to "create a group of listeners familiar with events and culture nationwide who thought of themselves as part of a large gathering" and that radio helped to intensify the experience of being part of a national audience. See Smulyan, pp. 29-30. Michele Hilmes has noted that radio has come to be recognized by scholars as "part of the social glue that held America – and other nations together" from the 1920s through the 1940s. See Michele Hilmes, "Rethinking Radio," in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, ed. Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 10.

⁹³ Llillo Jiménez, "Otro para el record de Chocolate," *Bohemia* 21 (August 25, 1929), p. 42.

decades. The Platt Amendment, which remained in effect from 1902 to 1934 “offered the United States virtually unlimited sanction for the supervision of Cuban public administration,”⁹⁴ a state of affairs which in turn helped to foster North American economic domination,⁹⁵ and persisted as a national affront. Based on the frustration surrounding their political and economic relations with the United States during the first few decades of the twentieth century, it is reasonable to presume that more than a few Cubans took pleasure in the graphic description of the legitimized and sanctioned pummeling of North Americans at the hands of a Cuban.⁹⁶ As Cubans watched or imagined Kid Chocolate successfully engaging in physical confrontation with North Americans, they may have imagined themselves venting their own frustrations through violent means. Sociologist John Sugden has described a function of sport that is particularly instructive in helping to understand the significance of Cuban exposure to direct violent confrontation between Kid Chocolate and North Americans:

...sport is a relatively autonomous theatre within which the conventions of the socio-cultural mainstream can be temporarily suspended, permitting modes of behaviour [sic] which as a rule, in terms of physical and emotional expression, lag behind the conventions of conduct which govern everyday life... through both participation and spectatorship sport provides opportunities for people to express repressed potentials and feel basic

⁹⁴ Pérez, *Cuba under the Platt Amendment*, p. 152.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 121.

⁹⁶ Recent scientific research suggests that there is a biochemical basis for the gratification that Kid Chocolate likely generated in Cubans as he literally beat North Americans. This research indicates that for certain cells in the brain, witnessing an action is indistinguishable from actually engaging in that very action. This connection is one reason why sporting events often generate intense emotion in spectators. See “Mirror Neurons,” *Nova Science Now*, 17 min., Boston: PBS. Video segment originally aired on January 25, 2005. Available on World Wide Web at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/sciencenow/3204/01.html>. Though the recent scientific research is based on visual observation of actions, it is likely that visual imagination of an action while hearing accounts on the radio or reading print accounts would generate the same effect.

human urges in settings which do not pose a threat to a given social order.⁹⁷

In this way Chocolate allowed Cubans to give vent to frustrations vis-à-vis the United States that could not have been expressed in other ways without dangerous or undesirable consequences.

The controversial decisions against Chocolate over the course of his career also generated nationalist ire among Cubans. Cuban sportswriters at times highlighted the disadvantage that Chocolate had as a foreign boxer in the United States and how this status as a foreigner (particularly a non-white one) made it that much more difficult for him to win decisions in championship fights. As early as September 1929, before Chocolate had even made his first attempt to win a world championship, a columnist for *La Lucha* expressed doubt that Chocolate would ever win such a title because North American boxing officials above all wanted to make sure that “world championships were not held in foreign hands.”⁹⁸ Soon after his failed bid for the world lightweight title against Tony Canzoneri, sportswriter Adolfo Font declared that Chocolate “had been cheated out of a victory.” Font went on to note that the decision in favor of Canzoneri demonstrated “what we have said numerous times: that for a foreign boxer, especially one who is not blonde, to obtain a world title held by a [North American], he has to defeat his opponent by killing him.”⁹⁹

Fully aware of the nationalist currency that boxing championships held, Font

⁹⁷ John Sugden, *Boxing and Society: An International Analysis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 178.

⁹⁸ *La Lucha*, September 10, 1929, p. 7.

⁹⁹ *Heraldo de Cuba*, November 26, 1931, pp. 9-10.

noted that North Americans would not easily yield such currency to foreign boxers if they could at all manage to not do so. Weeks later *Heraldo de Cuba* declared, “the Kid carries an enormous handicap against him whenever he fights for a world title... all Cuban fans know that a Cuban boxer fights abroad with maximum disadvantage, and he can never win without [knocking out] his opponent.”¹⁰⁰ Like the African-American and Spanish-speaking North American press, Cuban journalists expressed considerable doubt about the supposed impartiality of judges who officiated championship fights that pitted foreigners against North Americans. These doubts stemmed from an awareness of the significance of world boxing titles and an understanding that North Americans shared this awareness and thus often engaged in unfair practices to keep these titles in North American hands.

Welcoming the Hero – The Homecomings of Kid Chocolate

Cuban awareness of the success that Chocolate had in the United States translated into impressive demonstrations of appreciation and enthusiasm upon some of his returns to Cuba after campaigns in the United States. The reception and adulation that Chocolate received in Cuba was often overwhelming. His first return to Cuba occurred on Christmas Day 1928.¹⁰¹ At the behest of *Bohemia* sports writer Lillo Jiménez, the public gave a huge reception to “the boy who [had] gained glory, standing, twenty thousand dollars, the prospect of a world championship, and a million loving hearts among the deities of Harlem.”¹⁰² Thousands of fans came to the dock to await the arrival of his steamship and greet him. The crowds had to be pushed back as Chocolate and Gutiérrez were escorted

¹⁰⁰ *Heraldo de Cuba*, December 22, 1931, p. 9.

¹⁰¹ *Diario de la Marina*, December 26, 1928, p. 15.

¹⁰² “Sports,” *Bohemia* 20 (December 30, 1928), p.52.

to an automobile which took them directly to the *Arena Colón*, where they received gold medals from the Cuban National Boxing Commission. Crowds followed the pair to the arena by car and on foot, “enveloping the heroes of the victorious day in a wave of noise.” One reporter tried to interview the two with marginal success, as the number of people seeking to greet them left them with virtually no time to engage in conversation. Just as they had when he left the pier, police escorted him from the arena to protect him from the crowd.¹⁰³ One week later a banquet attended by over one hundred people was held in honor of Chocolate and Gutiérrez in Central Havana, and an “immense multitude” also congregated outside the banquet doors to greet him.¹⁰⁴

Reactions to Kid Chocolate’s fight with Al Singer in 1929 provide the most telling example of the enthusiasm and excitement that he generated among Cubans. After the fight “Cuban fight fans were elated when the word was flashed . . . that Kid Chocolate won over Al Singer. . . . So popular is the Keed [sic] here, that a movement has been started by influential sportsmen to gather a fund for the purchase of a home or some other appropriate gift for the boy who has placed Cuba on the map.”¹⁰⁵ The existence of this movement is startling given the fact that Chocolate had just earned over \$40,000 for that one fight alone. One columnist urged readers to “receive [Chocolate] the way a compatriot who has done so much to hang our flag at the top of the flagpole of world popularity should be.”¹⁰⁶ Two days later, the Havana city council began plans to

¹⁰³ *Diario de la Marina*, December 26, 1928, p. 15.

¹⁰⁴ *Diario de la Marina*, January 4, 1929, p. 17.

¹⁰⁵ W.D. Ryan, “Kid Chocolate Developed Through Semi-Pro System,” *The Ring* 8 (October 1929), p. 37.

¹⁰⁶ *La Lucha*, August 30, 1929, p. 6.

organize an official homecoming for the victorious boxer.¹⁰⁷ A special welcoming committee composed of “prominent personalities from the... political, industrial, sporting and journalistic” sectors of Havana society, including a senator of the republic and four members of the Havana city council, was put together to organize the event.¹⁰⁸

Upon their return to Cuba one week after the fight, thousands of people again came out to give Chocolate and Gutiérrez a hero’s welcome. The two arrived in a hydroplane operated by Pan American Airways. For the second time in the history of the port, Havana Harbor was officially closed for a brief period of time in order to prevent a collision between the arriving plane and any boats. The movement of boats in the harbor was totally prohibited as the plane made its arrival. The first time this measure had been taken was when North American president Calvin Coolidge arrived in Havana the previous year to open the Sixth Pan American Conference.¹⁰⁹ Official measures not only put the return of Kid Chocolate on a par with a visit from a foreign head of state, but were also a testament to the engagement with the modern that Kid Chocolate represented. That Kid Chocolate had amassed enough wealth to return to Havana in the same manner as the president of the United States was a testament to his ability to access the modern through the consumption of material goods as well as cast Cuba as a progressive and modern nation through success in athletic competition.

In spite of the temporary closure of Havana Harbor, port officials anticipated that “a veritable cloud of boats” would sail out as soon as the hydroplane carrying Chocolate

¹⁰⁷ *La Lucha*, August 31, 1929, p. 1.

¹⁰⁸ *La Lucha*, September 6, 1929, p. 5; *Diario de la Marina*, August 30, 1929, p. 15; *Diario de la Marina*, September 3, 1929, p. 17.

¹⁰⁹ *La Prensa*, September 5, 1929, p. 5; *Diario de la Marina*, September 8, 1929, p. 15.

touched down. An “infinite number of barges” sailed out along the coast of the city beforehand for a chance to get a glimpse of the arriving plane. Fans crowded nearby streets in anticipation of its arrival.¹¹⁰ Though the plane was scheduled to land at about two in the afternoon, an “abundant” number of fans began to come out in the morning in order to position themselves in the “most strategic locations” for witnessing the arrival. Thousands of individuals crowded the esplanade and piers of the port, “standing in the crowd amidst the heat of the mid-day sun” in anticipation.¹¹¹ The crowds were so large that one pier collapsed under the weight of those who had come out to greet Chocolate. Several individuals were mildly injured as a result of the intense “tide of humanity” that crowded the scene, and at least three children were separated from their guardians in the commotion and had to be taken to a police station to be reunited with their parents.¹¹² Once the plane landed the police were “impotent to contain the multitude” that awaited the travelers as they were escorted into a car that took them to a reception at City Hall.¹¹³ Along the route, people stood on “balconies and rooftops” to greet and cheer the two heroes of the day.¹¹⁴ (See figures 3.2 and 3.3) Waiting at city hall were Mayor Miguel Mariano Gómez, the president of the city council, the president of the National Boxing Committee and the chief of the national police. Several speeches paying tribute to Chocolate and Gutiérrez were made,¹¹⁵ and the mayor presented the two with gold

¹¹⁰ *La Prensa*, September 9, 1929, p. 1.

¹¹¹ *Diario de la Marina*, September 8, 1929, p. 15.

¹¹² *Diario de la Marina*, September 8, 1929, p. 15.

¹¹³ *La Prensa*, September 9, 1929, p. 1.

¹¹⁴ *Diario de la Marina*, September 8, 1929, p. 19.

¹¹⁵ *Diario de la Marina*, September 8, 1929, p. 19.



Figure 3.2. The September 1929 Homecoming of Kid Chocolate to Havana – Image 1. This image appeared in the September 5 issue of *Carteles* magazine and would later be used for the cover of the inaugural issue of *Nocaut* magazine. Courtesy *Bohemia* Archives, Havana, Cuba.



Figure 3.3. The September 1929 Homecoming – Image 2. This image shows Chocolate struggling with the overwhelming crowds seeking to greet him. Courtesy *Bohemia* Archives, Havana, Cuba.

medals of recognition on behalf of the city council.¹¹⁶ The streets outside were full of people, and the room where the reception was held was filled to capacity. Also present were his mother and girlfriend, both of whom were presented with flowers by the welcoming committee. As Chocolate made his way into City Hall he was delayed by the sheer volume of fans that greeted him and sought to shake his hand. The president of the city council handed Chocolate and Gutiérrez copies of the resolution passed by the council that officially honored Chocolate for his achievement. Another member went on at length to express the sentiment that prompted the council to organize such a homecoming.

[We] adopted the resolution to render a public tribute of admiration to... Kid Chocolate and his intelligent manager... because they have demonstrated that one can struggle with dignity to accomplish valuable merit in the field of sports, where the attention of the world is so focused. It is said that not only Havana, but the entire republic vibrates with happiness at the triumph of Kid Chocolate and receives him with pride. I declare that Kid Chocolate and Pincho Gutiérrez are doing more to bring prestige to Cuba abroad than the numerous scholars and appointees who circulate in a variety of countries.¹¹⁷

From city hall Chocolate was taken to a champagne toast in his honor,¹¹⁸ and then carried on “the shoulders of the multitude, which cheered him incessantly,” back to the automobile in which he drove back to his home neighborhood of El Cerro.¹¹⁹ That night Gutiérrez and Chocolate made an appearance at a boxing program at the Miramar

¹¹⁶ “El Kid en la Habana,” *Carteles* 14 (September 15, 1929), supplement, pp. iii-iv; *La Prensa*, September 9, 1929, p. 1; *Diario de la Marina*, September 8, 1929, p. 15.

¹¹⁷ *Diario de la Marina*, September 8, 1929, p. 15.

¹¹⁸ *Diario de la Marina*, September 9, 1929, p. 19.

¹¹⁹ *La Prensa*, September 9, 1929, p. 1.

Garden, and the ovation by the crowd “was one for the ages.”¹²⁰

The subsequent month that Chocolate spent in Cuba was one of “feasts, banquets and other diversions” as the young athlete attended numerous events in his honor.¹²¹ Four days after his return to Havana he was presented with the featherweight championship of Cuba. The title was honorary in nature and given to Chocolate simply by virtue of the fact that he had “placed the name of [Cuba] in a prominent place through the brilliant labor realized in the United States.”¹²² Two days later the National Association of Veterans of Peace organized a tribute in his honor at the Payret Theater.¹²³ Official receptions were also held by the provincial cities of Camagüey and Cienfuegos, where large crowds also greeted him.¹²⁴ In Cienfuegos Chocolate was feted at a banquet with 200 guests and at a party hosted by the Afro-Cuban society *Union Cienfueguera*. Days later yet the *Union Fraternal*, another Afro-Cuban society held another banquet in his honor.¹²⁵ Two years later one observer would declare that “Kid Chocolate was received in Havana in a manner unlike anyone else in any era.”¹²⁶

Once Kid Chocolate won a world title in July 1931, the reaction among Cubans further highlighted the nationalist significance that his boxing career had assumed. As with previous high profile contests, updates on his championship fight with Benny Bass

¹²⁰ *Diario de la Marina*, September 8, 1929, p. 19.

¹²¹ *La Prensa*, October 22, 1929, p. 5.

¹²² *La Lucha*, September 11, 1929, p. 12.

¹²³ *Diario de la Marina*, September 13, 1929.

¹²⁴ *Diario de la Marina*, September 29, 1929, p. 21 and October 1, 1929, p. 16.

¹²⁵ *Diario de la Marina*, October 13, 1929, section 3, p. vi.

¹²⁶ *Heraldo de Cuba*, July 2, 1931, p. 13.

in the summer of 1931 were broadcast “round by round and blow by blow” on the radio.¹²⁷ Once Cuban radio stations announced the result, “thousands of souls went out into the streets and expressed their enthusiasm in various forms.” Spontaneous celebrations erupted in bars across the island.¹²⁸ The next day *El Mundo* declared, “[w]e have now finally succeeded in reaching the summit. We have now finally achieved complete success.”¹²⁹ The day after the fight the sports headline of *Diario de la Marina* read: “As of last night Cuba has a world champion in Kid Chocolate.”¹³⁰ Within days of the victory President Gerardo Machado sent a congratulatory telegram to Pincho Gutiérrez in New York communicating the sentiments of the “entire Cuban people” and commending the two for delivering to Cuba “such a distinguished tribute.”¹³¹

In addition to having been a symbolic champion for Cuba for almost three years, Kid Chocolate was now crowned world junior lightweight champion. Cubans would again be able to take pride in claiming a world champion, which they had not been able to do since José Raúl Capablanca lost his chess title in 1927. Jess Losada captured the excitement and significance of the champion’s latest triumph:

Chocolate is a world champion. He is the only world champion that Cuba has at this moment. We will feel overcome with jubilation, moved by the high distinction that the modest ebony athlete has brought to the reputation of Cuban sports.¹³²

¹²⁷ *Diario de la Marina*, July 15, 1931, p. 13.

¹²⁸ *Heraldo de Cuba*, July 16, 1931, p. 13.

¹²⁹ Quoted in Menéndez and Ortega, p. 78.

¹³⁰ *Diario de la Marina*, July 16, 1931, p. 15.

¹³¹ *Heraldo de Cuba*, July 18, 1931, p. 9.

¹³² Jess Losada, “Regresa nuestra campeón,” *Carteles* 17 (July 26, 1931), supplement, p. vii.

Heraldo de Cuba, followed suit, printing head shots of both Chocolate and manager Gutiérrez on its lead sports page with a caption that noted that Chocolate was “the first to bring to Cuba a world boxing championship.” Sports journalists were not the only ones to cast the significance of the victory in nationalist terms. Juan Domingo Roche, president of the Afro-Cuban society *El Magnetic Sport Club*, wrote a letter to *Heraldo de Cuba* announcing that the organization had held a small reception to toast the most recent accomplishment of “the pride of Cuba: our Kid.” Correspondents from cities across the country reported that the win had been received with “intense enthusiasm” not just by boxing fans, but the general public as well. Fans “covered the principal streets of the island in mass,” and various organizations held parties in honor of the “new champion and his efficient manager.”¹³³

The return of Chocolate to Cuba in the wake of winning the Junior Lightweight title was similar in nature to previous homecomings. In addition to the crowd that awaited his arrival at the pier, admirers came out onto the “entire shore” of Havana, including along the Malecón and other major piers along the edge of the sea to “salute the excellent Cuban boxer” as his steamship arrived.¹³⁴ As the ship pulled in, the crowd greeted Chocolate with “enthusiastic cheers.” On hand to greet him on shore were Marcos A. Llanera, the head of the Navy and aide to President Gerardo Machado, and Octavio Zubizarreta, Minister of the Interior.¹³⁵ A procession including numerous fans and

¹³³ *Heraldo de Cuba*, July 16, 1931, p. 13.

¹³⁴ *Heraldo de Cuba*, July 24, 1931, p. 4.

¹³⁵ The attendance of Machado himself may have well been precluded by more pressing concerns and the possible security risk of attending such a public celebration as political violence increased considerably over the course of 1931. According to *Heraldo de Cuba*, President Machado himself had a rather full day on July 24, 1931, the day after Chocolate’s return to Havana, most likely attending to the considerable political unrest that threatened the very existence of his regime. That day he met with the Chief of the

several cars loaded with musical ensembles followed the newly crowned champion on his route from the shore.¹³⁶ As he rode to the reception in his honor at the Pasaje hotel, Chocolate was cheered by an “immense human wave that did not want to miss the opportunity to demonstrate to the new champion the sympathies that our people hold for him.” Crowds of people gathered at a variety of central locations along the route and applauded him incessantly¹³⁷ Fans also awaited his arrival at his new home in Almendares, and the crowd there was so dense that he had difficulty getting through to his house from a full three city blocks away.¹³⁸

For the next few weeks a number of dinners and tributes were held to honor Chocolate and give the Cuban public a chance to show their appreciation for him. On August 1 Chocolate participated in a boxing exhibition and autographed photos for sale at an event sponsored by the Cojímar Yacht Club.¹³⁹ The occurrence of such an event at a Yacht club suggests that even elite Cubans, who normally might not even allow Afro-Cubans to socialize with them, saw Chocolate as a hero worthy of praise.¹⁴⁰ Soon

Army, the Secretary of War as well as the chiefs of the national and secret police. The last two individuals reportedly gave Machado an account of investigations conducted in the prior 48 hours and attested to an “absolute normality” in the neighborhoods of Havana. See *Heraldo de Cuba*, July 24, 1931, p. 1. On July 23, Machado was reportedly outside Havana. See *Heraldo de Cuba*, July 23, 1931, p. 1.

¹³⁶ *Heraldo de Cuba*, July 24, 1931, p. 4; *Diario de la Marina*, July 24, 1931, p.12.

¹³⁷ *Heraldo de Cuba*, July 24, 1931, p. 9.

¹³⁸ *Heraldo de Cuba*, July 24, 1931, p. 9.

¹³⁹ *Heraldo de Cuba*, August 1, 1931, p. 10.

¹⁴⁰ Elite social clubs, often referred to as Yacht or Tennis Clubs, regularly excluded Afro-Cubans from their property and social functions as a matter of policy during the republican era. See Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality and Politics in Twentieth Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), pp. 157-160 and pp. 268-272.

after that he appeared at an exhibition in the central Cuban town of Caibarién,¹⁴¹ where “large festivities” were held in his honor.¹⁴² As in December 1928 and September 1929, several Cubans across the country engaged in public demonstrations of their appreciation of and excitement for the achievements of the young boxer from Havana.

Redeeming the Republic – Kid Chocolate as a Compensatory Sports Hero

A major reason for his popularity in Cuba was the fact that Kid Chocolate provided a sense of hope and gratification at a time of deepening political and economic crisis. Historian Benjamin Rader describes Babe Ruth, Jack Dempsey and Red Grange as North American “compensatory sport heroes:” individuals who, through their achievement in the arena of athletics “served a compensatory cultural function.” Rader argues that as North American society grew more bureaucratic and systematized in the 1920s, “the need for heroes who leaped to fame and fortune outside the rules of the system seemed to grow.” In addition, Rader argues that boxing seemed to have the highest capacity to furnish compensatory heroes.¹⁴³ Less than two weeks after Kid Chocolate won his first world championship, the comments of one sportswriter would confirm that Kid Chocolate served this function for Cubans: “We are elated by [his achievement] since these days in Cuba we are left with very few instances of happiness.”¹⁴⁴

In the late 1920s and early 1930s Cubans had a great deal of use for a

¹⁴¹ *Heraldo de Cuba*, August 18, 1931, p. 10.

¹⁴² *Heraldo de Cuba*, August 21, 1931, p. 9.

¹⁴³ Benjamin G. Rader, “Compensatory Sport Heroes: Ruth, Grange and Dempsey,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 16 (Spring 1983), p 11.

¹⁴⁴ Losada, “Regresa nuestra campeón,” p. vii.

compensatory hero. The Great Depression “came early to Cuba,”¹⁴⁵ as plummeting sugar prices and competitive pressures in the global sugar market crippled an industry that had served as the island’s main economic engine for decades. Between 1920 and 1925 the price of sugar, the dominant export of the island’s economy, dropped over seventy-five per cent.¹⁴⁶ As a result, businesses failed, jobs disappeared, and personal income fell for large numbers of Cubans. Crisis in the sugar industry rippled throughout the economy as declining employment led to decreased consumption. All sectors of the economy suffered, as even government employees faced the prospect of salary cuts or discharge because of a decline in state revenues. By the late 1920s the economy was stagnant and poverty was spreading.¹⁴⁷

The onset of the worldwide depression compounded the situation and “wrought havoc on an already ailing Cuban economy.” Total sugar production dropped by sixty percent. By 1933, approximately 250,000 heads of households, representing approximately 1 million people out of a population of 3.9 million, were unemployed. Those who managed to keep a job still saw their incomes plunge. Wages dropped seventy-five percent for agricultural workers and fifty percent for workers in urban zones. Profits plummeted and business failures reached “record proportions.”¹⁴⁸ By one scholarly account the impact of the global downturn was more severe in Cuba than in any

¹⁴⁵ Pérez, *Cuba under the Platt Amendment*, p. 265.

¹⁴⁶ Brian H. Pollitt, “The Cuban Sugar Economy and the Great Depression,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 3, no. 2 (1984), p. 5.

¹⁴⁷ Pérez, *Cuba under the Platt Amendment* p. 265-269.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 279- 280.

other nation.¹⁴⁹

While economic decline posed a great challenge to hopes for Cuban development and consigned a large proportion of the population to poverty if not destitution, Kid Chocolate attained fame and fortune, seemingly immune to the maelstrom of crisis that surrounded him, generating national prestige and pride while gaining access to wealth and the consumption of goods that Cubans increasingly began to see as markers of modernity. Over the course of his career, Kid Chocolate earned a substantial amount of money, and this too was a significant factor in his popularity at home. *The Ring Encyclopedia and Record Book* estimates that over the course of his career in the United States he earned \$345,000.¹⁵⁰ Contemporary estimates place the total at \$475,000.¹⁵¹ Half of that sum was earned in only thirteen high-profile matches.¹⁵² The Cuban print media often reported the purses that Chocolate commanded for his bouts. By December 1928 one reporter estimated that he had managed to make \$20,000.¹⁵³ During that month alone he had earned \$7,000 over the course of 17 days.¹⁵⁴

The amount of money Chocolate earned became a topic for explicit speculation. Sportswriter Jess Losada opened one article by bluntly asking “How much capital does Kid Chocolate have? How much money has he earned? How much does Pincho have?”

¹⁴⁹ Jules R. Benjamin, *The United States and the Origins of the Cuban Revolution: An Empire of Liberty in an Age of National Liberation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 80.

¹⁵⁰ Nat Loubet and John Ort, *The 1978 Ring Boxing Encyclopedia and Record Book* (New York: The Ring Book Shop, 1978), p. 53.

¹⁵¹ Eladio Secades, “Hace diez años que Chocolate debutó como profesional,” *Bohemia* 29 (October 31, 1937), pp. 30, 48.

¹⁵² Eladio Secades, “Kid Chocolate hace mutis,” *Bohemia* 30 (December 25, 1938), p. 44.

¹⁵³ *Diario de la Marina*, December 22, 1928, p. 19.

¹⁵⁴ *Diario de la Marina*, January 5, 1929, p. 15.

Losada also helped put Chocolate's income in perspective by comparing it to the situation of a typical Cuban professional. After noting that Chocolate drew a three thousand dollar purse for one fight, Losada observed "Three thousand dollars is a lot of money for half an hour of work! A man with above average intelligence who has studied at university for six years and practiced his profession for several more would consider himself lucky to earn three thousand dollars in one year!"¹⁵⁵

Chocolate made so much money that he was able to visit Cuba "in the manner of a North American tourist."¹⁵⁶ In 1929 he had a \$25,000 mansion built in Havana.¹⁵⁷ Contemporary income figures for the average Cuban at this time can help put this wealth in perspective. In 1928, estimated annual per capita income in Cuba was \$164.¹⁵⁸ In 1929 cane cutters earned an average daily wage of \$1.60 while skilled laborers such as electricians and mechanics earned as little as thirty cents an hour.¹⁵⁹ By 1933, sixty percent of the Cuban population was subsisting at an annual income level of \$300 or less. Another thirty percent earned between \$300 and \$600 dollars annually.¹⁶⁰ Chocolate's ability to earn considerable wealth stood out at a time when many in Cuba struggled to make enough simply to survive.

This wealth translated into high-end material goods. From early on in his career, Chocolate used his monetary earnings to purchase fine clothing and other expensive

¹⁵⁵ Jess Losada, "Un relato asombroso," *Carteles* 18 (August 7, 1932), p. 38.

¹⁵⁶ Adolfo Font, "Los sports en Cuba en 1932," *Bohemia* 25 (January 1, 1933), p. 43.

¹⁵⁷ *Diario de la Marina*, March 5, 1938, p. 15.

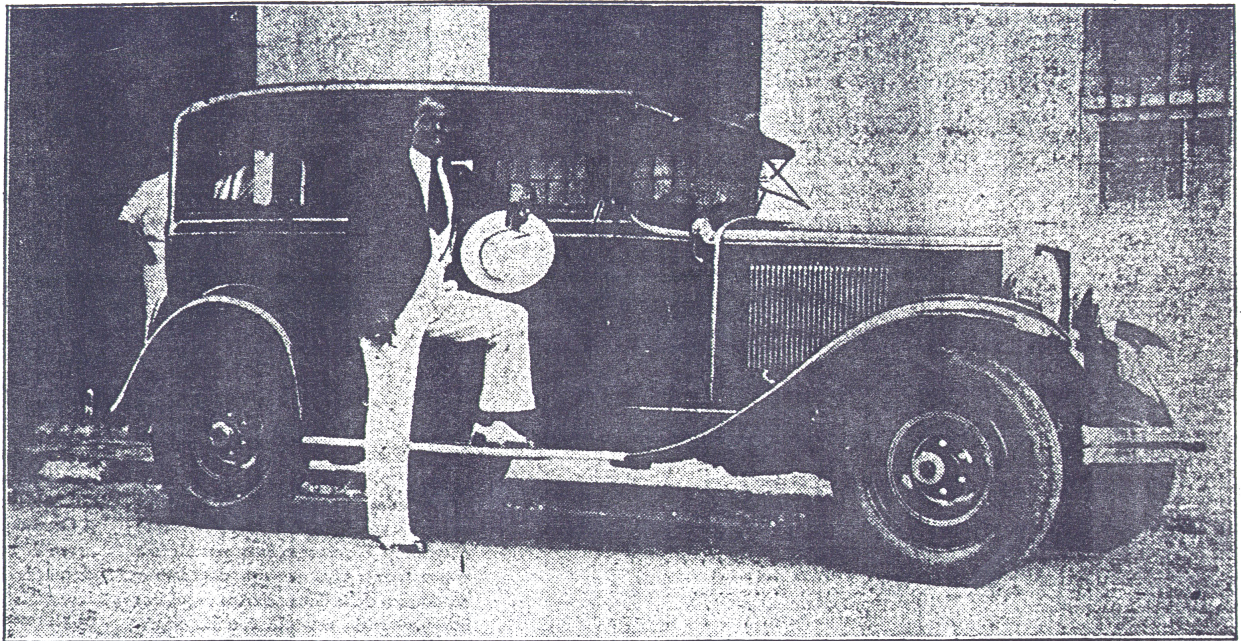
¹⁵⁸ Susan Schroeder, *Cuba: A Handbook of Historical Statistics* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982), p. 567.

¹⁵⁹ Schroeder, p. 190; Pérez, *Cuba under the Platt Amendment*, pp. 280.

¹⁶⁰ Pérez, *Cuba*, p. 191.

goods. According to one report, by the end of 1928 he had already bought fourteen custom tailored suits and spent three dollars a week straightening his hair.¹⁶¹ In October 1929, *Diario de la Marina* printed a captioned photo of Chocolate in front of a newly purchased luxury automobile, commenting, “[w]e *Habaneros* have already seen him driving in his precious Graham-Paige along the streets and avenues of the capital.”¹⁶² (See figure 3.4) An article in the inaugural issue of *Nocaut* magazine described Chocolate as “dressed impeccably in gray, giving the impression of an ebony ‘Beau Brummel.’ The

Kid *Chocolate* y su Nuevo Automóvil



El popularísimo boxer cubano, Kid Chocolate, invicto en los rings americanos adquirió recientemente un Sedán Graham-Paige convencido al vez que ninguno como él puede proporcionarle una aceleración y una rapidez tan extraordinaria como la que él desarrolla en el ring. Ya lo veremos los habaneros pasear en su precioso Graham-Paige por los paseos y avenidas de la Capital.

Figure 3.4. “Kid Chocolate and His New Car” from the October 6, 1929 issue of *Diario de la Marina*. Courtesy of Davis Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

¹⁶¹ *Diario de la Marina*, December 20, 1928, p. 17.

¹⁶² *Diario de la Marina*, October 6, 1929, p. 24.

part of his hair styled perfectly. His nails, immaculate, accustomed to the polishing stroke of the manicurist.” Further on the article noted, “[t]he Kid’s figure did not belie his profession, he looked more like an Abyssinian prince who had just been dressed by a tailor from London and was getting ready to tour the world.”¹⁶³ Another article catalogued how Chocolate spent his earnings: “On cars [he] has spent about \$20,000. On clothing (a wardrobe of 150 suits, 300 hundred shirts, 800 ties, numerous pair of socks and dozens of shoes, etc.) about \$25,000.”¹⁶⁴ The exact composition of his wardrobe was a constant source of speculation. One photo caption quoted Chocolate as saying “I have forty-five suits, two hundred shirts, thirty-five pairs of socks, sixty hats and only two world championships! This is intolerable! I need more championship [belt]s for my wardrobe!”¹⁶⁵ Chocolate was in fact well known for his wardrobe and style. In Cuba, as in the United States, his reputation as an impeccable dresser preceded him. He had first left Havana with “one suit, a ticket to New York and six dollars,” and within a year returned in possession of “a wardrobe replete with magnificent suits of Nile green, electric blue, canary yellow and similar colors that never failed to cause a deep impression among his admirers.”¹⁶⁶

The wealth and consumption that Chocolate engaged in and that was reported on extensively in the Cuban press resonated with some of the anxieties concerning the achievement of modernity and comfort that preoccupied many Cubans during the 1920s and 1930s. One significant result of the pervasive influence of North American culture in

¹⁶³ Losada, “Chocolate y Bass,” p. 6.

¹⁶⁴ Losada, “Un relato asombroso,” p. 38.

¹⁶⁵ “Feliz Año,” *Carteles* 19 (January 1, 1933), p. 38.

¹⁶⁶ *Diario de la Marina*, March 5, 1938, p. 15.

Cuba in the first half of the twentieth century was the continued aspiration of Cubans to achieve the material prosperity that seemed to characterize North American life. Material consumption and comfort were equated with modernity, and in the late 1920s and 1930s many Cubans aspired to the attainment of material comfort along the North American model, despite the economic dislocation that made such a course impossible for the vast majority. Kid Chocolate was one Cuban who had in fact been able to realize this aspiration. At his very first professional fight, Kid Chocolate appeared at the arena “in torn shoes, without a jacket and accompanied by a group of friends who were all poorly dressed.”¹⁶⁷ By the time he reached the prime of his career, he “drove the most expensive cars, wore the finest suits, and spent bank notes with both hands open and his eyes closed.”¹⁶⁸

Chocolate embraced this characterization as an ostentatious consumer. Shortly before his fight with Al Singer in which he would earn close to \$50,000, he declared, having already acquired a “magnificent automobile” in Havana, that he would use his earnings from the Singer fight to buy an airplane. Chocolate had reportedly taken quite an interest in the “art of Lindbergh” and expressed confidence that he would be “as good an aviator as he was a boxer.”¹⁶⁹ The claim by Chocolate borders on the absurd, but also highlights the connection between earning power, consumption and modernity that his persona represented. In the late 1920s an airplane was a consummately modern machine. That Chocolate, a former shoe shiner and paperboy who grew up in poverty, could amass

¹⁶⁷ Secades, “Kid Chocolate hace mutis,” p. 32.

¹⁶⁸ Secades, “Reacciona el deportismo cubano bajo nuevas esperanzas de gloria,” p. 26.

¹⁶⁹ *La Prensa*, August 28, 1929, p. 5.

enough prosperity to obtain such a commodity stood as a larger metaphor for the potential of Cuba to rise from relative poverty and supposed backwardness to a more advanced national condition. Kid Chocolate was a living example, however improbable that example might be, of the possibility of rising from the abject poverty that was reality for many Cubans to the luxury, wealth and modernity that the United States represented. His humble beginnings made him a representative of the “simple and painful life of our poor,”¹⁷⁰ and his ability to transcend that life contributed to his status as a national hero.

Kid Chocolate’s lucrative boxing career and ostentatious consumption were noteworthy precisely because he served as an actual example of a Cuban achieving material comfort through consumption. The proliferation of North American cultural forms in Cuba exposed Cubans to normative standards of material well-being that became increasingly difficult for them to attain in the 1920s and 1930s. These cultural forms “foster[ed] consumption patterns, and shape[d] popular tastes independent of the capacity of national structures to sustain the material base for these practices and preferences,” causing anxiety among Cubans who absorbed a clear vision of modernity and its basis on material comfort, but could not attain that modernity.¹⁷¹ As a general proxy for the Cuban nation, his ability to attain material goods served to compensate for the fact that the lifestyle he led was unavailable to the vast majority of Cubans. Ordinary citizens could take comfort in the fact that at least one Cuban had attained modernity through consumption.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ OsvaldoValdes de la Paz, “Kid, el soldado de Chocolate,” *Bohemia* 21 (September 8, 1929), p. 12.

¹⁷¹ Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*, p. 294.

¹⁷² For a discussion of the increased association between consumption, modernity and well being in Cuba in the 1920s see Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*, pp. 308-312.

The link between Kid Chocolate, his success in the United States and the attainment of material comfort and modernity are exemplified by his discussion of pasteurized milk in a September 1931 interview. Chocolate noted that milk was his favorite food but that “of course, I only drink pasteurized milk, since this is what doctors have advised me to do. The United States was where I learned to drink pasteurized milk.”¹⁷³ Through his success and travels in the United States, Chocolate was becoming familiar with more “modern” ways of being and in turn introducing these ways to Cubans. Moreover, Chocolate had a reputation for generously sharing his wealth. When he returned to Cuba in 1928 with an estimated \$20,000 in earnings, he reportedly gave all of his friends a “new and crinkly” \$10 note for Christmas.¹⁷⁴ One account estimated that Chocolate had given away \$2,000 to the poor of his home neighborhood of El Cerro after his first return from the United States.¹⁷⁵

One particular indication of the popularity Chocolate enjoyed in Cuba was the variety of offers for endorsement deals that he received. In the inaugural issue of *Nocaut* magazine, the Kid appeared on the inside cover in an ad for Kola Astier, a tonic that he recommended for “any athlete who wants to improve his physical condition.” (See figure 3.5) In subsequent issues of *Nocaut*, he also appeared in an ad for the Milk Company of Cuba; in which he again declared that he only drank pasteurized milk.¹⁷⁶ (See figure 3.6) Numerous other endorsements also appeared in the pages of *Diario de la Marina*. (See figures 3.7, 3.8 and 3.9) One endorsement belied the actual lifestyle that Chocolate led:

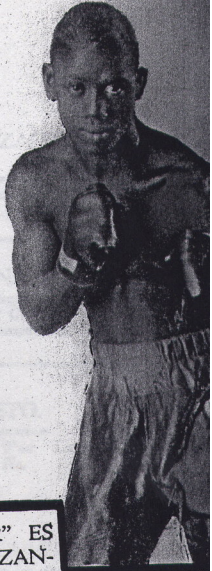
¹⁷³ Jess Losada, “El Kid Se Cuida: Una entrevista con Chocolate,” *Nocaut* 1 (September 1931), p. 29.

¹⁷⁴ *New York Times*, January 4, 1929, p. 4.

¹⁷⁵ *Chicago Defender*, January 12, 1929, p. 8.

¹⁷⁶ *Nocaut* 1 (August 1931), inside of front and back covers.

un testimonio d
KID
CHOCOLATE



LA "KOLA ASTIER" ES
 UN GRAN VIGORIZAN-
 TE. LA RECOMIENDO
 POR EXPERIENCIA PARA
 CUALQUIER ATLETA
 QUE DESEE MEJORAR
 SUS CONDICIONES FI-
 SICAS.

Kid Chocolate

Vino de Kola As
 exalta el vig
 físico y dis
 nuye el aho

DE VENTA EN TODAS LAS FAR

Figure 3.5. Advertisement for the Soft Drink *Kola Astier*. This advertisement appeared in the August 1931 issue of *Nocaut Magazine*. The caption states "Kola Astier is a great invigorator. I recommend it from experience for any athlete who wants to improve his physical condition." Courtesy of New York Public Library.

EL CAMPEÓN

El campeón de boxeo debe la destreza y efectividad de sus músculos a sus esfuerzos y habilidad para conservar una salud perfecta.

Quien come lo primero que le dan, ingiere alcohol, o no duerme de manera regular y suficiente, tiene una salud imperfecta y nunca será campeón de nada.

El campeón selecciona cuidadosamente lo que come.

Ingiere productos frescos que llevan vida a su organismo.

Toma la leche pasteurizada.

El agua, debidamente filtrada.

Es decir, evita por todos los medios la contaminación que destruiría su salud, clave y sostén de sus éxitos.

Todas las personas no pueden ser campeones, pero sí podrían ser fuertes y saludables como un campeón, si se alimentaran consciente y metódicamente.

Tome mucha leche, por ejemplo, pero tome leche buena, EXIJALA PASTEURIZADA, como hace el campeón, cerciórese de que procede de una buena planta. Haga lo mismo con todo lo que come y sentirá en su salud los resultados.



El campeón junior-ligero del mundo Kid Chocolate ingiriendo leche pasteurizada, su alimento predilecto.



Tome solamente LECHE PASTEURIZADA, el más sano, el más poderoso y el más completo de todos los alimentos. ES LA MEJOR GARANTIA PARA SU SALUD

Figure 3.6. Advertised Endorsement for Pasteurized Milk. This advertisement appeared in the September 1931 issue of *Nocaut* magazine. Courtesy New York Public Library.

¡GANÓ CHOCOLATE...!



Tenia que ser porque en su training tomó siempre

Trimalta

EXTRACTO TRIPLE DE MALTA

DÁ FUERZA Y VIGOR



Cía CERVECERA INTERNACIONAL S.A.

Figure 3.7. Advertisement for the Beverage *Trimalta*. This advertisement appeared in *Diario de la Marina* on August 31, 1929, two days after Chocolate defeated Al Singer at the Polo Grounds. The text declares: "Chocolate won! This had to be since in his training he always takes Trimalta: It provides strength and vigor." Courtesy Davis Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.



Figure 3.8. Advertisement for *Tropical Beer*. On September 7, 1929, *Tropical* beer ran an announcement in *Diario de la Marina* congratulating Chocolate for his "pugilistic triumphs." Courtesy of Davis Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

KID CHOCOLATE EN GUANABACOA



*He venido a visitar
La Fabrica De Champán
para pasar este
mi Refresco predilecto
Elijio Sardinias
Kid Chocolate*

**Autógrafo del gran boxeador, el cual nos honra
Haga lo que él, tome siempre**

CHAMPAN SPORT

IDEAL REFRESCO DE JUGOS DE FRUTAS

Figure 3.9. Advertisement for the Soft Drink *Champán Sport*. This ad appeared in *Diario de la Marina* on September 30, 1929 and claimed that while Chocolate visited the town of Guanabacoa, he stopped by the *Champán Sport* bottling plant because *Champán Sport* was his favorite soft drink. Courtesy of Davis Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

“He who . . . ingests alcohol or does not sleep regularly and adequately will never be champion of anything. The champion selects carefully what he eats. . . . He avoids by all means contaminations that would destroy his health, the key to and support of his success.”¹⁷⁷ Not even North American sporting heroes were making similar appearances in print advertisements.

Cuban sportswriters also saw practical material benefits to be gained from the success Chocolate achieved in the ring. In early 1929, one writer noted that his fame could bring something more tangible than international prestige to Cuba when he proposed that Chocolate could be used as a tourist attraction. This writer proposed scheduling a fight in Cuba with a leading contender to stimulate international interest in coming to Cuba to see the fight, framing the suggestion in the context of the tumult that characterized the sugar market at this time. “If our first *zafra* [sugar harvest] is in critical condition, for a variety of reasons, should we not devote more attention to what is justly called our “second *zafra*?”¹⁷⁸ Others concurred: “We are precisely in a time when our capital needs entertainment to revitalize it. Tourists will not come only, as many think, to enjoy the incomparable delights of don Emiliano [Bacardi]. . . . [Those delights] would be much [more appealing] if they were part of a magnificent sports schedule.”¹⁷⁹ Another added that the Tourist Commission should have devoted more energy to setting up a championship bout for Chocolate in Havana, adding “what a shame that the [National Boxing] Commission did not ask any random visiting North American: ‘which

¹⁷⁷ Advertisement for Pasteurized Milk, *Nocaut* 1 (October 1931), inside back cover. See chapter five for a full discussion of this lifestyle and the impact it had on his athletic career.

¹⁷⁸ B. Jiménez Perdomo “La Habana, trampolín del turismo; no meca,” *Bohemia* 21 (February 24, 1929), p. 50.

¹⁷⁹ *La Lucha*, January 3, 1931, p.7.

boxer would you like to see in action here [in Cuba]? Because the answer would infallibly have been ‘The Chocolate Kid . . . he’s the best one.’”¹⁸⁰

Increasingly writers pointed to sporting events as a means of promoting tourism on the island. One editorialist noted that a number of individuals had advocated that the Cuban Tourism Commission find ways to support the professional Cuban baseball league,¹⁸¹ such was the association of sport and tourism. Pincho Gutiérrez himself on at least one occasion sought to enter into a business venture to bring “the best North American boxers” to Cuba to engage in high profile bouts, with hopes that such an enterprise would attract travelers during the high tourist season.¹⁸² Through the association of sport and Kid Chocolate with tourism, journalists and others sought to leverage his celebrity to accrue some of the wealth generated by Chocolate to the rest of the country.

In addition to a deteriorating economy, Cubans confronted an increasingly unstable and violent political situation as Kid Chocolate pursued his career in the United States. Violating the tacit understanding that precluded re-election in republican Cuba, President Gerardo Machado engaged in a campaign of manipulation, intimidation and bribery to secure re-election in 1928 to a six-year term as an uncontested candidate.¹⁸³

¹⁸⁰ Jiménez “The Chocolate Kid; he’s the best one!” p. 49. While this article was written in Spanish. The title was printed in English as indicated, further testifying to the cultural influence of the United States in Cuba, particularly in sports.

¹⁸¹ *Heraldo de Cuba*, November 23, 1931, p. 9.

¹⁸² *La Prensa*, October 24, 1929, p. 5.

¹⁸³ Pérez, *Cuba Under the Platt Amendment*, pp. 272-276; Jules Benjamin, “The *Machadato* and Cuban Nationalism, 1928-1932,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 55, no. 1 (February 1975), p. 67; Luis E. Aguilar, *Cuba 1933: Prologue to Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1972), pp. 61-67 and pp. 89-90.

As a result, Machado began his second term “under the pall of unconstitutionality.”¹⁸⁴ His political maneuvers coupled with deteriorating economic conditions to provoke opposition in various sectors of the population. At first political opposition was limited to university students, organized labor and a small group of anti-Machado politicians,¹⁸⁵ and as late as the end of 1929, Machado had “full control of the national situation.”¹⁸⁶ The situation changed dramatically over the course of 1930. In September a demonstration by students at the University of Havana resulted in a clash with police. The resulting violence resulted in injuries to students and policemen and the death of one student. In response “manifestations of protest and proclamations of solidarity” with the students “poured from every corner of the island.”¹⁸⁷ Opposition to the regime began to spread beyond the limited sectors of students and labor. In October the government suspended constitutional guarantees in the province of Havana, and in November it declared a state of siege throughout the island.¹⁸⁸

By the summer of 1931, Cuba was “seething with rumors of an imminent revolution,”¹⁸⁹ and “open warfare” had broken out, as repression by the regime was countered with increasingly violent responses from the opposition, which used assassinations, bombings and sabotage and made every member of the government a

¹⁸⁴ Pérez, *Cuba Under the Platt Amendment*, p. 276.

¹⁸⁵ Aguilar, p. 94.

¹⁸⁶ Aguilar, p. 88.

¹⁸⁷ Aguilar, p. 103. Jaime Suchiliki agrees that the violent repression of the September 1930 student demonstration marked a turning point in the anti-Machado opposition, as a movement previously dominated by students broadened to other sectors of society. See Suchiliki, pp. 101-102.

¹⁸⁸ Pérez, *Cuba under the Platt Amendment*, p. 283.

¹⁸⁹ Aguilar, p. 113.

potential target. Both parties to the conflict resorted to “escalating deeds of violence and blood”¹⁹⁰ Military units “in full combat dress” assumed police functions throughout the provinces, while armed opposition bands ambushed trains, cut telephone and telegraph wires and attacked isolated Rural Guard outposts. Military authorities replaced civilian institutions, periodicals were closed and editors arrested, and military censors supervised the editorial boards of newspapers and magazines. Cuba assumed “the appearance of an armed camp.” Machado responded to political demonstrations with deadly force and the imprisonment of opposition political leaders.¹⁹¹ The government organized a secret police force and regularly used torture in its efforts to suppress the opposition. The arrest and harassment of government critics also became routine. The situation persisted until August 1933 when North American diplomatic pressure and defections among the army and formerly pro-Machado political elements finally resulted in the departure of Machado from the island and the inauguration of a new president.¹⁹²

In a seeming attempt to leverage the popularity of Chocolate to counter the considerable political unrest that characterized Cuban society by the summer of 1931, the pro-Machado *Heraldo de Cuba* emphasized the potential that his post-championship celebration had to serve as a unifying event for Cubans. Expressing confidence that Havana fans would appear in considerable numbers to pay tribute to “the beloved compatriot who has done more, much more, for his land than the majority who speak

¹⁹⁰ Pérez, *Cuba*, pp. 195-196.

¹⁹¹ Pérez, *Cuba under the Platt Amendment*, pp. 282-284.

¹⁹² Pérez, *Cuba*, pp. 196-200.

daily of patriotism,” on the day of Chocolate’s arrival the paper announced that “representatives of all social classes” were expected to participate:

No one can stay in their home. All, without distinction of race, beliefs or political leanings, are to come to the Arsenal pier to eloquently express how proud they are to have [Chocolate] as a compatriot.

From the upper-crust gentleman who parades in a luxurious auto...to the humble worker dressed in classic overalls; from the high official to the most humble soldier, everyone, absolutely everyone; habaneros will congregate at the pier to pay tribute to the Kid.¹⁹³

At least for the editors of *Heraldo de Cuba*, a celebration of the accomplishments of Kid Chocolate could help provide a unifying national event at a point in time when Cuban society and political institutions seemed to be dangerously fraying at the edges.¹⁹⁴

The variety of congratulatory events notwithstanding, there is evidence to suggest that popular reaction to Kid Chocolate’s victory in 1931 may not have been as enthusiastic as the response to his defeat of Al Singer in 1929, and this more muted general popular response may have been due to the violence related to increased opposition to the Machado regime. Two weeks before the fight *Heraldo de Cuba* lamented “we don’t know for what reason Cuban fans... have not yet stopped to think... about the importance for our future sporting life” that the fight with Bass would have. Recalling the grand reception that the Kid received in 1929, the paper decried the fact that “a large part of the fandom, referring to the great champion say ‘he’s now history.’” It went on to opine that “Cuban fans tire quickly of their idols” and rhetorically asked “Kid Chocolate... will have a new chance to crown himself with a world title... is this

¹⁹³ *Heraldo de Cuba*, July 23, 1931, p.9.

¹⁹⁴ *Heraldo de Cuba* had a reputation as a pro-Machado media outlet, which helps to explain some of its exhortations to fans to show their national pride and cheer Kid Chocolate as the intensity of political violence in Cuba increased. In August 1933, *Bohemia* magazine described the newspaper as “the disgusting gazette of Machadismo.” *Bohemia* 25 (August 20, 1933), p. 42.

not enough to enliven the enthusiasm of the masses?”¹⁹⁵ This seeming decline in interest may have been to the fact that by the summer of 1931 Cubans had considerably more serious issues on their minds.

The attention to boxing that Kid Chocolate helped to stimulate in Cuba prompted one writer to liken the political crisis engendered by Machado’s machinations to remain in power to competition for a boxing championship. One week before Chocolate won the world junior lightweight title, Jess Losada wrote a piece for *Bohemia* magazine, titled “Ring Político: El Campeonato Nacional.” Referring to the president as “Kid Machado,” Losada noted that Machado “does not want to let go of the title belt, he has gone six years without defending the title in spite of the fact that the sporting press and public opinion have indicated a number of contenders worthy of challenging the pugilistic marvel who is in decline.” Losada compared Machado to current heavyweight champion Max Schmelling, noting “both won their title through a foul and have extended their pugilistic reign without giving a chance to legitimate contenders.” Losada went on, “Schmelling at least, has signed to defend his title against [Young] Stribling in July. But the national heavyweight champion Kid Machado insists on declaring to sportswriters that he does not have any challengers at the moment and that a fight against a Cuban opponent would not be a box office success.” “Kid” Machado had declared that “he was in excellent condition and there is not a single Cuban who would last a round [against him]. ‘There is no public interest for a championship fight,’ says the Kid, ‘and furthermore the fans are currently going through a very acute crisis’ referring to the economic crisis which Machado used to justify the extension of his mandate. Losada continued his parody by noting that for

¹⁹⁵ *Heraldo de Cuba*, July 2, 1931, p. 13.

boxing experts who know when a boxer is deteriorating, “it is no secret that Kid Machado has ceased to be a marvel of the ring.”

Losada pointed to one challenger, Battling Mendieta [a reference to Carlos Mendieta, head of the anti-Machado political party *La Asociación Unión Nacionalista*], who was sure to defeat Machado in a bout if given the chance. “Vedado Jack” Menocal [a reference to former president Mario Garcia Menocal, who also opposed Machado’s presidency by July 1931] was described as a sparring partner of Battling Mendieta who considered Kid Machado to be an illegitimate champion. Losada went on to propose a number of bouts that could serve as preliminaries to the main event between Machado and Mendieta, referencing several Cuban politicians. The winner of the main bout was to receive a trophy donated by the “Reforming Club,” an institution that sought to “reform the new rules of boxing and reestablish the old rules of the Marquis of Queensbury,” a goal worthy of the “support of all conscientious boxers.”¹⁹⁶

The satirical piece was a thinly veiled call for an opening of the political process that Machado had closed down through political manipulation and repression. While the threat of censorship may have precluded a direct critique of the political actions of the Machado regime, the notion of athletic competition as a fair and open arena where all had the opportunity to compete provided a normative metaphor for how the political arena in Cuba should function. Just as Kid Chocolate had the opportunity to demonstrate Cuban capability through participation in the meritocratic sphere that sport was understood to be, Cuban politicians should also be given the proverbial shot at the title, and Kid Machado, who was obviously past his prime, was encouraged to yield to notions of

¹⁹⁶ Jess Losada, “Ring politico: El campeonato nacional,” *Bohemia* (June 7, 1931), pp. 40-41, 43.

sportsmanship and fair play by competing with worthy contenders.

The way in which President Machado extended his time in power most certainly caused Cubans to question their ability to execute peaceful political transitions and adhere to a progressive or developed ideal of modern liberal democracy. Athletic competition had become such an accepted metaphor for modernity and progress, that at least one sportswriter felt comfortable invoking it as a means of critiquing the current state of Cuban political affairs. Moreover, while Cubans were forced to contemplate the lamentable state of political affairs in their country, they could at least keep in mind the hope provided by Kid Chocolate that success in the modern world of athletic competition provided hope for success in other spheres of modern activity, such as electoral politics. While supporters of Machado looked to the Kid as a means of manipulating nationalism for the sake of supporting the regime, opponents seemed to look to his career and the significance of sport more generally as an indicator that he should step down. At a time of growing uncertainty and consternation regarding the young republic's ability to fully take its place among the community of sovereign nations, Kid Chocolate provided the hope that full sovereignty and nationhood was within reach of the young republic, at least in the realm of representation.

Chapter 4: The *Negrito* as National Hero: The Cultural Politics of Racial Inclusion in Republican Cuba

In the late 1920s and early 1930s a significant shift occurred in the way Cubans related race to national self-imagining. Increasingly, more optimistic and positive views of African-derived cultural forms began to take hold among intellectuals. The *afrocubanismo* movement engendered a reassessment of Afro-Cuban culture and its relation to Cuban national identity.¹ By the end of the 1920s, “long-standing biases against Afro Cuban street culture” were being aggressively challenged by “a younger generation seeking new modes of nationalist expression.”² Through the *afrocubanismo* movement, African-ness was co-opted into a reformulation of Cuban-ness while the issue of racism and racial inequality within Cuban society was de-emphasized. Artistic leaders of this new movement “disseminated musical works that depicted Afro Cubans as an important part of the nation, even as social reality continued to demonstrate their subjugation and exploitation.”³ African cultural forms were deployed to assert a new formulation of Cuban national identity while the nationalist ideology of a raceless nation discouraged substantive discussions regarding racial inequality in Cuba.

The emergence of a national hero of unmistakably African descent highlighted

¹ Perhaps the most complete study of the *afrocubanista* movement is Robin Moore, *Nationalizing Blackness: Afrocubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920-1940* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997). For a discussion of the ways in which *afrocubanismo* manifested itself in literary circles, see Vera Kutzinski, *Sugar's Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1993.), ch. 5.

² Moore, p. 116.

³ Ibid., p. 146.

this shift in the way race related to Cuban identity and nationalism. This chapter will examine what narratives constructed around the career of Kid Chocolate can tell us about the ways in which race and gender were implicated in the national project in pre-revolutionary Cuba. Rhetoric relating to the career of Kid Chocolate in the Cuban press largely mirrored a dominant discourse that emerged in the late 1920s whereby race was deployed as a means of affirming national identity and sovereignty relative to the outside world, especially the United States, while at the same time it was largely precluded from substantive discussions of Cuban society in a domestic context.

Anti-Racism as Nationalist Expression

Since his success in the United States formed the primary basis for interest in his career at home, coverage of Kid Chocolate gave Cuban journalists considerable opportunity to express their perception of race relations to the north. That perception was emphatically negative. Cuban journalists repeatedly used the career of Kid Chocolate as a means to highlight the racist nature of North American society. *Carteles* magazine observed that in order to fully apprehend the experience of “colored” boxers, it was necessary to “take into account a robust sociological factor that is observed in the United States . . . none other than racial prejudice. The man of color in the United States fights in a hostile atmosphere, thus his triumph must be based on extraordinary execution. The pugilist of color in North America must achieve twice or three times the effort of . . . the white boxer.” The magazine attributed the rise of black boxers like Chocolate to greed, declaring that the prejudice that had barred black boxers from big time boxing in the late teens and early twenties “continued as strongly as in the past. . . . It was only that the North American had learned to compromise his absurd scruples when the Golden Fleece

showed its face.”⁴

Cuban journalists cast racial prejudice as a North American problem that Kid Chocolate transcended with his meteoric rise. They noted that he overcame “all the barriers of racial or national prejudice,” when he received acclaim from North American critics and fans.⁵ These North Americans, “because of the spell of the splendid demonstrations of the Cuban Negro [*del negrito Cubano*], have forgotten that he is black and that he is Cuban.”⁶ Chocolate “made his way through the unstoppable force of his muscles, his ability and his personality,” against “all obstacles and prejudices.”⁷ *Heraldo de Cuba* observed that through his success as well as his comportment as a “gentleman” in the United States, Chocolate had rendered forgotten “the racial prejudices that many men in the north feel by supposing – an absurd thought in a civilized country – that the pigments which color the skin create distinctions among human beings.” The paper condemned notions of racial hierarchy as uncivilized while consigning such notions to “many men in the north,” creating an understanding that racial prejudice was a distinctly North American problem.⁸ The popularity of Chocolate in the United States was all the more remarkable because North Americans were understood to be “so racist and nationalist.”⁹

⁴ Jess Losada, “Nubes oscuros sobre el boxeo,” *Carteles* 24 (September 1, 1935), p. 43.

⁵ “Chocolate y Berg, Goyito y Bianchi,” *Bohemia* 22 (August 3, 1930), p. 50.

⁶ Berny Jimmy, “Chocolate vencedor o vencido, es nuestro Chocolate,” *Bohemia* 22 (August 17, 1930), p. 49.

⁷ *Heraldo de Cuba*, July 23, 1931, p. 9.

⁸ *Heraldo de Cuba*, July 16, 1931, p. 14.

⁹ Jess Losada, “Chocolate vs. Kid Berg,” *Carteles* 16 (July 13, 1930), p. 42.

The racism of North American society could not always be completely overcome, however. Like the African-American and Latino press in the United States, the Cuban press often cast many of the close decisions against Chocolate in 1930 and 1931 as the product of racial or national bias. After his loss to Tony Canzoneri, *Heraldo de Cuba* declared its disagreement with the decision by observing, “Kid Chocolate, our great champion, was once again the victim of the prejudices of the American people.”¹⁰ Manager Pincho Gutiérrez agreed with this assessment, stating “again ethnic prejudices and the Saxon race have been influenced against us,” declaring that Chocolate’s loss was due “only and exclusively to the fact that the small ebony giant” was Cuban.¹¹ The comment by Gutiérrez seemed to indicate his belief that that the decision was due more to national rather than racial prejudice, though his reference to the ebony complexion of Chocolate suggests that he may have viewed Chocolate’s racial identity as significant in this instance as well.

In addition, the reference by Gutiérrez to the Saxon “race” also highlighted the multiple connotations that the term race could have in the sphere of athletic competition. Even if Chocolate’s identity as African-descended was not espoused as the explicit reason for his loss, observers still remarked on a racist motivation that was in part based on supra-national categories such as Saxon that were themselves understood to be racial. Like the New York newspaper *La Prensa*, the Cuban press also spoke of a “Hispanic race” and its athletic representatives, noting that Kid Chocolate was one of several athletes who “brought prestige to hispano-American bravery in the Anglo-Saxon

¹⁰ *Heraldo de Cuba*, November 21, 1931, p. 9.

¹¹ *Heraldo de Cuba*, November 21, 1931, p. 9.

arena.”¹² Categories like Hispanic and Saxon or Anglo-Saxon formed supplemental racial categories that were based on a hybridization of race and nation and indicated the fluidity of the category of race beyond the more conventional categories such as white or black. Through such supplemental categories the association between racial hierarchies and national hierarchies became most apparent. Narratives constructed around the career of Kid Chocolate demonstrated the ways in which Cubans cast racist thought as a problem to be confronted with respect to Cuba’s subordinate status internationally. They understood that North American racism not only affected individuals of African descent, but also cast all Cubans as racially inferior.

Narratives in the mainstream press with regard to Chocolate’s experiences in the United States confirm the view held by many Cubans that, unlike Cuban society, North American society was decidedly racist. The perception held by many Cubans of their own country as one characterized by racial fraternity was based in part on an understanding of the United States as a counterpoint, a society where prejudice and racial conflict prevailed. The negative portrayal of North American race relations helped to sustain an image of Cuba as a society characterized largely by racial fraternity. Cuban sportswriters, by highlighting North American racism, made an implicit statement that such racism did not occur in Cuba and that thus Cuba did not have a race problem. Also understood in such portrayals of race relations in the United States was the notion that Cuba was more progressive in these matters, and thus more modern. Thus in at least one sense Cubans could imagine their country as more advanced than the United States.

The rise of the *afrocubanismo* movement was in part a reaction to the fact that

¹² José Juan Tablada, “La rapsodia de Kid Chocolate,” *Bohemia* 21 (June 2, 1929), p. 26.

North American culture, as well as the degree it had penetrated Cuban society, came to be viewed with suspicion by the late 1920s.¹³ It was thus also an attempt to counter North American hegemony in Cuba (cultural, as well as political and economic) and the racist ideology that served to justify that hegemony. Alejandro de la Fuente has noted the historical links between Cuban anti-racism and anti-imperialism, noting that the *afrocubanista* movement emerged as a means of validating Cuban nationality. If Cuba was “condemned because it was black,” as many posited in the first few decades of the twentieth century, then the *afrocubanista* movement was in part a movement to “vindicate blackness as a means of saving Cuba.”¹⁴ By the early 1930s racism became associated with “the social groups who benefitted from and were allied with North American interests in Cuba,” and conversely the struggle for national sovereignty and anti-racism also became closely linked in the minds of many Cubans.¹⁵ A nationalist anti-racism emerged in Cuba in direct counterpoint to North American racism and its neo-colonialist implications. Thirty years after U.S. officials closely linked race and nation to enforce a dependent status on Cuba, Cubans revived that link in a celebration of nationalist defiance of North American supremacy.

The emergence of nationalist anti-racist discourse did not, however, necessarily mean that racist practices within Cuban society would be addressed. Indeed, the nationalist anti-racism of the 1920s was based in large part on an understanding that

¹³ Moore, p. 120.

¹⁴ Alejandro de la Fuente, “‘Antídotos de Wall Street’: Raza y racismo en las relaciones entre Cuba y los Estados Unidos,” in *Culturas encontradas: Cuba y los Estados Unidos* ed. Rafael Hernández and John H. Coatsworth (Cambridge: David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, Harvard University, 2001), p. 246.

¹⁵ *Ibd.*, pp. 248-250.

because North American racism helped form the basis for North American neo-colonial dominance in Cuba, it was the most significant form of racism with which Cubans needed to be concerned.¹⁶ While internal racist practices persisted in Cuban society, they existed alongside an externally oriented anti-racism that served a nationalist goal of undermining the rationale for North American hegemony and strengthening claims for Cuban sovereignty. An externally oriented anti-racist ideology emerged in Cuba to counter anxieties about the feasibility of Cuban nationhood while the denial or elision of racial inequality within Cuban society allowed the continued existence of that inequality.

Kid Chocolate's success in international boxing heightened the association between anti-racist thought and Cuban nationalism. The way Cuban sportswriters discussed the racial identity of Kid Chocolate exemplifies how Cubans increasingly began to deploy the concept of race as it related to Cuban identity relative to the outside world rather than discussing the significance of race within Cuban society. His physical appearance meant Cubans could deploy his athletic accomplishments as a means of countering racist notions that suggested that Cuba was incapable of development while still allowing Cubans to respect the taboo of not engaging in the divisive discourse of race when discussing domestic conditions. Thus his career assumed a significance that it could not have done if Kid Chocolate were a white boxer who had achieved the same success. Through him, Cubans would be able to cite evidence that they did in fact compare favorably with other racial or national groups, and that the large proportion of

¹⁶ Etienne Balibar asserts that there is not "merely a single invariant racism, but a number of *racisms*." One formulation he devises to distinguish among different racisms is that of theoretical or doctrinal racism and spontaneous racism or racial prejudice. He also dubs these two types as institutional and sociological racism, arguing that "[t]he alternative between institutional and sociological racism arms us not to dismiss as negligible the differences which separate the presence of racism *within the state* from an (official) state racism." Etienne Balibar, "Racism and Nationalism" in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* ed. By Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 38-41.

Cubans of African descent did not condemn the island to backwardness and dominance by other nations. Cuban media outlets could highlight a champion who was an indicator of Cuban fitness and worth as well as a direct refutation of the racist theories that might undermine this Cuban claim to fitness.

Blackness and Cubanness

Because of his status as a national hero, it was Kid Chocolate's capacity to unite Cubans in a nationalist fervor rather than his potential to divide them along racial lines that was emphasized in the press. The mainstream Cuban press rarely, if ever, posited any distinct racial identity for him that was at odds with his national identity. In popular magazines like *Bohemia* and *Carteles*, he was never identified as a representative of Afro-Cubans. His role as a champion related to Cuba as a whole. While sportswriters at times made note of the challenge his career posed to racial prejudice, it was almost always in the context of North American prejudice. This reticence to articulate a racial identity for Chocolate distinct from his national identity was consistent with the dominant discourse on race and nationality in Cuba at this time. Ostensibly, Cubans fancied their country a raceless nation, and had developed a "nationalist ideology of racial fraternity" that considered discussions regarding race divisive and discouraged them as unpatriotic.¹⁷ "The ideal of a racially integrated and harmonious nation did not reflect social realities accurately, but the idea itself was so strong as to impose its acceptance on all quarters of Cuban society, even the most reluctant ones."¹⁸ Thus it stood to reason that Cuban

¹⁷ Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality and Politics in Twentieth Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), p. 11.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

sportswriters never explicitly articulated a racial identity for Kid Chocolate, because true Cuban patriots did not see white Cubans or black Cubans, but only Cubans.

Nonetheless, Cubans were forced to confront the racial identity of Chocolate for two reasons, first was the fact that Cubans reading North American copy on the career of Kid Chocolate undoubtedly had to recognize his identification as black by the North American press. Cubans knew that in the United States his racial identity was at least as significant as his national identity. Cuban editors reprinted North American articles that identified Kid Chocolate as one of the great “colored” boxers of all time. They could not help but notice when North Americans compared him “with the best boxers of the colored race.”¹⁹ After Chocolate won his first world title, *Heraldo de Cuba* printed a United Press article noting that Chocolate was the ninth individual “of color” to win a world boxing title.²⁰ When he challenged Tony Canzoneri for the lightweight title, another syndicated item noted that if he won he would be the first boxer “of color” since Joe Gans to be champion of the lightweight division.²¹ As they read North American copy to find out the latest news about their national idol, Cubans consistently absorbed the ways in which the North American press regularly identified Kid Chocolate in racial terms.

In addition, his physical appearance indicated that he was unmistakably of African descent, which made his racial identity difficult to ignore. But if mainstream Cuban sportswriters did not articulate a discrete racial identity for Kid Chocolate within the

¹⁹ Eladio Secades, “Hace diez años que Chocolate debutó como profesional,” *Bohemia* (October 31, 1937), p. 30.

²⁰ *Heraldo de Cuba*, August 5, 1931, p. 9.

²¹ *Heraldo de Cuba*, November 18, 1931, p. 9.

context of the salience of race in Cuban society, nor did they shy away from the physical features that indicated this identity. Writers constantly referred to his dark skin in their descriptions of his physique and appearance. He was described as “the modest ebony athlete,”²² an “ebony Beau Brummel,”²³ “a boxer with dark skin and a dark name,”²⁴ “the chocolate soldier”²⁵ and “an Apollo carved in ebony.”²⁶ Because Chocolate was unmistakably black, his success could be deployed to counter the notion that the African influence in Cuban society was precisely what held it back from achieving modernity and fitness for full sovereignty. This could be accomplished without writers having to explicitly address his race (outside of references to his physical appearance) thus allowing Cubans to confront this issue and still maintain a dominant discourse that painted Cuba as a race-less nation.

Far from content to rely on his appearance and very stage name as a constant reminder to fans of Kid Chocolate’s racial phenotype, Cuban sportswriters repeatedly used the word “*negrito*” when referring to him, employing phrases such as “*el negrito cubano*”²⁷ and “*el simpático [agreeable] negrito*”²⁸ on a regular basis. As early as October 1927, eight months before Chocolate even made his first trip to the United States, *El Mundo* called him the “smiling negrito” while reporting on his first fight with

²² Jess Losada “Regresa nuestra campeón,” *Carteles* 17 (July 26, 1931), supplement p. vii.

²³ “Galería deportiva,” *Carteles* 17 (August 23, 1931), p. 40.

²⁴ Jess Losada “Un relato asombroso,” *Carteles* 18 (August 7, 1932), p. 38.

²⁵ Osvaldo Valdés de la Paz, “Kid, el soldado de chocolate,” *Bohemia* 21 (September 8, 1929), p.32.

²⁶ Jess Losada, “Una entrevista a larga Distancia con “Pincho” Gutiérrez,” *Carteles* 14 (July 28, 1929), p. 38.

²⁷ Jess Losada, “Kid Chocolate en una crisis saludable,” *Carteles* 16 (November 16, 1930), p. 18.

²⁸ “Del momento sportivo,” *Bohemia* 20 (March 11, 1928), p. 55.

Johnny Cruz.²⁹ After the fight, *El Mundo* referred to him as “a *negrito* who had been in the ring since he knew how to walk.”³⁰ In reporting on his second fight with Cruz, *Diario de la Marina* described him as “the immense *negritillo*” and “the marvelous *negrito*.”³¹ One month later the same paper referred to him as the “happy *negrito*.”³² By the spring of 1928 *Diario de la Marina* had dubbed him “*el negrito del Cerro*,”³³ a nickname that referred to the El Cerro section of Havana where he grew up, and would stay with him in Cuba through the duration of his career. “*El negrito del Cerro*” became a well-established nickname for Kid Chocolate, used regularly in headlines and articles in newspapers such as *Diario de la Marina*, *El Mundo* and *Heraldo de Cuba* as well as popular magazines such as *Bohemia* and *Carteles*.

The very term *negrito* exemplified the tension between national and racial identity that sports writers engaged when writing about Kid Chocolate. *Negrito* was rarely, if ever, used in the Cuban press to refer to African descended peoples from the United States. For example, when African-American Chick Suggs fought Kid Chocolate in 1929, *Diario de la Marina* referred to Suggs on two separate occasions as “the American boxer of the colored race,” eschewing the term used regularly to refer to Chocolate.³⁴ The *negrito* was a racialized character but also a distinctly national type. *Negrito* referred distinctly to black Cubans, and a certain subset of black Cubans at that,

²⁹ *El Mundo*, October 19, 1927, p. 26.

³⁰ *El Mundo*, October 23, 1927, p. 27.

³¹ *Diario de la Marina*, March 7, 1928.

³² *Diario de la Marina*, April 4, 1928, p. 16.

³³ *Diario de la Marina*, March 11, 1928.

³⁴ See *Diario de la Marina*, February 14, 1929, p. 18 and February 18, 1929, p. 17.

namely poor and uneducated blacks who were often seen as obstacles to Cuban modernity and development.³⁵ In an essay titled “Kid Chocolate o *El Negrito*” the magazine *Revista de Avance* articulated the meaning of *negrito* for Cubans in the 1920s and 1930s. The *Negrito* was:

[t]he one who loitered in the lot and ran errands... who played baseball on the street corner. The one who sold newspapers, cleaned shoes, or loaded freight on the docks. *El Negrito*, the mischief-maker on the loose, the familiar denizen... tied umbilically to our old domestic institution, as yet still not free from memories of slavery.³⁶

By calling Kid Chocolate *negrito*, Cuban journalists emphasized his Cuban-ness with the very term they used to indicate his racial phenotype. Nonetheless some Afro-Cubans found the term to be denigrating when used in reference to a grown man, as did columnist Gustavo Urrutia, who pointedly insisted that the term was derogatory, and that whenever some Afro-Cubans saw the term, they thought of “one of those little boys ... capable of any emotional and unthinking atrocity.”³⁷ Though it had the inclusionary effect of emphasizing Cubanness, *negrito* also had derogatory undertones. The term carried connotations of age and class as well as race, indicating a background of relative scarcity

³⁵ Recent scholarship has traced the category of the *negrito* as a distinctly national Cuban character type to specific forms of nineteenth century artistic expression. Jill Lane calls the *negrito* “the most popular stage character” in nineteenth century Cuba. She argues that from its inception the *negrito* was seen as more of a national than a racialized character. See Jill Lane *Blackface Cuba, 1840-1895* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), pp. 2-3. Robin Moore describes the theatrical *negrito* as “the comic black man.” The *negrito* “occupied the lowest social and cultural rung” his economic position was “tenuous at best,” his occupation was “subservient, criminal or nonexistent,” and he tended to be “lacking in cultural development.” He notes that as late as the 1920s the *negrito* was typically “depicted as a hustler, trying to cheat customers and making sexual advances to all *mulatas* and light-skinned women.” See Moore, pp. 42-47. Yeidy Rivero notes that the Cuban *negrito* character was a critical influence on Puerto Rican forms of blackface expression beginning in the late nineteenth and on into the twentieth century. See Yeidy M. Rivero, *Tuning Out Blackness: Race and Nation in the History of Puerto Rican Television* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), ch. 1.

³⁶ Francisco Ichaso, “Kid Chocolate o el negrito,” *Revista de Avance* 4 (June 15, 1929), p. 182.

³⁷ *Diario de la Marina*, November 17, 1928, p. 7.

and a tendency to engage in criminal or degenerate behavior.³⁸

Athletics held out the hope that the *negrito* could grow beyond his current condition. *Revista de Avance* declared “[t]he *negrito* becomes a man – he becomes black – and he becomes powerful – he becomes white – on the canvas of the ring.”³⁹ In the boxing ring the *negrito* had the potential to undergo a eugenic transformation. He could go from being a derided mischief-maker to a full man, and finally to a powerful man. Kid Chocolate provided an example for poor young Afro-Cuban men to engage in activities that fostered their own self-improvement and development while contributing in meaningful and positive ways to the nation-building project by bringing prestige to Cuba through athletic achievement. That improvement also served as a metaphor for the improved condition of the country as a whole. Because of the association between athletic achievement, masculine power and national and racial hierarchies that had become commonplace throughout the world, sport became an acceptable vehicle for self-improvement at both individual and collective levels. Historical circumstances and racial inequality had consigned Afro-Cubans and Cuba more generally to subordinate and inferior status, but sport held out the promise of improvement in that status.

Chocolate also stood as an example of the possibility of overcoming challenging conditions to achieve success in life. His success was valued all the more by Cubans because he had risen “from below... from the simple and painful life of our poor.” Despite economic scarcity, poor nutrition and a childhood surrounded by vice, he had

³⁸ Given his social background, Chocolate himself likely fit the description of the typical *negrito* when he started his career. This background and the fact that he first came to public attention as a boxer when he was, in fact, a boy, help to explain how the nickname became easily attached to Chocolate.

³⁹ Ichaso, p. 182.

managed to rise to the pinnacle of achievement and fame.⁴⁰ Chocolate provided an example for poor Cubans and Afro-Cubans of turning away from a life of degenerate and backward activities, but his success also provided a metaphor for Cuba more generally. His career provided hope that Cuba as a country could overcome difficult conditions to move beyond its relative state of poverty and backwardness to one of prosperity and modernity.

Through his success as an athlete Kid Chocolate helped to establish a niche for integrating Afro-Cuban men into the Cuban nation in a way that addressed anxieties that a significant population of color condemned Cuba to backwardness and dependence rather than civilization and modernity. Athletics helped to solve the problem that Cuban thinkers faced of integrating the African into a modern Cuba. The story of his rise and success held out the promise of improvement and advancement for someone poor and black. Sport became a means through which individuals of African descent (particularly men of African descent) could be transformed from agents that inhibited modernity and national development to agents that fostered it.

As a result, Chocolate became a role model for other young Afro-Cuban men. His fame spawned a number of boxers who took on the name of Chocolate, including *Chocolatico Habanero*,⁴¹ *Chocolate Reglano* (from the town of Regla), *Chocolate de Marianao* and *Chocolate Pinareño* (from the province of Pinar del Río).⁴² Young men were literally emulating Kid Chocolate, taking on his name and attempting to follow in

⁴⁰ Valdés de la Paz, p. 32.

⁴¹ *Heraldo de Cuba*, December 19, 1931, p. 9.

⁴² *Heraldo de Cuba*, December 8, 1931, p. 10.

his footsteps. Chocolate showed that sport was a means through which poor Afro-Cuban men could become part of a nationalist effort, exerting themselves physically in endeavors that proved Cuban capacity. One columnist proclaimed,

Kid Chocolate represents a most splendid, edifying, educating and transcendent example for all his compatriots, and most especially for his kind, black Cubans... He has placed himself at the summit of athletic glory... while other young Cubans of his age and environment think about the rumba and other pleasures that lower and denigrate the citizenry and lead them to degeneration. Is it not a highly patriotic lesson that this negrito from El Cerro has given us?⁴³

The column originally appeared in the regional newspaper *El Camagüeyano* but was reprinted in the *Diario de la Marina* column, *Ideales de una Raza*, suggesting a possible endorsement of such views by at least a portion of middle class Afro-Cubans.⁴⁴ Kid Chocolate provided an appealing alternative for those who were concerned about the supposedly degenerate and uncivilized activities engaged in by poor Cubans of color and the implications those activities had for Cuban society as a whole.⁴⁵ Another writer noted

⁴³ *Diario de la Marina*, September 15, 1929, section 3, p. vi.

⁴⁴ The column “*Ideales de una Raza*” first appeared in the conservative newspaper *Diario de la Marina* in 1928. Despite the fact that the Havana daily had supposedly banned the use of the word *negro* in its columns to preclude a discussion of race relations, Afro-Cuban architect Gustavo Urrutia had successfully proposed the project as a weekly column to the editorial board in April 1928. By November its popularity resulted in expansion to a full page in the Sunday edition. According to Rosalie Schwartz, the objective of the column was to “solidify a collective consciousness among Afro-Cubans, and then to explain the new mentality to Cuba’s white population.” Pedro Cubas adds that the section constituted a space whose principal reason for being was to “show the sociocultural advances of black and mulatto Cubans (as well as foreign ones) and promote a frank and open debate on race relations in Cuba.” See Rosalie Schwartz, “Cuba’s Roaring Twenties: Race Consciousness and the Column ‘Ideales de una Raza’” in *Between Race and Empire: African-Americans and Cubans before the Cuban Revolution*, ed. Lisa Brock and Digna Castañeda Fuertes (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), pp. 107-108 and Pedro Alexander Cubas Hernández, “Coloreando el juego: la información deportiva en ‘Ideales de una raza’ (1928-1931)” (Unpublished paper, Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Cultura Cubana Juan Marinello, Havana), p. 1.

⁴⁵ The mention of the rumba in the above quote suggests a disdain on the part of the writer for artistic expression of lower class Afro-Cubans. For a more detailed discussion of elite attitudes regarding the rumba and attempts to suppress musical activity of lower-class Afro-Cubans see Moore, pp. 166-190. For a discussion on the discourse of civilization and its relationship to the attitudes of middle-class Afro-Cubans to lower-class Afro-Cubans see Karen Y. Morrison, “Civilization and Citizenship through the Eyes of

that Chocolate was “a magnificent example for that portion of Cuban youth that lacks moral principles because of the lack of education or because of atavism,” adding that he “could not have conquered the position he occupies today in the world of boxing if his interest in maintaining a good physical condition did not keep him away from vice.” His career constituted “the best hymn that can be intoned in praise of athletics.”⁴⁶ The life of a competitive athlete required restraint and discipline, two virtues that appealed to those seeking to encourage “healthy” behavior and discourage supposedly “degenerate” activities among poor Cubans of color.

It was not just Chocolate’s athletic performance, but also his comportment, his “serenity of spirit,” his modesty and “ineffable” sensitivity that endeared him as an icon. Through his personality he was able to show the capability for improvement among poor blacks that preoccupied many Cuban thinkers, both white and middle-class blacks. Gustavo Urrutia praised him as “morally,” as well as physically beautiful, noting that Chocolate did not let his considerable success affect his personality. Instead he continued to think of “his mother, his country, his humble origins and Pincho Gutiérrez, to whom he owes everything.”⁴⁷ The force of Chocolate’s example lay not just in his success as an athlete, but in his behavior as a poor Afro-Cuban who displayed the virtues of humility and gratitude to those who helped foster his success.

Heroism and Denial: Kid Chocolate and Domestic Race Relations

While the Kid was readily discussed in the context of overcoming North

Afro-Cuban Intellectuals during the First Constitutional Era, 1902-1940,” *Cuban Studies* 30 (1999): pp. 76-99.

⁴⁶ “Chocolate, Campéon,” *Bohemia* 21 (May 26, 1929), p. 49.

⁴⁷ *Diario de la Marina*, September 2, 1929, p. 10.

American racism, the mainstream Cuban press rarely placed him in the context of race relations within Cuba, and if they did it was to help support the notion that racial inequality and discrimination were not characteristic of Cuban society.⁴⁸ When members of the Panamanian national team participating in the second Central American games in 1930 were allegedly denied entry to the Havana Yacht Club on the basis of their race,⁴⁹ the newspaper *El Mundo* condemned the incident by invoking the heroic status of Kid Chocolate in Cuba as proof that the episode was not characteristic of Cuban society. Noting that athletics was the last place where “the absurd preoccupation with race” should exist, the paper declared, “no one in Cuba is unaware that Kid Chocolate is a man of dark skin, and the truth is that blacks and whites have applauded him with equal enthusiasm.” The paper added “we say this emphatically: in Cuba there is no reason whatsoever to *create* racial problems.”⁵⁰ Evidence provided by the incident at the Havana Yacht Club notwithstanding, *El Mundo* implied that racial problems did not exist in Cuba with its statement that there was no reason to create them. Even while discussing episodes of racial discrimination the Cuban press engaged in a subtle denial of that

⁴⁸ See Aline Helg, *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886-1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), pp. 16-17 and 162-191 for a discussion of the rise of the myth of racial equality in Cuba. De La Fuente also notes the emergence of an ideology of racial inclusion and fraternity that emerges in the wake of the war for independence. Though he agrees with Helg that it obfuscated the reality of racial inequality and at times it was used to discourage Afro-Cuban political mobilization, he argues that at the same time it opened a space for critiques of racist practice, and thus had a more bidirectional effect on Cuban racial politics. See Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), Introduction and chapter 1.

⁴⁹ The incident first seemed to receive public attention when Club Atenas, perhaps the most prominent *sociedad de color* in Cuba, passed a resolution condemning the act and sent a copy of the resolution to the Havana press, President Machado, the Cuban Olympic Committee and other public officials. *La Lucha*, March 27, 1930, p. 1; *Diario de la Marina*, March 27, 1930, p. 13.

⁵⁰ Emphasis added. Reprinted in “Opiniones concordes,” *Boletín Oficial del Club Atenas* 1, no. 4 (April 1930), p. 6. The April 1930 issue of *Boletín Oficial del Club Atenas* included reprints of numerous letters and columns denouncing the incident that had appeared in the Cuban press, including columns from *Bohemia*, *Carteles*, *El Mundo* and *Diario de la Marina*.

discrimination as a significant issue.⁵¹

The invocation of Kid Chocolate by *El Mundo* formed part of a larger chorus that decried the incident at the Havana Yacht Club as despicable, put perhaps more importantly, as categorically un-Cuban. The Havana Yacht Club was reproached for not adhering to the Cuban ideal of racial fraternity, but the notion that racial discrimination was common in Cuba remained conspicuously unarticulated. One commentator observed that the members of the club had apparently forgotten “that they enjoy this country... by virtue of the efforts of Martí and Maceo,”⁵² insinuating that the actions of the club contradicted the legacy of racial fraternity forged by the two independence heroes. Another noted that the Panamanian athletes who had been denied entry “should know that in our country laws protect all men regardless of race, but furthermore, we especially recall that white men and black men created this nation together, and therefore we cannot maintain depressing and shameful distinctions.”⁵³ *La Lucha* insisted that the affair was especially lamentable in Cuba, where “this social distinction does not exist, and many traitorous whites owe their liberty to loyal negroes.”⁵⁴

Racial discrimination was defined by many in Cuban society as the exception and not the rule, such that even as one Afro-Cuban observer decried the incident at the Havana Yacht Club as a clear example of “the intensity of racial prejudice maintained by some white elements in our country,” he at the same time also noted that the episode did

⁵¹ Alejandro de la Fuente has proven that in fact race had a significant influence on life chances and racial discrimination was quite significant in Republican Cuba, despite a dominant discourse that posited the insignificance of race in Cuban life. De la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, especially chapters 3 and 4.

⁵² “Opiniones concordes,” *Boletín Oficial del Club Atenas* 1, no. 4 (April 1930), p. 6.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵⁴ *La Lucha*, March 25, 1930, p. 1.

not reflect “the sentiment of white population of the country.”⁵⁵ The consistent denial of racist behavior, regardless of evidence to the contrary, extended to those responsible for the behavior itself. The president of the Havana Yacht Club denied the accusations and insisted that the athletes were turned away not because of their race, but because the premises were too crowded, calling the charges of racial discrimination a “vile calumny.”⁵⁶

When Kid Chocolate himself was the victim of racial discrimination, the mainstream press in Havana seemed to ignore the incident altogether. In the fall of 1929 Kid Chocolate was denied lodging in two prominent hotels in Santiago de Cuba on the grounds that there were no available rooms, despite the fact that Chocolate was being hosted in the eastern city as a guest of honor by local officials. While the episode received coverage in the eastern newspapers *La Región* and *El Camagüeyano* of Santiago and Camagüey provinces, with one key exception it went unreported in the mainstream Havana press. Afro-Cuban columnist Gustavo Urrutia chided his Havana colleagues for their failure to report the episode. Declaring that “such an important occurrence could not have escaped” the attention of Havana dailies and magazines, he insinuated that they deliberately neglected to publish the news. Urrutia also took the story as an opportunity to insist that racial discrimination was more common in Cuba than some cared to admit, observing, “the case of Kid Chocolate has produced a scandal because of the popularity

⁵⁵ *Diario de la Marina*, March 30, 1930, section 3, p. 6.

⁵⁶ *Diario de la Marina*, March 31, 1930, p. 1. Cornelio Elizalde, the president of Club Atenas, disputed this claim, noting that two members of Club Atenas who appeared white were admitted to the club on the day in question while two that did not appear white were also denied entry. “Opiniones concordes,” *Boletín Oficial del Club Atenas* 1, no. 4 (April 1930), p. 10.

of the pleasant young man, but how many [cases] occur on a daily basis?”⁵⁷

As the above example indicates, dissenting voices on the existence of racial discrimination in Cuba existed to be sure. And in their dissent these voices attributed a different significance to Kid Chocolate than the mainstream press. While the mainstream Cuban press tended to celebrate Chocolate as a symbol of Cuban racial fraternity in contrast to North American racial conflict, Afro-Cuban commentators often challenged the notion that racism and racial inequality were solely North American problems, insisting that racial discrimination persisted in Cuba despite the celebration of African-descended athletes like Kid Chocolate. In late 1935, the Afro-Cuban magazine *Adelante* noted, “the economic inequality that weighs on the Cuban negro - as it does on the American [negro] - has its fundamental base in the racial discrimination of which he is a victim in *both* countries.” The magazine cast sport as a means of reducing racial discrimination by promoting exposure between individuals from different races and highlighting some of the “great qualities that adorn the negro.” In addition, *Adelante* claimed African-American athletes such as Jack Johnson, Joe Louis and Jesse Owens as legitimate heroes for Afro-Cubans, noting that along with Afro-Cuban boxers like Kid Chocolate, Kid Charol and Black Bill, they constituted athletes “of our type.”⁵⁸ In contrast to the mainstream press, *Adelante* cast sport as a means of striving for an ideal of racial equality that had yet to be realized in Cuba, and maintained the salience and larger symbolic significance of the racial identity of both African-American and Afro-Cuban sports heroes. The article also suggested a sense of solidarity with African-descended

⁵⁷ *Diario de la Marina*, October 6, 1929, section 4, p. 5.

⁵⁸ Salamar, “El negro en los deportes,” *Adelante* 1 (September 1935), p. 21. Emphasis added.

peoples in the United States by virtue of the racial discrimination that both groups faced.

Adelante was also especially emphatic in explicitly casting Kid Chocolate as a racial hero.⁵⁹ A poem titled “The Black Boxer” appeared in the publication that, though it did not explicitly mention Kid Chocolate, provided an unequivocal articulation of the significance that victory of a black boxer over a white boxer could hold for at least some Afro-Cubans. The poem describes such a fight, and then explains the emotions arising within the black boxer after he knocks out his opponent:

There is in his chest of steel
The luster of a shined boot
And in his eyes is a light
Of achieved vengeance.
Every lash of the whip struck
On the men of his race
By the terrible majority
Over in the cane fields,
Has been avenged by his arm
Of carved hard rock!⁶⁰

The poem suggests that at least some portion of Afro-Cubans saw the success of black boxers against white ones as a form of retribution for past racial violence and a vindication of black grievances and resentment. Thus while the mainstream press tended to highlight Chocolate as a national hero who helped to prove that Cuban society was characterized largely by an ideal of racial fraternity, at least one observer viewed the accomplishments of boxers of color as a reflection of a broader current of racial confrontation and conflict within Cuban society.

⁵⁹ The dissenting view espoused by *Adelante* reflects Rosalie Schwartz’ assertion that by the 1920s Afro-Cubans increasingly began to “declare what most Cubans denied or deliberately overlooked: Republican Cuba had not solved the color problems that a colonial slave society had engendered,” though she also asserts that middle-class Afro-Cubans typically “took great pains to present the case for racial acceptance in a non-adversarial way. See Rosalie Schwartz, “Cuba’s Roaring Twenties,” p. 106.

⁶⁰ Pedro Baeza Vega, “El boxer negro,” *Adelante* 1, no. 3 (August 1935), p. 17.

Through his column, *Ideales de una raza*, Gustavo Urrutia provided another example of the ways in which some middle-class and elite Afro-Cubans perceived the significance of the career of Kid Chocolate. In contrast to most mainstream Cuban journalists, Urrutia was much more explicit in highlighting the fact that Chocolate could have an impact on racial attitudes within the context of Cuban, as well as North American, society. Urrutia insisted that Chocolate was both a racial and national hero, noting that while he “brought prestige to his country through universal admiration of his sporting ability and serenity of spirit,” he also posed a challenge to those who “proclaim the inferiority of the negro.” Urrutia declared that Chocolate was “the legitimate pride of Cuba and all Cubans,” and noted his potential to bring Cubans of all colors together, regardless of race. He observed how after the victory over Al Singer, the white Cubans at the offices of *Diario de la Marina* “hugged me as we all screamed, possessed by the same child-like enthusiasm.”⁶¹ As a black icon Chocolate refuted racist theories of black inferiority, but as a national icon he fostered unity, not divisiveness among Cubans.

Urrutia did not see any conflict or inconsistency between Chocolate’s status as both a racial and national hero. Instead Chocolate represented the ideal of racial improvement and uplift rather than political mobilization and confrontation as a means of achieving equality; a notion to which many middle class Afro-Cubans subscribed.⁶² Urrutia observed “the black race would gain much if it had twenty men like Chocolate in each of the intellectual and athletic activities that constitute civilization.” Urrutia put

⁶¹ *Diario de la Marina*, September 2, 1929, p. 10.

⁶² For discussions of this emphasis by Afro-Cuban intellectuals and elites on racial uplift or improvement as a strategy for achieving equality, see Morrison, pp. 76-87 and Frank Andre Guridy, “Racial Knowledge in Cuba: The Production of a Social Fact, 1912-1944” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2002), ch. 2.

athletic achievement on par with intellectual achievement and saw Kid Chocolate as an example of one way in which Afro-Cubans could improve their condition. In fact, because of his popularity, Urrutia felt that Chocolate was contributing more to the cause of racial uplift and conciliation than those involved in intellectual pursuits, declaring, “with his gloves the Kid is writing more brilliant and effective pages than I could produce in several years of [writing] ‘Ideales de una Raza’ ... both Juan Gualberto [Gómez] and myself look on him not with envy, but with admiration and gratitude for his contribution to Cuban happiness.”⁶³ Not only did Urrutia submit that Chocolate’s deeds were as significant as those of Senator Juan Gualberto Gómez,⁶⁴ but he also made little distinction between Chocolate’s contribution to the status of Afro-Cubans and to Cuba more generally. For Urrutia, Chocolate aided the cause of striving for racial equality within Cuban society, but ultimately was the pride of all Cubans. The significance that many Afro-Cuban thinkers attributed to the career of Kid Chocolate was consistent with a larger effort to couch demands for racial equality within a narrative of loyalty to the Cuban nation more broadly and a desire to promote a language of racial fraternity and cooperation rather than confrontation and conflict.

While at times dissenting voices suggested otherwise, the celebrity of Kid Chocolate was woven into a dominant narrative that characterized Cuba as a society devoid of racial conflict and characterized by racial fraternity. His popularity among all Cubans was cited as proof that racial discrimination was not a problem on the island and

⁶³ *Diario de la Marina*, September 2, 1929, p. 10.

⁶⁴ Alejandro de la Fuente describes Juan Gualberto Gómez (1854-1933) as the most prominent Afro-Cuban politician in early Republican Cuba. See De la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, p. 37. As a journalist and politician he played a prominent role as a public intellectual during the Republican era. For a detailed biography see Leopoldo Horrego Estuch, *Juan Gualberto Gómez: Un gran inconforme* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2004).

at times was even used to elide the obvious presence of such racism. Even when Afro-Cuban and other dissenting voices insisted on the continued existence of racist practices within Cuban society, they often did so in a manner that cast these practices as decidedly un-Cuban, and often cited the career of Kid Chocolate as proof of the racial fraternity that characterized Cuban society.

From the Battlefield to the Boxing Ring: Kid Chocolate and The Construction of Afro-Cuban Masculinity

As an athlete competing in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Kid Chocolate status as a national hero was unequivocally gendered. The role of the heroic athlete was a decidedly masculine one.⁶⁵ Theories of racial and national dominance and superiority were played out and tested in athletic competition between men.⁶⁶ By the 1920s championship boxers became symbols of “national virility,” and as male sporting heroes,

⁶⁵ Numerous theorists have highlighted the nature of sport as not only a sociocultural sphere that is coded as masculine, but one that also legitimizes the subordination of women. Jim McKay, Michael Messner and Donald Sabo note that despite the significant increase in women’s participation, sport “continues to be an institutional practice through which men’s collective power and privilege vis-à-vis women are reproduced and naturalized.” Jim McKay, Michael A. Messner and Donald Sabo, “Studying Sport, Men and Masculinities from Feminist Standpoints,” in *Masculinities, Gender Relations and Sport* eds. Jim McKay, Michael A. Messner and Donald Sabo (London: Sage Publications, 2000), p.7. David Whitson argues that as the industrial revolution reduced the importance of physical labor, sport assumed greater importance as a means of proving masculine valor. He adds that the social acclaim that often accompanies sporting success “help[s] to confirm patterns of male privilege and female subordination (and indeed structures of domination) that exist outside sport.” David Whitson, “Sport in the Social Construction of Masculinity,” in *Sport, Men and the Gender Order: Critical Feminist Perspectives* eds. Michael A. Messner and Donald F. Sabo (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Books, 1990), pp. 19-20. Todd Crosset goes as far as to argue that sport’s role in “socializing men to define themselves as biologically superior to women” was one of the very reasons for its global rise in the late nineteenth century. See Todd Crosset, “Masculinity, Sexuality and the Development of Early Modern Sport,” in *Sport, Men and the Gender Order: Critical Feminist Perspectives* eds. Messner and Sabo, pp. 51-54.

⁶⁶ On this point Joan Scott’s definition of gender as “a primary way of signifying relationships of power” is particularly instructive. Based on this formulation sport can be seen as a cultural arena where gender representation served to justify “power relations among nations.” Athletic competitions could determine who were the manliest of races or nations and thus lend legitimacy to racial and national hierarchies. See Joan Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” in *Feminism and History* ed. Joan Scott (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 167-173. For a historical analysis of the links between gender hierarchy and racial hierarchy, especially as articulated through the trope of “civilization,” see Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

they imparted a “gendered dimension” to nationalism throughout the globe.⁶⁷ Sport itself was often taken as a metaphor for warfare,⁶⁸ and the execution of warfare was largely understood to be an exclusively masculine activity.⁶⁹ As the most martial of popular sports, boxing in particular emphasized the similarity between warfare and sport as distinctly masculine activities. Small wonder, then, that Cuban sportswriters repeatedly referred to boxing as “the manly sport,” “the virile sport” and “the most virile of sports.” Through sport and its association with aggression and military conflict, the ability to commit violence was directly equated with male virility as well as with racial or national ascendancy.⁷⁰

One essay in *Bohemia* magazine demonstrates the association between violence, militarism and male heroism that boxing evoked in Cuba as well as throughout the world. The essayist argued that boxers, as participants in direct physical confrontations,

⁶⁷ Lewis A. Erenberg, *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation: Louis vs. Schmelling* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 3.

⁶⁸ J.A. Mangan observes “throughout history sport and militarism have been inseparable,” and attributes the close association between sport and warfare in part to the fact that “[t]he sportsfield and battlefield are linked as locations for the demonstration of legitimate patriotic aggression.” J.A. Mangan, *Shaping the Superman: Fascist Body as Political Icon – Aryan Fascism* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1999), p. xii.

⁶⁹ Nancy J. Chodorow remarks that “the military in all societies is by definition masculine.” See Nancy J. Chodorow, “The Enemy Outside: Thoughts on the Psychodynamics of Extreme Violence with Special Attention to Men and Masculinity,” in *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory: New Directions* ed. Judith Kegan Gardiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 252.

⁷⁰ Michael Messner and Donald Sabo argue that sport is a major cultural vehicle for the transmission of demonstrations of violence and anger as normative displays of manhood, adding that they help to normalize the process by which men “use the threat or application of violence to maintain their political power and economic advantage over women.” See Michael A. Messner and Donald F. Sabo, *Sex, Violence and Power in Sports: Rethinking Masculinity* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1994), pp. 71-72. Messner has also observed that through violent sports especially, “men’s power over women becomes naturalized and linked to the social distribution of violence.” Michael A. Messner, *Out of Play: Critical Essays on Gender and Sport* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 54. The role of sport in normalizing violent behavior may be most potent in the socialization of young boys. Kevin Young and Philip White assert that “[a]s a central experience among school-age boys, sport confirms and consolidates violent physicality as one of the cornerstones of masculinity.” Kevin Young and Philip White, “Researching Sports Injury: Reconstructing Dangerous Masculinities,” in *Masculinities, Gender Relations and Sport* eds. McKay, Messner and Sabo, p. 116.

represented the epitome of manly courage. He declared, “[t]hese men who face each other, bring to the fight courage, personal cunning and authentic valor.” He insisted that boxers were much more admirable than those “men of state who hurl their fellow men into a fierce inhuman war while they stay in their carpeted offices.” The author went so far as to insist that boxing matches become a substitute for warfare, proposing that the League of Nations be transformed into an international boxing commission.⁷¹ As a structured representation of primal, violent confrontation between two individuals, boxing epitomized the use of violence and physical force that was understood to constitute the fundamental basis of power. It thus stood to reason that boxing competition represented symbolic struggles for masculine dominance between racial and national groups.⁷²

The continual use of militaristic language by sportswriters to describe the career of Kid Chocolate highlighted the link between sport, militarism and violence that undergirded his heroic status as a celebrity athlete and a national hero. Scholars have argued that war and sport have served very similar functions in the consolidation of national identity.⁷³ The Cuban experience and the career of Kid Chocolate support this

⁷¹ Valdes de la Paz, pp. 32, 63.

⁷² Michael Messner observes that violent sports in particular support male dominance through the association of males and maleness with the “sanctioned use of aggression/force/violence.” He notes that sport in general legitimizes and sanitizes violence by structuring and placing safe boundaries around it, and that violent sports serve a dual function by providing “linkages among men in the project of domination of women, while at the same time help[ing] to construct and clarify differences between various masculinities.” Messner, *Out of Play*, pp. 93-104.

⁷³ J.A. Mangan observes that “war and sport are potent forces in the creation of imagined communities. Both unite individuals in shared ecstasy and despair, happiness and sadness, pleasure and pain.” J.A. Mangan, “Combative Sports and Combative Societies,” in *Militarism, Sport, Europe: War without Weapons* ed. J.A. Mangan (London: Frank Cass, 2003), p. 1. Similarly Roberto González Echevarría observes, “[t]he memory of athletic feats, like that of wars and other heroic activities, is an essential component of the nation.” Roberto González Echevarría, *The Pride of Havana: A History of Cuban Baseball* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 9.

line of interpretation. Time and again, Chocolate and Gutiérrez, were often likened to soldiers defending their country. Chocolate was described as “the Cuban Napoleon,”⁷⁴ who had “conquered the first world championship in boxing for our beloved nation.”⁷⁵ Writers even went so far as to liken Chocolate and his manager Gutiérrez to the heroes of the Cuban wars for independence. One asserted that Gutiérrez deserved to receive the rank of general “with all its honors.” The writer went on to compare him directly to independence general Maximo Gómez, for just as the history of Cuba was impossible to write without mentioning the name of the “generalissimo” [Gómez], the history of “our boxing” could not be written without mentioning Gutiérrez. Victories in the ring were compared to the battles of “Arroyo Blanco, Peralejo and various others during [the] emancipatory struggle,” and Gutiérrez was to be credited for understanding that “the nation was not forged only on the battlefield.”⁷⁶

The militaristic celebration of Kid Chocolate as a national hero resonated with the celebration of Afro-Cuban participation in the independence wars in palpable ways. Over the course of the military struggle for independence in the late nineteenth century, more inclusive notions of Cuban nationality with regards to race began to emerge as Cubans of African descent swelled the military ranks of the anti-colonial insurgency. In order to counter fears of racial violence that arose in response to black participation in the military struggle for independence, Cuban “patriot-intellectuals” conducted a “sweeping reevaluation of the role of the black insurgent in the process of making the nation” in the

⁷⁴ *Heraldo de Cuba*, December 19, 1931, p. 11.

⁷⁵ *Heraldo de Cuba*, July 16, 1931, p. 13.

⁷⁶ *Heraldo de Cuba*, August 1, 1931, pp. 9-10.

late 1880s and early 1890s, and constructed the trope of the loyal or “ideal black insurgent.” Through the construction of the idealized loyal black insurgent, a “dreaded emblem of race war and black republic,” namely armed and violent black men, were “neutralized and made an acceptable – and indeed central – component in the struggle for Cuban nationhood.”⁷⁷ Through the portrayal of black participants in the wars of independence as safe, passive, loyal and highly patriotic soldiers, pro-independence intellectuals sought to make their fellow Cubans more comfortable with the idea of black men as violent national heroes.

The role ascribed to Kid Chocolate as a champion of the nation paralleled the role ascribed to Afro-Cuban soldiers during the military struggle for independence. *Bohemia* magazine declared, “thirty-five years ago Kid Chocolate would have been the same strong and bold man, and instead of winning his battles in the rings of New York, he would have planted the lone star in the soil of Vueltabajo as one of Maceo’s soldiers during the campaign of the Invasion.”⁷⁸ The declaration was a direct reference to the invasion of western Cuba by anti-colonial insurgents in 1896, and demonstrates how the career of Kid Chocolate was cast in a rendering of Afro-Cuban masculinity generated during the wars for independence. The army of the western invasion was composed primarily of black and mulatto Cubans marching into a region, western Cuba, that was seen as less African, and consequently more civilized, than eastern Cuba. The invasion constituted a “moment of reckoning in which long-held perceptions and newly created

⁷⁷ Ada Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation and Revolution, 1868-1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), p. 117.

⁷⁸ Valdés de la Paz, p. 32.

doubts about race and nation were affirmed, denied and modified.”⁷⁹ Its success revealed significant changes in “elite and popular understandings of race and nationality” in Cuba.⁸⁰ The invasion helped to mark a transformation in the way black men were discursively incorporated into the nation. Decades later the career of Kid Chocolate established athletics as another means for such discursive integration.

But it was not just the ability to commit violence that underscored the role of the male hero. The acts of violence in question had to be sanctioned as legitimate. For certainly women were just as capable of engaging in acts of violence as men. More often than not, however, violence committed by women was considered deviant, to be described in police blotters or the section of the newspaper devoted to reporting criminal incidents. The substantive difference rested in the perception of those acts of violence. The perceived legitimacy of a violent act often meant the difference between being labeled a hero or a criminal, between being labeled as a patriot (as in the case of independence war soldiers) or a savage (as was the case for those who participated in the so called race war of 1912).⁸¹ The trope of the loyal black insurgent was based on clear distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate violence. By virtue of their willingness to engage in legitimate violence for the national cause, Afro-Cuban men transcended racial divisions and became indispensable constituents of the Cuban nation.⁸² The loyal black insurgent engaged in legitimate violence on behalf of his country. In contrast, illegitimate

⁷⁹ Ferrer, p. 149.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 143.

⁸¹ In the spring of 1912, violent conflict erupted in Cuba over the legality of the *Partido Independiente de Color*. For a detailed discussion of this conflict and the racial rhetoric and imagery that accompanied it see Aline Helg, *Our Rightful Share*, pp. 193-242.

⁸² Ferrer, p. 126.

violence was defined as race war, and ultimately, any agitation that pitted Afro-Cubans against white Cubans. Thirty years later, Kid Chocolate was also cast as a heroic defender of the *patria* and the most recent incarnation of the loyal black insurgent because he also engaged in legitimate violence on behalf of the nation.

Graphic depictions of the legitimate acts of violence performed by Kid Chocolate were common in the sports pages of major Cuban dailies. Cuban newspapers frequently printed round-by-round summaries of Chocolate's fights and fight details were also disseminated over radio, ensuring that Cuban boxing fans were intimately familiar with the centrality of violence to the heroic persona of Kid Chocolate. Blow-by-blow descriptions of his fights ran with regular frequency, leaving no doubt as to the actions that constituted the basis for his status as a national hero. For example, the following detailed description of his pummeling of Benny Bass appeared in the *Havana Post*:

[Chocolate] hammered Bass through six rounds, cutting him steadily and methodically down, ripping open a cut in the left eyebrow, smashing at the wound until the eye closed, splitting his lips, tearing his face, bringing a stream of blood from the champion's nose. . . . [Towards the close of the seventh round] the Cuban Bon Bon lashed a volley of rights to the head. As Bass reeled into his own corner, his left eyelid torn wide open, blood pouring down his face, Referee Houck stepped between the warriors and stopped the fight.⁸³

The use of the term warriors underscored not only the violent nature of the event, but the fact that the violence was in fact legitimate and sanctioned violence. The two men were not simply ruffians, but warriors, venerated individuals entrusted with the defense of their respective collectives. The use of the term warrior to describe boxers was far from uncommon, but this only underscored the general association between boxing and

⁸³ *The Havana Post*, July 16, 1931, p. 2.

militarism. Thus racial inclusion in Cuba had a decidedly gendered aspect to it. The notion of racial fraternity that was foundational to Cuban national identity was based on bonds between men formed in the midst of violent confrontation.⁸⁴ One generation later, the emergence of athletics as a site of nationalist expression reinforced this masculinist aspect of the link between racial inclusion and Cuban nationalism.

The role of warrior or heroic defender of the *patria* entailed not only the perpetration of violence, but also its absorption.⁸⁵ Placing the self in harm's way formed a critical aspect of the role of male hero. Injury and pain, or the threat of injury and pain, formed an important component of the reasons why boxers were admired.⁸⁶ Kid Chocolate clearly played the role of the male hero in this respect as well. For example, one observer of his 1931 fight with Tony Canzoneri described it as "one of the... toughest, bloodiest fights in the history of boxing," and Chocolate certainly took his share of punishment. Throughout the fight, the two boxers delivered punches "that would cause the other to shudder," and the "whirlwind exchange of blows" pushed the fans in attendance into a "paroxysm of excitement."⁸⁷ The ability of each fighter to absorb punishment was just as critical to the spectacle as his ability to deliver blows.

⁸⁴ Ferrer eloquently describes the formation of these bonds as "that physical and spiritual embrace between black and white men" in battles that constituted "the symbolic and material birth of the nation." Ferrer, p. 9. See also Helg, *Our Rightful Share*, pp. 105-107; De la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, pp. 23-39.

⁸⁵ Kath Woodward observes that the ability to withstand pain is one of the aspects of boxing that constitutes "the most traditional and expected of the practices associated with masculinity," adding "exposure to hurt is part of the heroic masculinity of boxing" and "part of the mythology of boxing masculinities requires courage in the face of injury." Kath Woodward, *Boxing, Masculinity and Identity: The 'I' of the Tiger* (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 86, 114.

⁸⁶ Allenn Guttman has noted that while physical strength forms "an important part of every 'manly' sport... better still is the ability to mete out and to absorb pain," adding that boxers "experience perverse pleasure in the physical punishment they endure," and "injuries are listed like accomplishments." See Allenn Guttman, *The Erotic in Sports*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 69, 152.

⁸⁷ *Heraldo de Cuba*, November 21, 1931, pp. 9-10.

The relative status of Pincho Gutiérrez and Kid Chocolate as militarized heroes points to another dimension of Kid Chocolate's persona that paralleled the ethos of the independence struggle, that of trans-racial cooperation between white men and black men in a hierarchical partnership. While Gutiérrez was likened to General Maximo Gómez, the leader of the *independista* army, Chocolate was described as a rank and file member of that army. The relationship between Pincho and Chocolate stood as an example of the white tutelage of black action and the hierarchical relationship that was understood to characterize the independence struggle and considered necessary as a formula for national advancement. A celebrity in Cuba in his own right who had gained fame as a capable boxing promoter and manager, Luis "Pincho" Gutiérrez, was the son of a wealthy Cuban businessman.⁸⁸ Educated in part in the United States, he was a youth who "was born and raised in abundance" among the "best of [Cuban] society."⁸⁹ Gutiérrez played a critical role in Kid Chocolate's rise to fame. It was Pincho who first brought Chocolate to the United States, and he would remain Chocolate's manager and confidante for virtually the entirety of his boxing career.

Depictions of the relationship belied an understanding of the importance of elite (and implicitly white) leadership, and black gratefulness for white benevolence, in Cuban nation-building that dated back to the military struggles for independence.⁹⁰ Media columnists gave Gutiérrez as much, and sometimes more, credit than Chocolate himself for the successes of the young boxer. One was rarely mentioned without the other in the

⁸⁸ *Tribuna de la Habana*, January 14, 2007, p. 3.

⁸⁹ Jess Losada, "El 'Showman': 'Tête-A-Tête' con 'Pincho,'" *Carteles*, 17 (November 8, 1931), p. 36.

⁹⁰ For a detailed discussion of these debates as they related to the struggle for independence from Spain and the early years of North American Occupation, see Ferrer, pp. 133-135 & 172-201. For an assessment of the form these debates took in the early Republican years, see De la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, pp. 26-45.

Cuban press, and one commentator went so far as to describe them as “one man inside another...Pinchocolate”⁹¹ The press repeatedly emphasized the importance of the direction Gutiérrez provided to the young boxer. He was routinely credited with having “so ably directed the pugilistic career” of his protégé.⁹² Sportswriters referred to Chocolate as Gutiérrez’s boy (“*su muchacho*”),⁹³ while likening Gutiérrez to a “jealous father,”⁹⁴ a characterization which distorted the reality that Gutiérrez was only 10 years older than Chocolate. Gutiérrez was the individual to whom Chocolate owed “everything,” and Chocolate was even praised for having the sense to “allow himself to be guided” by such an intelligent and well-meaning man.⁹⁵ Even graphic imagery of the two suggested a relationship of tutelage and control, as was the case with the March 9, 1930 issue of *Carteles* magazine, which featured a drawing of Chocolate being held in the arms of Gutiérrez as if he were a child or vaudevillian dummy (see figure 4.1).

Some observers argued that it was North American racism itself that engendered the need for a white manager of an Afro-Cuban boxer. In his sports year in review for 1928, columnist Adolfo Font observed that Kid Chocolate, his physical talent notwithstanding, would have continued boxing in anonymity if Gutiérrez had not had the “selflessness to bring him to New York at a time that did not seem the most appropriate to introduce a Cuban athlete to win honor and money, particularly when he belonged to a

⁹¹ *Heraldo de Cuba*, July 16, 1931, p. 14.

⁹² Captioned photograph, *Record* 1 (August 1935), p. 33.

⁹³ See for example *Heraldo de Cuba*, November 18, 1931, pp. 9-10.

⁹⁴ *Diario de la Marina*, February 17, 1929, section 3, p. vi.

⁹⁵ *Diario de la Marina*, September 2, 1929, p. 10.



Figure 4.1. March 9, 1930 cover of *Carteles* magazine. Courtesy of Rare Books Collection, University of Havana.

race that... is repudiated by at least half of the Yankee population.”⁹⁶ Another commentator agreed, questioning whether the success Chocolate had in the United States would have been possible without the “intelligent and tenacious effort of [Gutiérrez] in a country whose greatness is frequently obscured by racial prejudice?”⁹⁷

Cooperation between white Cubans and Cubans of color was also necessary as a response to the racist nature of North American society. Thus even if one did not subscribe to racist notions that African-descended peoples needed white tutelage in order to advance to a certain level of civilization, one might still view such tutelage or cooperation as necessary in a world where racist behavior was all too common, especially among those with decision making power and authority on an international scale. Thus the hierarchical relationship between white and black men that was seen as critical to Cuban nationalist expression was also linked to the anti-racist impulse that had become a significant aspect of Cuban nationalism by the twenties and thirties.

To highlight the nature of the descriptions of the relationship between Gutiérrez and Chocolate is not to make a judgment one way or the other as to their accuracy. Such supposed accuracy or inaccuracy is beside the point. Chocolate himself is said to have described Gutiérrez as both a father and a brother.⁹⁸ In addition, there is certainly a life-cycle dimension to the descriptions of the pair as able guide and physically gifted boy. Chocolate was, after all, only 18 years old when he first arrived in New York City. The accuracy of the portrayal is less important than the degree to which the Cuban media

⁹⁶ *Heraldo de Cuba*, December 25, 1931, p. 9.

⁹⁷ *Diario de la Marina*, February 17, 1929, section 3, p. vi.

⁹⁸ Menéndez and Ortega, *Kid Chocolate: El boxeo soy yo* (Havana: Editorial Obre, 1980), p. 42.

seized on this portrayal and highlighted its significance. The depicted relationship encapsulated debates on themes such as the racial profile of leadership of the independence movement and post-independence order, black indebtedness and gratefulness for patriotic white benevolence and the importance of a cultured (and implicitly white) elite in leading the mass of Cubans to an advanced state of civilization. Through this common understanding of the relationship between the two, the ideal of a cross-racial partnership between Cuban men was carried forward from the memory of the struggle for independence into a new cultural realm that would also give form to nationalist expression, that of athletic competition.

Sport provided an arena where the male-centered notion of cross-racial fraternity that became central to Cuban national identity could be reinscribed. Its character as a distinctly homosocial space served to reinforce a notion of racial fraternity that effectively excluded women. The discourse of racial inclusion and fraternity in Cuba was a decidedly masculinist discourse based on a hierarchical partnership between black and white men in which black men played a subordinate role. This partnership was initially forged during the military struggle for independence, but during the republican era athletic competition would provide another sphere where the partnership could be realized.⁹⁹ The fact that athletic competition had become a means of nationalist expression also served to reinforce the links between racial inclusion, Cuban nationalism and spheres of activity that were coded as distinctly masculine. In this sense racial

⁹⁹ Based on an analysis of the themes of race and sex in nineteenth and twentieth century literature, Vera Kutzinski argues that as a whole, the construction of the ideal of racial fraternity and racial mixture in Cuba is a “male homosocial construct premised precisely on the disappearance of the feminine.” She argues that in Cuba racial mixture “became legitimated as an exclusively male project or achievement.” See Kutzinski, especially pp. 161-168.

fraternity formed a part of what R.W. Connell has called the patriarchal dividend.¹⁰⁰

Racialized Masculinity and the Limits of Male Privilege

Given his status as a hero-athlete, it should come as no surprise that the physicality of Kid Chocolate was a central facet of his persona as represented in the Cuban print media. He was the subject of considerable admiration of both his physical ability and form. It was his “body of an ebony Apollo” that served as his primary instrument, and through which he applied his “courage, intelligence and marvelous ring technique” to bring glory and renown to Cuba.¹⁰¹ His physical skill was the subject of consistent praise in the Cuban press. He was admired for his “excellent command... over all the muscles of his body,” which gave him a “feline-like agility” as well as “the extraordinary velocity that the ebony Cuban champion imparts upon his arms and legs.”¹⁰² One writer insisted that he “does not move a muscle, doesn’t laugh or blink without a precise goal,” emphasizing his status as a superior physical performer.¹⁰³ Descriptions of training sessions and round-by-round synopses of fights ensured that readers of the Cuban press were exposed to Kid Chocolate in large part through images and descriptions that underlined his role as a physical performer. His success was explicitly described as the result of “hard labor.”¹⁰⁴ The physicality of Kid Chocolate was

¹⁰⁰ R.W. Connell defines the patriarchal dividend in part as the benefits men gain “from patriarchy in terms of honour [sic], prestige and the right to command.” In the case of Republican Cuba, the right to a national inclusion that transcended racial barriers can also be said to have formed part of the patriarchal dividend for Afro-Cuban men. R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 82.

¹⁰¹ *Diario de la Marina*, September 15, 1929, section 3, p. vi.

¹⁰² *Heraldo de Cuba*, November 16, 1931, p. 9

¹⁰³ Tablada, p. 27.

¹⁰⁴ *Diario de la Marina*, September 15, 1929, section 3, p. vi.

inescapable for anyone who read Cuban newspapers or magazines. This physicality suggested a primary role for Afro-Cuban men as contributors to the nation primarily through their physical labor or performance.

In December 1929 poet Nicolás Guillén published a poem entitled *Pequeña Oda a Kid Chocolate*, which highlighted Chocolate's status as an exemplary physical performer and specimen. The poem opened by assuming: "surely you are not concerned with [North American intellectual] Waldo Frank, nor Langston Hughes ... because training is hard, and the muscles betray, and one must be as strong as a bull (hecho un toro)." Guillén went on:

You already have your place,
Which is what interests you - and us as well.
The best, in the end
Is to find a punching bag,
To eliminate fat under the sun,
To jump,
To sweat,
To swim,
And from jumping rope to shadow boxing,
From the shower to the dining room,
To emerge polished, slender, strong
Like a newly carved cane.

The poem suggests that Chocolate's most productive role was to labor and strain, to cultivate his physical condition, not just for performance as an athlete, but also for form as a physical specimen, so that he could emerge, "polished, slender, strong, like a newly carved cane."¹⁰⁵ Educated Afro-Cubans also celebrated the physical means through which Chocolate contributed to Cuban national prestige, at times relating it to the supposedly innate abilities of African-descended peoples, as Gustavo Urrutia did when he noted that Chocolate was "fleet of foot [and] light of choreographed movement as in him

¹⁰⁵ *Diario de la Marina*, December 29, 1929, section 3, p. ix.

resides the innate rhythmic sense of his race.”¹⁰⁶ Many commentators assumed and implied that the most effective way that Kid Chocolate as a poor, young Afro-Cuban could contribute to the cause of Cuban nation-building was to leverage his supposedly “innate” physical capabilities in the world of athletic competition.

Descriptions of Chocolate as a physically beautiful specimen were also common in the Cuban press. One writer observed “his shoulders are so broad and his waist so tight” that his figure was reminiscent of ancient Greek sculptures.¹⁰⁷ Gustavo Urrutia took Chocolate’s attractiveness as an opportunity to admonish Cubans to value and admire the beauty of both blacks as well as whites, declaring that Cubans “still do not know how to appreciate black beauty” and that “many of us have to whiten ourselves, confusing aesthetics with sociology, beauty with utility.” He called Chocolate “the prototype of a black and beautiful young man,” and described his complexion as “beautiful black velvet... [which] transforms itself, through the heat of the fight, into a polished ebony.” Though Urrutia had never seen Chocolate fight, he imagined Chocolate in his “red trunks with black trim highlighting the splendid nakedness of his body,” speculating that “[h]is appearance alone on the platform must be a delicious spectacle, illuminated by his intelligent and kind smile.”¹⁰⁸ Urrutia emphasized the physical attractiveness of Kid Chocolate as another indicator of the value of blackness and Afro-Cubans within Cuban society, using Chocolate’s celebrity and physical image as a means of fostering racial inclusion. As with his success more generally, Urrutia took advantage

¹⁰⁶ *Diario de la Marina*, September 2, 1929, p. 10.

¹⁰⁷ Tablada, p. 27.

¹⁰⁸ *Diario de la Marina*, September 2, 1929, p. 10.

of Chocolate's attractiveness and popularity to call for more inclusive racial practices and attitudes.

This appreciation of Chocolate's physical form reached extreme dimensions when pictures of him in the nude appeared in major magazines of the era and emphasized his status as a physical specimen.¹⁰⁹ The first appearance occurred in the August 1931 issue of *Carteles* magazine, with a caption that described him as a living statue. (See figure 4.2)¹¹⁰ The same image appeared in the February 1933 issue of *Nocaut* magazine with a caption describing Chocolate as the "ebony Apollo."¹¹¹ (See Figure 4.3) In December 1933 *Carteles* printed another nude photograph of Chocolate, (See figure 4.4) with a caption pronouncing the "narcissism" of the popular boxer. The photographs suggest an appreciation of Chocolate's physical form as an erotic object to be gazed upon.

Far from generating an image of Chocolate as a powerful male hero who regularly engaged in acts of violence for a living, the photographs portray a passive individual. In both photos he is looking away from the camera and engaged in poses that privilege his aesthetic form instead of evoking any sense of action. The pictures themselves had an erotic dimension to them, as did the manner in which several Cuban journalists described the body of Chocolate. Whether or not this eroticization had an intended or realized effect

¹⁰⁹ John Kasson has noted that since its inception photography has "stimulated and satisfied demand for intimate knowledge of the body." Thus these photos of Chocolate were in a sense a supplemental means of accessing the body of Chocolate for readers, in addition to writing by journalists in admiration of his physique. See John F. Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), p. 60. The origin of these photos is unclear, though it seems they may have been taken in the United States. The New York daily *La Prensa* noted that awareness of these photographs was widespread in Harlem, and that Chocolate shared copies with female admirers. *La Prensa*, January 9, 1934, p. 6.

¹¹⁰ "Galería deportiva no. 1," *Carteles* 17 (August 23, 1931), p. 40. With regard to the origin of the photo, *Carteles* only notes that it was the creation of "the genius 'Rembrandt,'" referring to an unknown photographer.

¹¹¹ Jess Losada, "Peleará Chocolate en Venezuela?" *Nocaut* 3 (February 1933), p. 31.

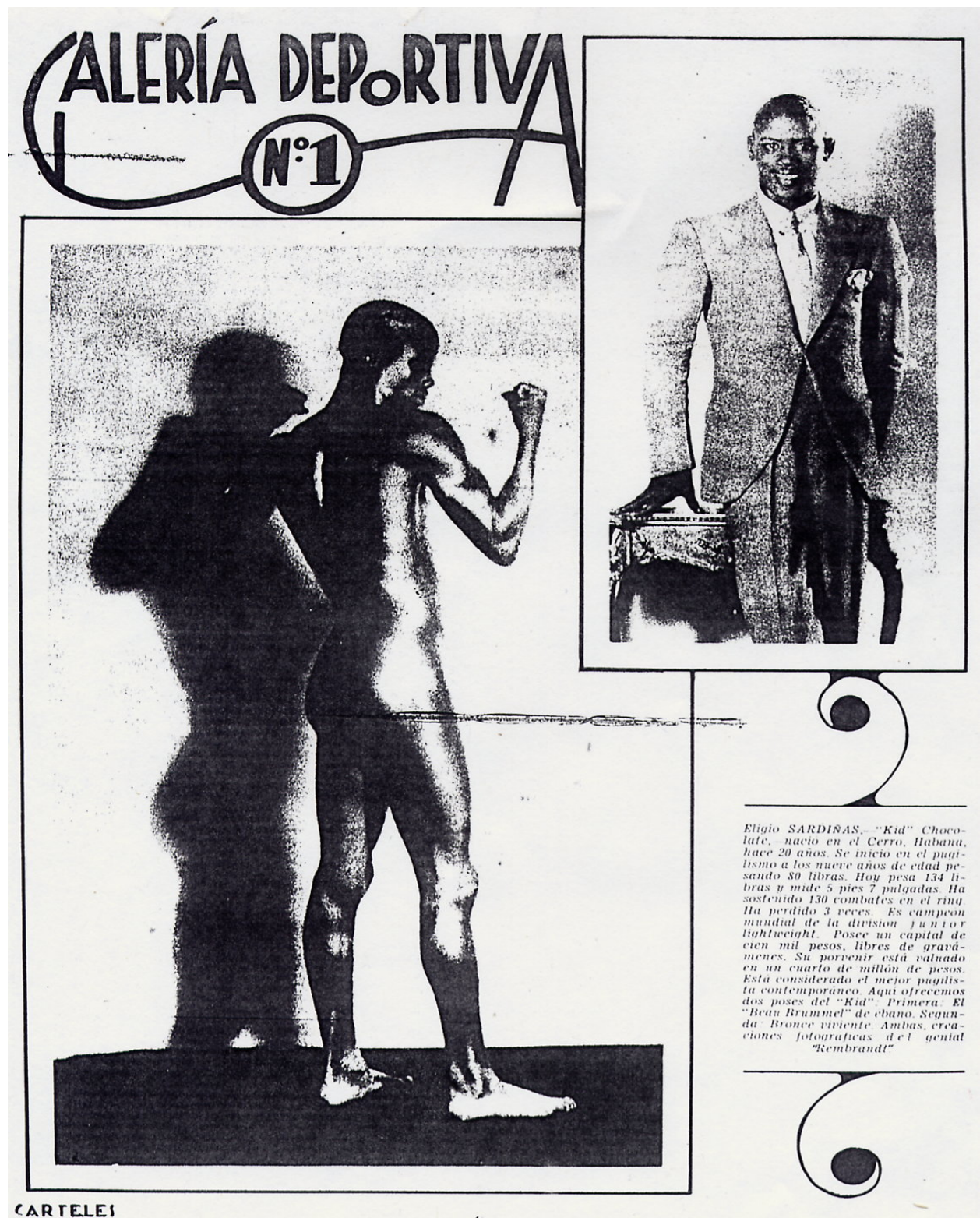
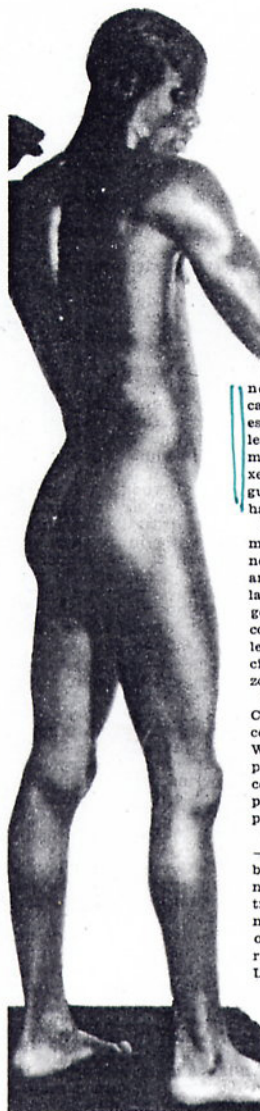


Figure 4.2. Nude photograph of Kid Chocolate in *Carteles* magazine. From the August 23, 1931 issue. The inset image on the right provides an example of the numerous photos of Chocolate in elegant attire that appeared in the Cuban popular press. Courtesy of Davis Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Peleará Chocolate en Venezuela?



El Apolo de ébano, constraído por la crítica mundial como el más perfecto púgil de la época.

Tres "shots" de la última pelea del Kid contra Fidel La Barba, la que ganó, conservando su título de campeón mundial. La última instantánea muestra el instante histórico en que CHOCOLATE ganó su campeonato mundial derrotando a Lew FELDMAN por nocaut técnico.

HA sido la misma reacción que cuando Chocolate peleó con Singer, Kid Berg y Canzoneri... Idéntica maraña de opiniones entre los cronistas más destacados de la Meca del Pugilismo. La controversia, alma del "ballyhoo" pugilístico, se infiltra talmadadamente en las columnas deportivas, y la figura de Kid Chocolate cobra nuevos relieves de celebridad. ¿Explicación? Ese ángel que posee Chocolate: esa habilidad innata para ofrecer peleas sensacionales que lo destaca como un maravilloso estilista del boxeo: ese blasón de aristócrata de los guantes, que tantos jirones de gloria ha proporcionado a Cuba deportiva.

Chocolate retuvo su campeonato mundial de los pesos plumas, al obtener la decisión de los jueces sobre su antiguo rival, Fidel La Barba. ¿Que la pelea fué muy pareja; que el margen fué exiguo? ¿Y no es una justa compensación por los robos judiciales que despojaron al Kid de merecidas victorias sobre Battalino y Canzoneri?

Se puede asegurar que el triunfo de Chocolate ha sido legítimo. Ambos jueces votaron por el cubano. El referee Willie Lewis, antiguo boxeador, (siempre son los ex púgiles los peores jueces de boxeo), votó tablas. ¿Dónde, pues, está el más leve indicio de despojo al californiano?

En cuanto a los cronistas americanos —y aunque esto pueda causar asombro— me resisto a tomarlos en serio, no obstante su pregonada fama, mientras exista una diversidad de opiniones tan marcada, tan absurda, que ofrezca al ingenio fanático norteamericano una opinión de diez rounds a La Barba por 2 a Chocolate, contrastando con otra opinión de 7 al Kid por 3 a La Barba.

Generalmente, las opiniones "para publicación", de los cronistas neoyorquinos, son engendros mercantiles y caprichosos. Antes de celebrarse la pelea ofrecen su vaticinio de acuerdo con los requisitos de la propaganda. Y después del bout, explican el resultado con todo el capricho de sus simpatías o intereses personales... No hay razón en el mundo para que un crítico que vió la pelea asegure que La Barba ganó diez rounds por dos Chocolate, mientras otro declare que fué

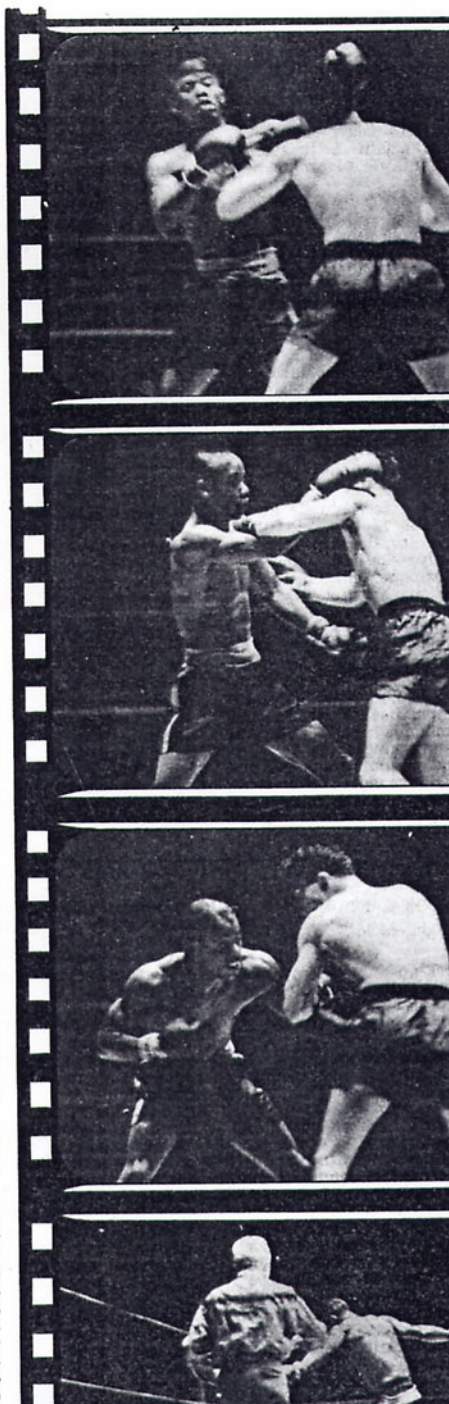


Figure 4.3. Nude photograph of Kid Chocolate in *Nocaut* magazine. From the February 1933 issue. Courtesy of New York Public Library.



Figure 4.4. Nude photograph of Kid Chocolate as printed in *Carteles* magazine. This photo appeared in the December 31, 1933 issue. Courtesy of Bohemia archives.

of feminizing Chocolate is debatable.¹¹² While photographs of nude women were common in the pages of popular magazines like *Bohemia* and *Carteles*, photographs of nude men (except for Chocolate) were non-existent.¹¹³ Nonetheless, they certainly displayed him as a passive objet to be looked at rather than as an active and aggressive male hero. Such a passive portrayal may have reflected a degree of discomfort with a man of African descent playing the role of the epitome of masculine aggression and power, perhaps reflecting a desire to mute this aspect of his public persona. This discomfort in turn may have indicated an ambivalence regarding the status of Afro-Cuban men as masculine heroes and a desire to minimize the significance of that status.¹¹⁴

This discomfort aside, the fact that photographs of a nude black man who grew up poor could appear in the pages of *Carteles*, a magazine devoted in large part to events in elite Cuban society and typically devoid of any references to or images of Cubans of African descent (except for caricature), speaks to the efficacy of sport for creating a niche of inclusion for black men in Cuban society. In becoming a national hero Kid Chocolate

¹¹² Allenn Guttmann argues that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries “it was manly to admire the bodies as well as the prowess of male athletes.” He adds that even today spectator sport constitutes one arena where the male body is a “legitimate object of the male gaze.” Guttmann, p. 83. John Kasson has skillfully explored the ways in which images of a muscular and attractive male would body would appeal to other men “across a broad spectrum of sexual orientation.” See Kasson, pp. 50-67. Michael Messner goes so far as to indicate that many theorists place the “major ideological salience” of sport in the fact it gives male spectators the opportunity to identify with the muscular male body. Michael A. Messner, “When Bodies are Weapons,” in *Sex, Violence and Power in Sports: Rethinking Masculinity* ed. Michael A. Messner and Donald F. Sabo (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1994), p. 96. Thus the admiration of Chocolate’s physique could be said to be homoerotic without in fact feminizing him.

¹¹³ The image of Chocolate that appeared in the August 23, 1931 issue of *Carteles* was part of a four-part series of photographs titled “Galería deportiva” which included pictures of swimmer Johnny Weismüller, boxer Jack Dempsey and baseball player Al Simmons. Of the four celebrities, Chocolate was the only one who appeared fully nude, further attesting to the unique nature of the image.

¹¹⁴ Aline Helg has suggested that in the early twentieth century feminizing stereotypes and images of Afro-Cuban men as witches arose in response to anxiety over the significance of their role as military heroes in the wars for independence. See Aline Helg, “Black Men, Racial Stereotyping and Violence in the U.S. South and Cuba at the Turn of the Century,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42 (2000):pp. 588-589.

transcended typical pre-existing racial barriers within Cuba, generating a means through which even the most exclusive members of the Cuban elite would feel comfortable claiming a poor “*negrito*” with no schooling as their own. That Cubans could comfortably admire the attractiveness of an Afro-Cuban suggests a degree of comfort with the incorporation of blackness into Cuban national identity more generally. Aesthetic appreciation of the physical form of a celebrity athlete constituted another form of symbolic racial inclusion that did not necessarily threaten the actual status quo of racial inequality.

Sport as a cultural sphere also reflected a growing tension in modern notions of masculinity, between the primal impulses associated with violent competition and the notions of sportsmanship, fair play and discipline in training. Sporting ideals included a modern view of a controlled or harnessed masculinity in its grounds for racialized hierarchy. Restraint and proper channeling was just as important as physical talent itself in guaranteeing athletic success, reflecting an understanding that superior masculinity reflected civilized control as well as brute power. On the one hand, sport and athletic achievement were beginning to represent progress and development in the modern world. On the other, the physical capacity required for successful athletic performance still conjured up images of savagery and unbridled aggression, especially in a violent sport such as boxing. Boxing in particular spoke to the contradictory attitudes of simultaneous disdain for and fascination with violent behavior that often characterized modern life.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Jeffrey Sammons argues that this contradictory attitude toward violence is a necessary characteristic of modern society, noting “boxers pursue a sport at once scorned and glorified for its violence by a confused people who have prided themselves on civility and modernity but who cling to atavistic instincts. Boxing reflects society’s fear of and need for violence.” Jeffrey Sammons, *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 251.

One article demonstrates the way in which a successful athlete with celebrity status could highlight the tensions and contradictions in idealized notions of modern masculinity that had begun to manifest themselves by the early twentieth century. In reporting on one training session in 1931, Associated Press journalist Walter Douglass remarked that “it was truly delightful to watch the Kid advancing ... with his two strong arms alongside his body, throwing punches that could not be seen because of their speed... moving from side to side and ... attacking with considerable precision.” The very next paragraph in the article then summarized Chocolate’s post-workout routine: “he bathed, went up to his room, spent a half hour combing his hair and... returned downstairs dressed like Beau Brummel.”¹¹⁶ Within the space of an hour Kid Chocolate slipped between the role of brute, physical performer and refined, modern dandy, straddling the contradictory divide between physical power and civility that lay at the core of modern notions of masculinity.¹¹⁷

Through his elegant dress and appearance, Kid Chocolate managed to represent the modern notion of the ideal man as civilized and refined, while his exploits in the ring exemplified a masculine ideal based on violence, power and physical ability. He had a proclivity for fine apparel that, when juxtaposed with the image of him as a performer spoke to the tension in modern masculinity between the ideals of the civilized gentleman and the physical brute. Photos of Kid Chocolate dressed in elegant attire abounded in the Cuban press. (see figure 4.2 for one example) While his performance in the ring and descriptions of his body emphasized a role of contributing to the nation-building project

¹¹⁶ *Heraldo de Cuba*, July 13, 1931, p. 13.

¹¹⁷ For discussions of this contradiction in early twentieth century formulations of masculinity see Bederman, especially chapters 1 and 5 and the conclusion as well as Kasson, pp. 3-13 and chapter 3

as a physical specimen or performer, his persona outside the ring evoked images of a modern and civilized masculinity. The irony of the seeming contradiction between the images of Chocolate as physical specimen and as refined dandy lay in the fact that it was in fact the former that had generated the income which made the latter possible.

The importance of restraint in modern masculinity extended to the restraint of sexuality, especially for Afro-Cuban men, whose sexuality was a problematic and disturbing issue for those seeking to integrate them into a modern Cuba. In addition to loving his country and fighting valiantly for independence, the loyal black insurgent lacked (in the words of Ferrer) “any trace of sexual will . . . the absence of sexuality was essential to the portrayal of his political passivity and deference.”¹¹⁸ Similarly, any portrayal of the sexual adventures of Kid Chocolate in the mainstream Cuban press might arouse fears of black male sexuality and threaten his status as national champion that resonated so strongly with the independence era trope of the ideal black insurgent. Comfort with the idea of a man of African descent as a masculine hero required a de-emphasis of his sexuality and the notion of sexual access as a key aspect of male privilege.

Such a formulation of the black hero may help to explain the absence of any discussion of the sexual activity of Kid Chocolate in the Cuban press. As one biographer has noted, Kid Chocolate had numerous romantic encounters with a wide range of women, including white women.¹¹⁹ While Cuban journalists frequently referred to his

¹¹⁸ Ferrer, p. 121.

¹¹⁹ In contemporary Cuba Chocolate's amorous exploits are well known. The fact that Chocolate engaged in an active love life and often had sexual relations with white women was related to the author in conversations with several individuals. What is now common knowledge, however, seems to be the product of revelations in the biography *El boxeo soy yo*, which was first published in 1980. Through interviews with Chocolate and others who knew him, the authors demonstrate that Chocolate had amorous encounters

penchant for the nightlife, accounts of his sexual activity, openly acknowledged in the North American press, were conspicuously absent from the pages of popular magazines such as *Carteles* and *Bohemia*. Major Cuban publications omitted women in the trio of “wine, women and song” that North American sportswriters faulted for his eventual demise as a boxer.¹²⁰ Incidents such as the episode when Chocolate arrived at his training site with “a painted lily of Harlem on his arm”¹²¹ did not filter into the mainstream Cuban press. While foreign correspondents explicitly mentioned the women who met with Chocolate and “made the hours more pleasant for him,”¹²² Cuban journalists made oblique comments in passing about his “destructive licentiousness.”¹²³ Cuban periodicals sometimes hinted at Chocolate’s amorous adventures as part of a lifestyle of inadequate training that shortened his career, but never explicitly mentioned such adventures. Any portrayal of the sexual adventures of Kid Chocolate in the mainstream Cuban press might arouse fears of black male sexuality and threaten his status as national champion that resonated so strongly with the independence era trope of the ideal black insurgent.

One particular episode demonstrates the degree to which the Cuban press sought

with numerous women during the height of his popularity, and even include pictures of some of these women. See Menéndez and Ortega, especially pp. 115-117, 122-124, 128, 164 & 181. However, there is little evidence to indicate that the Cuban public openly discussed or was even aware of these liaisons during the peak of his career.

¹²⁰ Nat Fleischer, “Kid Chocolate’s Fall Should Serve as Object Lesson,” *The Ring* 13 (February 1934), p. 18. The demise of Kid Chocolate as a top ranked boxer and reactions to this demise in the press will be discussed fully in chapter 5.

¹²¹ Hype Igoe, “Following the Fistic Trail: ‘Little Chocolate’s’ Last Christmas Eve - Famous Negro Fighter’s Career Recalled,” *The Ring* 7 (January 1929), p. 18.

¹²² A. Arroyo Ruz, “Salió el Cubano de Europa huyendo de Gironés?: La verdad acerca de la actuación de Kid Chocolate en España,” *Carteles* 20 (February 25, 1934), p. 30. While this article appeared in the Cuban magazine *Carteles*, it was written by Spanish journalist A. Arroyo Ruz while he was in Cuba on assignment.

¹²³ “Epílogo del ‘Kid,’” *Carteles* 19 (December 31, 1933), p. 37.

to avoid discussing Kid Chocolate's sexuality, especially if such discussion brought attention to sexual transgression on his part. On November 30, 1931 Chocolate was arrested by federal marshals at the St. Nicholas Arena in New York. He was wanted in Cuba on seduction charges and was held in a federal detention center pending extradition.¹²⁴ In July of that year Pablo Mora Nieto alleged that Chocolate had taken the virginity of his daughter, Rosario Mora Martínez, after having promised to marry her, and then reneged on his pledge of marriage.¹²⁵ Mora insisted that Chocolate either fulfill his promise or serve the required sentence for the crime of seduction. Chocolate had in fact been arrested at that time in Havana (he had briefly returned in the wake of winning his first world title) but was released on bail shortly thereafter.¹²⁶ Press Reports in Cuba suggest that after formal charges had been filed, he did intend to marry Rosario Mora as early as August 1931,¹²⁷ but for some unknown reason returned to the United States that month without completing the ceremony. As a result, her father filed a motion on October

¹²⁴ *New York Times*, December 2, 1931, p. 19; *La Prensa*, December 1, 1931, p. 5. The Cuban consul general in New York, Augusto Merchán, would later insist that he initiated extradition proceedings and the detention of Chocolate in the United States only after Gutiérrez and Chocolate refused to return to Cuba immediately of their own accord. Merchán alleges that the two instead sought to stay in the United States until December 11 for Chocolate's scheduled rematch with Al Singer, forcing the consul to initiate the arrest and detention of Chocolate. See Minister Consul General Augusto Merchán y Cortés to Secretaria de Estado José Clemente Vivanco, December 9, 1931, Legajo 227, Expediente 3236, pp. 66-67, Fondo Secretaria de Estado, Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Havana, Cuba (hereinafter referred to as ANC).

¹²⁵ Declaration by Rosario Mora Martínez, July 27, 1931, Legajo 227, Expediente 3236, pp. 9-12, Fondo Secretaria de Estado, ANC; Declaration by Pablo Mora y Nieto, July 27, 1931, Legajo 227, Expediente 3236, pp. 6-9, Fondo Secretaria de Estado, ANC. In his statement Pablo Mora y Nieto insisted that his daughter had been the girlfriend of Chocolate "before he had achieved fame and celebrity as a boxing champion." Indeed, Rosario Mora had participated in the official September 1929 homecoming of Chocolate staged by the city of Havana, and was described by several press organs as his girlfriend. See Chapter 3.

¹²⁶ Complaint submitted by Cuban Consul General Augusto Merchán y Cortés to United States Commissioner Garrett W. Cotter, December 3, 1931, Legajo 227, Expediente 3236, p. 41, Fondo Secretaria de Estado, ANC.

¹²⁷ *Heraldo de Cuba*, August 10, 1931, p. 9; *La Prensa*, August 10, 1931, p. 5.

21 to have him extradited.¹²⁸ Chocolate would later write in an open letter to the Cuban press that he left without marrying Mora due to pending engagements in the United States, and had in the meantime delegated powers of matrimony to a friend so that the marriage could be completed in his absence, alleging that Mora refused to allow the marriage by proxy to take place. He also alleged that he had plans to return to Cuba in November to effect the marriage in person when requests to fight in benefit events for charity kept him in New York.¹²⁹ After his arrest by United States Federal marshals, a judge denied his initial request for bail, and he was detained for sixteen days.¹³⁰

The lengthy stay in a federal jail in New York was the result of a delay in the processing of extradition papers by Cuban diplomatic officials. It was not until after Gutiérrez met with President Gerardo Machado himself on December 14 to request his intervention that the arrangements for Chocolate's release to Cuban officials and return to Cuba were completed.¹³¹ After meeting with Gutiérrez, Machado had his Secretary of State José Clemente Vivanco ask the Cuban ambassador Orestes Ferrara to expedite the matter, and within two days Chocolate was freed.¹³² Chocolate later asserted that "the kindness of our president reached the extent of informing us daily on the process through telegrams and letters" and expressed "profound gratitude" for his intervention.¹³³ In all

¹²⁸ Dr. José A. Villaverde, Motion for Extradition, October 21, 1931, Legajo 227, Expediente 3236, p. 17-18, Fondo Secretaria de Estado, ANC.

¹²⁹ *La Prensa*, December 29, 1931, p. 5; *Heraldo de Cuba*, December 20, 1931, p. 9, 13.

¹³⁰ *New York Times*, December 4, 1931, p. 18; *La Prensa*, December 4, 1931, pp. 1 & 5.

¹³¹ *La Prensa*, December 29, 1931, p. 5; *Heraldo de Cuba*, December 15, 1931, pp. 9, 10.

¹³² Secretary of State José Clemente Vivanco to Ambassador Orestes Ferrara, December 14, 1931, Legajo 227, Expediente 3236, p. 56, Fondo Secretaria de Estado, ANC.

¹³³ *La Prensa*, December 29, 1931, p. 5.

likelihood the involvement of the president in the matter was a gesture intended to temper the growing popular opposition to his regime by intervening on behalf of a national hero. The pro-Machado *Heraldo de Cuba* noted that in intervening on behalf of Chocolate, Machado had “once again shown pleasure in offering all the necessary assistance to a compatriot” and that Pincho Gutiérrez was “very grateful” for his involvement in the matter.¹³⁴ On December 16, Chocolate was finally released from prison into the custody of Cuban authorities. The same day a ceremony was held in Havana in which he married Rosario Mora Martínez by proxy, with Pincho Gutiérrez representing Chocolate.¹³⁵ By the time Chocolate returned to Havana from New York the seduction charges had been dismissed.¹³⁶

The manner in which the Cuban press covered the affair indicated a reticence on the part of journalists to expose Chocolate’s sexual misconduct. *Bohemia* and *Carteles* magazines made no mention whatsoever of the case. *Heraldo de Cuba*, which ran numerous articles and columns on the case from the day of the arrest until the resolution of the matter, did not mention the specific charges brought against him until December 15,¹³⁷ over two weeks after he had first been arrested. Instead the paper made opaque allusions to the nature of the case. Similarly, *Diario de la Marina* revealed that Chocolate had been arraigned in court in Havana for having “evaded his fiancée,”¹³⁸ but added that

¹³⁴ *Heraldo de Cuba*, December 15, 1931, p. 9.

¹³⁵ *New York Times*, December 17, 1931.

¹³⁶ Order # 358, December 17, 1931, Legajo 227, Expediente 3236, p. 60, Fondo Secretaria de Estado, ANC.

¹³⁷ *Heraldo de Cuba*, December 15, 1931, p. 2.

¹³⁸ *Diario de la Marina*, December 1, 1931, p. 15.

Gutiérrez called the case “a small amorous affair.”¹³⁹ The day after the arrest *Heraldo de Cuba* referred to the alleged deed as “an offense of a private matter.”¹⁴⁰ On December 2 the paper insisted that Chocolate “has not killed nor robbed, but has committed an offense that he is prepared to correct in the manner that a gentleman can,”¹⁴¹ alluding to the alleged promise of marriage. Not only did *Heraldo de Cuba* refuse to mention the specific charge, it also found it necessary to confirm the gentlemanly nature of the young boxer. Two days later the paper insisted that his only crime was to have done something that “many individuals have done... and have paid for solely with a signature in a courthouse.”¹⁴² Sexual transgressions, or the sexually liberal behavior of Kid Chocolate, threatened to undo an inclusive construct of Afro-Cuban masculinity based on a tense balance between male privilege and racial subordination.

The coverage (or lack thereof) of the romantic life of Kid Chocolate in the mainstream Cuban press reflected the tensions and contradictions surrounding the implications of an individual of African descent filling the role of a masculine national hero. As a male hero whose status was based on his physical abilities, Kid Chocolate likely triggered anxieties regarding the sexuality of men of African descent in Cuba.¹⁴³ As an epitome of manly valor, he may have awakened fears that were grounded in the understanding of sexual access across racial lines as one basis of racial dominance by

¹³⁹ *Diario de la Marina*, December 2, 1931, p. 13.

¹⁴⁰ *Heraldo de Cuba*, December 1, 1931, p. 10.

¹⁴¹ *Heraldo de Cuba*, December 2, 1931, p. 9.

¹⁴² *Heraldo de Cuba*, December 4, 1931, p. 9.

¹⁴³ For a discussion of anxieties in Cuba with regards to racial equality and the sexuality of Afro-Cuban men, see Guridy, pp. 246-248 and Helg, *Our Rightful Share*, chs. 6 and 7.

white men over black men. While admiration of his physical form was commonplace, such admiration was grounded in a casting of Chocolate as a physical specimen rather than a sexual subject. Silences in the press regarding the sexual exploits of Chocolate suggest that discomfort regarding the sexuality of black men complicated their status as potential exemplars of Cuban manhood.

Chapter 5: The Fall of a Superstar and the Legacy of an Icon

The Fall of Kid Chocolate

The demise of Kid Chocolate as a top ranked boxer occurred almost as abruptly and unexpectedly as his rise. Though he won the New York State world featherweight title in November 1932 and ended the year as a titleholder in two different weight classes, by the end of the year he was already beginning to lose his reputation as a top-level fighter. As early as the spring of that year, observers detected a noticeable decline in his performance and skills. One reporter noted that during a fight in May Chocolate “fought like his old fiery and spectacular self only in flashes, which came all too infrequently.”¹ Even when he defeated Lew Feldman to win the New York State featherweight crown one paper noted, “it was not the victory it could have been if Chocolate had been in his best physical shape.”² His drawing power was also beginning to falter. *The Ring* magazine observed that in the summer of 1932 Chocolate “didn’t get as much out of seven fights last summer as he did for one of his indoor shots at the Garden a year ago.”³

By 1933 boxing correspondents began to write obituaries for Chocolate’s status as a top boxer. *The Ring* commented on one fight that Chocolate either “had an off night or... he is completely through as a first class fighter. [His] speed and skill were sadly missing... The dash and vim of former days were gone and Chocolate looked like an

¹ *New York Times*, June 2, 1932, p. 28.

² *La Prensa*, December 15, 1932, p. 6.

³ Nat Fleischer Says, *The Ring* 11 (November 1932), p. 37.

ordinary fighter.”⁴ Cuban journalists also noted the decline. In the spring of 1934 *Carteles* magazine declared that it was clear to everyone that Chocolate had “ended his days as an exceptional pugilist. He has lost his most brilliant talent: agility.”⁵

The nature of the decline of the “Cuban Bon Bon” at times baffled sportswriters, who struggled to make sense of the development. In July 1934 *La Prensa* asked, “What happened to Kid Chocolate?” The paper noted that “from the waist up” Chocolate was “the same as ever,” but that his legs were noticeably weak in the joints, as if “some evil genie had played a joke... and attached an agile and young torso to a pair of ancient legs.” His demise was so puzzling to one observer that only magic seemed to provide a plausible explanation. The loss of quickness in his legs became a recurring theme. By the end of 1934 one reporter noted that there continued to be “enough Chocolate, from the waist up to prevail over a good number of the present boxers in the lighter categories,” but the state of his legs compromised his abilities overall.⁶ Chocolate apparently retained enough ability to compete against many boxers, but he could no longer compete with the best boxers of the day.

The relatively sudden demise of Kid Chocolate in his early twenties, an age when he should have been entering his prime as an athlete, begs the question as to the precise cause of his decline as an elite boxer. In separate conversations, biographers Elio Menéndez and Víctor Joaquín Ortega both indicated that he was afflicted with syphilis at some point in the early 1930s, and this was the cause of his downfall.⁷ While there is no

⁴ Eddie Borden, “Broadcast from New York,” *The Ring* 12 (July 1933), p. 40.

⁵ Jess Losada, “Actualidad deportiva,” *Carteles* 20 (March 2, 1934), p. 36.

⁶ *La Prensa*, November 7, 1934, p. 6.

⁷ Víctor Joaquín Ortega, interview by author, tape recording, Havana, Cuba, June 22, 2005. Elio Menéndez, interview by author, tape recording, Havana, Cuba, April 20, 2007. Menéndez notes that the

reliable written evidence available to date to document that Chocolate had syphilis, elements of his decline do suggest that he was affected by some sort of ailment. His performances were often erratic, with lackluster displays often following a string of promising fights when he appeared to show flashes of his old form. Oftentimes fatigue seemed to be a major issue in his fights, as active dominance of his opponents in early rounds gave way to lethargic efforts. This explanation would account for Chocolate's ability at times to show flashes of his old brilliance even as he was considered "past his prime" by all observers.⁸

Evidence exists to suggest that some sort of illness was the cause for the erosion of Chocolate's abilities. Beginning in 1931, multiple references to a joint ailment appeared in newspaper reports, though no specific illness was ever mentioned.⁹ That summer Gutiérrez revealed that Chocolate had been suffering from a mastoidal infection during his 1930 losses to both Jack "Kid" Berg and Battling Battalino.¹⁰ One month later

contraction of syphilis by Kid Chocolate was not public knowledge in the 1930s and he was apprised of the information through personal acquaintances of Chocolate. It may be virtually impossible to determine for certain if Kid Chocolate had syphilis based on circumstantial evidence. Deborah Hayden, who has attempted to diagnose and assess the possible affect of syphilis in the lives of numerous historical figures, including Friedrich Nietzsche, Charles Baudelaire and even Abraham Lincoln and Adolf Hitler, notes that without the examination of physical tissue under a microscope, detection of syphilis is quite difficult. Even for doctors attempting to diagnosis a living patient based on external observation, syphilis "never yields to one diagnostic key" and it is a disease of "low visibility and wide dispersion of manifestations." So much so that it carries the nickname "the Great Imitator." Deborah Hayden, *Pox: Genius, Madness and the Mysteries of Syphilis* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), pp. 61-62.

⁸ Hayden notes that in the years following initial infection with syphilis, "[a]pparent good health alternates with bouts of being bedridden or hospitalized as pain flares up and subsides in one part of the body after another," and relapses in symptoms were common. In the early twentieth century researchers "accepted the premise that syphilis was a relapsing lifelong disease." Hayden, pp.35, 49 and 55. Victor Joaquín Ortega claims that Chocolate acquired syphilis before winning his world championships. Victor Joaquín Ortega, interview by author, tape recording, Havana, Cuba, June 22, 2005. Thus having syphilis may have been compatible with Chocolate's erratic performance later in his career and his sometimes promising, though ultimately unsuccessful comeback attempts.

⁹ Deborah Hayden has noted that pain in the joints is one common symptom of the early stages of syphilis. See Hayden, pp. 53 and 319.

¹⁰ *Heraldo de Cuba*, July 7, 1931, p. 13.

Heraldo de Cuba reported that a doctor had advised Chocolate to take two or three months off to recover from a joint ailment.¹¹ *La Prensa* reported that he suffered from pus in his joints.¹² In early 1933 a fight with “Seaman” Tommy Watson was delayed a week for undisclosed health reasons as Chocolate complained of pain in his left knee.¹³ Chocolate also complained of pain in his shoulders and legs right before the bout.¹⁴ *The Ring* called attention to the fact that “Kid Chocolate is suffering from an ailment that is not conducive to good boxing.” While the magazine did not specify what the illness was, it expressed doubt that the one-time star would “ever again... be the Chocolate of old.”¹⁵

Whether or not Chocolate actually contracted syphilis, it does appear that most fans and reporters, both Cuban and North American, were aware of some illness, though they did not seem to know whether it was a long-term illness or if it had lasting effects.¹⁶ Thus his abrupt decline as a quality boxer was a mystery to many observers. Inconsistent performances beginning as early as 1930 and 1931, and the noticeable sustained erosion in his abilities beginning in 1932 left observers struggling to find reasons to explain the demise of an athlete that many had considered the most exciting boxer of the day. Writers consistently speculated and debated the reasons for the deterioration of his abilities.

Some cited fatigue caused by the demands of a relentless schedule of fights. They

¹¹ *Heraldo de Cuba*, August 10, 1931, p. 9.

¹² *La Prensa*, August 10, 1931, p. 5.

¹³ *La Prensa*, May 17, 1933, p. 5.

¹⁴ *La Prensa*, May 22, 1933, p. 5.

¹⁵ Nat Fleischer, “Nat Fleischer Says,” *The Ring* 12 (July 1933), p. 31.

¹⁶ Elio Menéndez, interview by author, tape recording, Havana, Cuba, April 20, 2007. While previous treatments with varying degrees of effectiveness existed, penicillin was successfully used to treat syphilis for the first time in 1943. Though it does not reverse any damage already done, penicillin typically cures the disease, though slight traces may remain in the body. Thus it is possible that syphilis may have cut the boxing career of Kid Chocolate short, but a treatment was discovered in time to prevent the onset of the more destructive symptoms characteristic of later phases, which can occur as late as “a few years to several decades after infection.” Hayden, pp. 50 and 56.

pointed to the sheer number of fights that Chocolate had, arguing that his body was simply worn down by so much activity at such a young age. Former lightweight champion Benny Leonard commented, “Chocolate is a marvelous fighting machine but he has had too many fights. He is burnt out from overwork because he has not matured. His size and age are against him. He needs a long rest.”¹⁷ *The Ring* emphasized the presumed impact of his busy schedule during the first four years of his professional career:

The Cuban negro [sic] started boxing when he was hardly more than a child. He engaged in one hundred and seventy bouts without a single defeat... His sudden slipping from form was due to the fact that he fought too often before he gained his full strength...Those one hundred and seventy matches were crowded into a few years. Chocolate fought almost continuously, once and sometimes twice a week. That took something from him that probably will never return.¹⁸

Even in the early stages of his career, journalists questioned the wisdom of Chocolate’s frequent schedule of fights. One asserted that Gutiérrez was “working Chocolate too much, making him fight very frequently.”¹⁹

Others speculated that his social habits compromised his abilities. Evidence indicates that Chocolate did in fact become an avid participant in the New York nightlife soon after he arrived in the United States. He seemed to struggle with the need to balance the attraction such a lifestyle might pose for any late adolescent blessed with newfound wealth with the rigorous training regimen required of a successful boxer. He often “trained during the day and, behind the back of Gutiérrez, enjoyed the social scene at

¹⁷ *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 17, 1931, section 2, p. 5.

¹⁸ Jack Kofoed, “It’s a Long Road to Boxing Peaks,” *The Ring* 10 (April 1931), pp. 18-19.

¹⁹ *Diario de la Marina*, November 10, 1928, p. 15.

night.”²⁰ Four months after he first arrived, one writer commented wryly on a complaint by Chocolate that he was fighting too often: “Fighting twice a week will not harm the Kid. His greatest danger at present is that the alluring fleshpots of Harlem will make him their victim. Success seems to have come to him too fast.”²¹ Two weeks later another writer observed that he had become fascinated by the Harlem nightlife.²²

Even at the early stages of his career, observers pointed to festive nights whenever Chocolate executed what seemed to be a sub-par performance. In the week before one fight in the fall of 1928, he reportedly “did his training in the nightclubs of 7th and Lenox Aves.” As a result he entered the ring “out of condition and had to travel at top speed to get a decision at the end of 10 rounds.”²³ Hype Igoe suggested that his immediate success in New York was one reason for his seeming reticence to train consistently and in a disciplined manner.

Kid Chocolate... has come to believe, in light of his repeated easy victories... that he does not need to prepare [for fights]. In a word, the Kid has decided to abandon any rigorous training as unnecessary. He came to New York without a cent, and money so rapidly entered his pockets, thanks to the capable maneuvers of Gutiérrez and the help of promoter Eddie McMahon, that he no longer wants to train.²⁴

A week later Igoe again took Chocolate to task for his purported lack of discipline: “I have been told that the Kid is already forgetting his training, that he has been dedicating

²⁰ Menéndez and Ortega, pp. 24-25.

²¹ *New York Daily Mirror*, November 20, 1928, p. 24.

²² *New York Daily Mirror*, December 3, 1928, p. 27.

²³ *New York Daily Mirror*, December 5, 1928, p. 29.

²⁴ *Diario de la Marina*, November 19, 1928, p. 15.

himself to dancing and wastes his most precious moments attending picaresque parties in Harlem.”²⁵

Once Chocolate seemed to have permanently lost his superior talents, the press seized on his social life as the principal reason for this development. In this narrative, his refusal to train consistently and his penchant for enjoying the nightlife were what compromised an otherwise brilliant career. *The Ring* declared that “[f]ame and fortune apparently went to the head of the Patent Leather Kid and at an age when he should still be in his prime so far as fisticuffs is concerned, he has shot his bolt and is on his way out.”²⁶ The magazine declared that “fast living” was responsible for his fall,²⁷ and pointed to his experience “as a lesson to those who try to retain their physical stamina while burning the candle at both ends.”²⁸ The *New York Mirror* concurred, stating that Chocolate was “endowed by Nature with... the grace and agility of a leopard,” but added that “she failed to endow him with the force of character to resist the fleshpots strewn along his path through life.”²⁹

Ultimately talent was not enough to sustain a successful boxing career. The athletic ideals of discipline and preparation carried considerable weight as values that were central to the cultural sphere of sport. *La Prensa* optimistically suggested that Chocolate could indeed mount a successful comeback if he returned to a life of discipline:

²⁵ *Diario de la Marina*, November 28, 1928, p. 15.

²⁶ Nat Fleischer, “Nat Fleischer Says,” *The Ring* 12 (January 1934), p. 47.

²⁷ Nat Fleischer, “The Ring’s Ratings of Boxers for 1933,” *The Ring* 13 (February 1934), p. 10.

²⁸ Nat Fleischer, “Kid Chocolate’s Fall Should Serve as Object Lesson,” *The Ring* 13 (February 1934), p. 18.

²⁹ Dan Parker, *New York Mirror*. Cited in *The Ring* 13 (September 1934), p. 16.

Chocolate only needs a renewal, and this renewal is not a question of rest or submitting himself to certain diets to gain weight and strength. This 'renewal' is simply a total change in lifestyle, a return to those times when the boxer had... sufficient willpower to realize what needs to be done in the private life of an athlete, controlling worthless impulses and all the habits that are detrimental to a man who lives off his physical faculties and the virtues of a clear and worriless mind.³⁰

Without explicitly mentioning the specific behaviors that were understood to have contributed to the demise of Chocolate, the editorial invoked the issues of self-control and discipline that were understood to be critical aspects of the life of a successful athlete and male hero. Though they often used furtive and coded language to say so, for journalists the decline of Kid Chocolate became a morality tale about the importance of discipline, self-control and restraint in the life of a successful athlete, providing a metaphor for the importance of these qualities in the life of the ideal modern man.

Though his abilities declined, his reputation still generated demand for his appearance in a variety of locations throughout the globe. Pincho reported that lucrative offers continued to come in from across the United States as well as Argentina and Mexico.³¹ His persisting fame also generated lucrative offers for fights in Madrid, Barcelona and Paris.³² In May 1933 Chocolate and Gutiérrez travelled to Europe with plans to fight in England, France and Spain.³³ It is possible that Gutiérrez and Chocolate had decided to leave for Europe in order to avoid being in Cuba during the tumultuous summer that would result in the fall of President Gerardo Machado. The two had apparently discussed the possibility of going to Europe for some time, but finally decided

³⁰ *La Prensa*, February 21, 1934, p. 6.

³¹ *La Prensa*, April 15, 1933, p. 6.

³² Jorge Alfonso, *Puños dorados: Apuntes para la historia del boxeo en Cuba* (Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 1988), p. 64.

³³ *La Prensa*, May 26, 1933, p. 5.

to go after the United States only gave Chocolate a ninety-day visa when he returned from Cuba in April.³⁴ Faced with the prospect of having to leave the United States after ninety days, Chocolate and Gutiérrez may have instead opted to travel in Europe rather than return to a volatile political situation in Cuba. After the trip the two returned directly to North America in early October to pursue a number of fights there before finally returning to Cuba in late December, after Machado had been ousted.³⁵

The tour of Europe turned out to be a disappointment. During his three month trip Chocolate only fought in three bouts over the course of ten weeks, a stark contrast to the whirlwind schedule of up to one fight a week that he had pursued in the years 1928 and 1929. Reports on his fights in Spain and France suggested that he continued to suffer from a decline in form, ability and stamina. Though he won his first fight on the trip in Madrid, the fact that he had failed to knock his opponent down once was seen as a disappointment by fans and other observers.³⁶ Two weeks later, during a fight in Barcelona he “tired badly toward the finish... and slowed down visibly as the result of his opponent’s body attack.”³⁷ From a business perspective the fight was also seen as a disappointment, as Chocolate only secured three fights, never having fought in London as he had planned.³⁸

Nonetheless, interest in the career of the “Cuban Bon Bon” continued. As of the fall of 1933 he remained a champion in two weight classes, holding the NBA junior lightweight and the New York State Featherweight titles. A rematch of his spectacular

³⁴ *La Prensa*, May 26, 1933, p. 5.

³⁵ *La Prensa*, October 11, 1933, p. 5.

³⁶ *La Prensa*, July 17, 1933, p. 5.

³⁷ *New York Times*, August 3, 1933, p. 23.

³⁸ *La Prensa*, October 11, 1933, p. 5.

fight with Tony Canzoneri had been scheduled for late November, and one reporter hailed the fight as part of a “calendar of boxing that recalls pre-depression days.” The fight marked the first time during the winter season that Madison Square Garden was to charge a maximum price of five dollars per seat, charging only as much as three in previous bouts that year.³⁹ While the fight was not a title bout,⁴⁰ 13,000 fans, “the largest crowd of recent months,” came to Madison Square Garden to witness the contest.⁴¹ Perhaps fans hoped that Chocolate might be able to stage a return to prior form. Those hopes were quickly dashed as Chocolate was knocked out for the very first time in his career towards the end of the second round. Despite its short duration, *The New York Times* commented that “more blood and thunder fighting was crowded into that actual five and one half minutes of action than has been seen here in years.”⁴² *La Prensa* opined that Chocolate had won the first round and implied that the knockout was the result of a lucky punch on the part of Canzoneri, suggesting that Chocolate did appear to be in good shape during the first two rounds.⁴³

One month after the loss to Canzoneri, Chocolate fought Frankie Klick in Philadelphia on Christmas day to defend his NBA junior lightweight title. Again Chocolate turned in a disappointing performance, as he succumbed to a technical knock out in the seventh round.⁴⁴ Chocolate, who had gone almost six years and over 200 fights

³⁹ *New York Times*, November 19, 1933, p. S11.

⁴⁰ Canzoneri could not make the featherweight cut off of 126 pounds and New York State did not recognize the junior lightweight division. *New York Times*, November 24, 1933, p. 26.

⁴¹ *New York Times*, November 25, 1933, p. 20.

⁴² *New York Times*, November 25, 1933, p. 20.

⁴³ *La Prensa*, November 25, 1933, p. 2.

⁴⁴ *La Prensa*, December 26, 1933, p. 1; *La Prensa*, December 27, 1933, p. 6.

without ever being knocked out, was knocked out twice in thirty days time.⁴⁵ As “dramatic as it was unexpected” the loss seemed to mark the final death knell in Chocolate’s status as an elite boxer. Klick himself was a relative unknown at the time of the fight.⁴⁶ Two months later, Chocolate announced that he would relinquish the New York State featherweight title because he could no longer stay within the class weight limit of 126 pounds, though he would continue to box in the lightweight division (135 pounds or less).⁴⁷ Within the space of three months Chocolate had been knocked out twice and lost both of the world championships in his possession.

After the loss to Klick Chocolate would not fight for four months, spending time in Havana in an attempt to recuperate and make a comeback to the top of the boxing ranks. He had been scheduled to appear in a fight at the Payret Theater in Havana in March 1934, but the fight never took place. The bout was intended to be part of a “tourist week” program put together by the national tourist commission to stimulate visits after “many years of disturbed conditions” in Cuba.⁴⁸ The announcement suggests that even as his reputation as a prime contender began to fade, Cuban government officials sought to leverage his fame for the benefit of the island as a whole.

In the spring of 1934, Chocolate began a five-week tour of California before returning to New York City in a bid to continue to regain his former status. In July he squared off against Petey Hayes at Ebbets Field in Brooklyn and lost in a unanimous decision that seemed to confirm his decline. Before the fight *La Prensa* observed that a

⁴⁵ “Nat Fleischer, Nat Fleischer Says,” *The Ring* 12 (January 1934), p. 47.

⁴⁶ *New York Times*, December 26, 1933, p. 23.

⁴⁷ *New York Times*, February 18, 1934, p. S4; *New York Times*, February 20, 1934, p. 29.

⁴⁸ *New York Times*, March 4, 1934,

loss by Chocolate would be “the final punctuation of the sensational career of the ‘negrito’ as a first class [boxer].”⁴⁹ The *New York Times* commented that during the fight “the Cuban phantom was just a shadow” as his “attempt to strike the comeback trail met with disastrous defeat.” Chocolate managed to display elements of his prior form in the first two rounds, but for the rest of the fight took a “terrific beating,” as “the sting was gone from his punches and the speed from his legs.”⁵⁰ After the loss one reporter declared that any attempts by Chocolate to continue fighting would effectively amount to “an exploitation of the enormous prestige he had in previous times.”⁵¹ By the end of 1934 observers agreed that, at the relatively young age of twenty-four, Chocolate had lost the ability and skill that had propelled him to stardom.⁵² His ability to excite fans through his speed and constant activity was gone. One account of a fight that spring described the contest as “a monotonous ten round encounter,”⁵³ a far cry from the accounts of electrifying action and riveted fans that characterized the first four years of his professional career. In December the *New York Times* declared that he was “fading from boxing.”⁵⁴

Commensurate with the decline of Chocolate’s ability and the reversal of his success was his disappearance from the sports headlines of the daily press in Cuba,⁵⁵ though popular magazines continued to occasionally report on his attempts to regain his

⁴⁹ *La Prensa*, July 11, 1934, p. 6.

⁵⁰ *New York Times*, July 12, 1934, p. 24.

⁵¹ *La Prensa*, May 21, 1934, p. 6.

⁵² Alfonso, p. 65.

⁵³ *La Prensa*, May 24, 1934, p. 6.

⁵⁴ *New York Times*, December 30, 1934, p. S4.

⁵⁵ Elio Menéndez and Victor Joaquín Ortega, *Kid Chocolate: El boxeo soy yo* (Havana: Editorial Orbe, 1980), p. 137.

status. Cuban commentators also remarked on the significance of discipline and self-control, or the lack thereof, in the career of Chocolate. In September 1935 *Carteles* magazine observed, that he “could have been much more than he was with a stronger mind...it was not the gloves of his opponents that imparted defeat... but the erroneous tactic of his lifestyle and training.”⁵⁶ Hopes that Kid Chocolate could stage a comeback also highlighted the importance of discipline as a key to athletic success. The Cuban sports magazine *Record* articulated this notion in November 1935 when it observed that Chocolate had begun to “recuperate his old form through means of an orderly and strict lifestyle.”⁵⁷ In the summer of 1936 the magazine *Adelante* expressed optimism that Chocolate could in fact return to his old form if he “took his training seriously and stayed away from certain friendships that instead of benefitting him are detrimental.” The magazine noted that if he were able to engage in proper behavior he could in fact “revert to what he had been: one of the best boxers of all times.”⁵⁸ The statement echoed the narrative articulated in the North American press that certain social habits were the cause of the Kid’s downfall. But rather than making any explicit mention of women or amorous encounters, *Adelante* only went so far as to mention “certain friendships,” suggesting a reticence to be too direct or transparent in its discussion of the matter.

The impact of the emergence of athletics as a site of nationalist expression of Afro-Cuban masculinity had the effect of emphasizing discipline, control and restraint as core values within the masculine ideal. Such an emphasis would have a comforting effect on those seeking to integrate poor Afro-Cuban men into the national project in ways that

⁵⁶ Jess Losada, “Nubes oscuro sobre el boxeo,” p. 42.

⁵⁷ Filiberto, “Ajiaco,” *Record* 1, no. 3 (November 1935), p. 45.

⁵⁸ Salamar, “Deportes: Chocolate hacia su antigua forma,” *Adelante* 2, no. 15 (July 1936), p. 21.

would minimize their supposed degenerate proclivities or lack of civilization and refinement. The morality tale provided by Chocolate's decline as a top boxer helped to emphasize this disciplining aspect of athletics as a site of masculine expression. As he attempted his comeback, Cuban commentators emphasized the importance discipline and training would have in his return to form. *Adelante* declared "we encourage... the great boxer to take his return to the ring seriously, we believe that he still has the potential to return to his old form, which he can attain if he begins a life of rest and care, as is necessary for one who intends to maintain himself in perfect physical condition."⁵⁹ Athletic success carried an imperative of an orderly and disciplined lifestyle, such imperatives of order and discipline undoubtedly appealed to Cuban intellectuals and leaders seeking to mold a modern and developed nation out of a category of people considered by many to be savage and backwards.

Chocolate continued to fight, though in less prominent venues and with much less frequency than at the beginning of his career. Over the course of 1935 and most of 1936 he did not box at all in the United States, and instead engaged in eight bouts in Cuba and two in Venezuela against boxers from the United States, Cuba and elsewhere in Latin America. These fights were in large part intended as a means of preparing for a return to North American rings.⁶⁰ When he did return in late 1936 to fight Phil Baker, his "comeback hopes received another rude jolt" as he was subjected to a "severe beating" by his opponent. The fight, Chocolate's first in a North American ring in over two years, was said to generate "enormous" interest among fans.⁶¹ Though a doctor from the New

⁵⁹ "Chocolate y su Come Back," *Adelante* 1, no. 3 (August 1935), p. 21.

⁶⁰ Salamar, "Deportes: El come-back de Kid Chocolate," *Adelante* 2, no. 16 (August 1936), p. 21.

⁶¹ *La Prensa*, December 7, 1936, p. 6.

York State Athletic Commission would declare two days before the fight that Chocolate was “in excellent physical condition,”⁶² fatigue again seemed to be a major cause for his lackluster performance as only in the first round did he “approach anything resembling his former greatness.” The fight served as further proof that “[g]one were his former devastating left hooks and the dazzling speed that had stamped him as one of the greatest little men in the boxing game.”⁶³

Despite the one-sided loss, Chocolate continued to pursue a North American comeback in 1937, fighting in over twenty bouts in the smaller rings of New York City and New Jersey. His attempt met with moderate success. He won twenty-four out of twenty-six fights after the loss to Baker, with two draws. Commentary by one reporter suggested that the comeback was in large part an attempt to continue to generate income:

The Chocolate career should be a great object lesson to young fighters who come up fast and find money being pushed at them from every direction. A game fighter and a brilliant boxer, Chocolate didn't take care of himself or his money. He went down as fast as he came up. He should have a fortune tucked away. Instead of that, he is now working for meal money.⁶⁴

That summer he began to fight with greater frequency, fighting four times each month during June, July and August. This increased frequency may have been due to an improvement in his condition, a need to generate income,⁶⁵ or perhaps both. By August he managed to secure an engagement at Madison Square Garden.⁶⁶ In the fight Chocolate made a favorable impression as to the feasibility of his comeback, winning in a

⁶² *La Prensa*, December 5, 1936, p. 6.

⁶³ *New York Times*, December 8, 1936, p. 33.

⁶⁴ *New York Times*, June 2, 1937, p. 31.

⁶⁵ One biographical account notes that despite the large amounts that Chocolate earned in the early part of his career, he had saved very little and thus was forced to continue to fight well after his obvious decline. See Jorge Alfonso, “Campeón de campeones: Kid Chocolate,” *Bohemia* 66 (August 9, 1974), p. 47.

⁶⁶ *New York Times*, August 19, 1937, p. 14.

unanimous decision, and demonstrating clear superiority over his opponent.⁶⁷ By the end of the year, Chocolate had returned to a ranking of sixth among featherweights in 1937 annual rankings composed by *The Ring*. The magazine dubbed his comeback effort, “the most remarkable comeback that any fighter has accomplished in the last ten years.”⁶⁸ However the fight at Madison Square Garden would be his last in the United States, and by the end of the year Kid Chocolate disappeared from the North American boxing scene without much fanfare.

Despite his downfall, Chocolate remained one of the best drawing cards in Cuba through the end of his career.⁶⁹ Even when his status as a top contender waned, Cubans continued to revere the “Havana Kid” and turn out in large numbers to support him. After the victory at Madison Square Garden, Chocolate returned to Havana, where he fought in a rematch against Phil Baker at the *Tropical* stadium in September. The Associated Press described the fight against Baker as part of a “celebration of the fourth anniversary of Colonel Fulgencio Batista’s revolution,” a somewhat distorted characterization of the events of September 1933.⁷⁰ Batista himself, who was now the effective head of state, was one of the 10,000 Cuban fans who came out to watch Chocolate “dance nimbly to victory.”⁷¹ His penultimate bout in March 1938 against Fillo Echeverría broke the Cuban

⁶⁷ *New York Times*, August 20, 1937, p. 12.

⁶⁸ Nat Fleischer, “The Ring Ranks Boxers for 1937,” *The Ring* 17 (February 1938), p. 15.

⁶⁹ Nat Fleischer, “Central America Boxing Minded,” *The Ring* 15 (May 1936), p. 10.

⁷⁰ For a more accurate account of the “Sergeants’ Revolt” of September 1933, and the consolidation of Cuban politics under Fulgencio Batista in the wake of the fall of President Gerardo Machado in August 1933, see Louis A. Pérez, Jr. *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 200-209.

⁷¹ *New York Times*, September 6, 1937, p. 12.

record for attendance at a non-heavyweight bout in Cuba, drawing a crowd of 13,000.⁷² In this bout, too, he sporadically showed flashes of his former brilliance, and won the bout easily.⁷³

Chocolate's final fight took place in December 1938 in Havana against North American boxer Nick Jerome. Earlier that year Pincho Gutiérrez stepped down as Chocolate's manager because of his new responsibilities working for the Cuban National Boxing Commission,⁷⁴ and journalist Jess Losada, sports writer for *Carteles* magazine, took on the role. Before the Jerome fight took place, Losada and Chocolate had made plans to tour Central and South America, so that the Kid might "retire with a bit of capital to secure his future."⁷⁵ The fight ended in a draw,⁷⁶ but the "Havana Kid" apparently had such a poor showing in the fight that the very next day he met with his current and former managers, Jess Losada and Pincho Gutiérrez, and decided to retire.⁷⁷ Right up until that final fight in December 1938, Chocolate was described as "the most popular fighter in Cuba."⁷⁸ In its year in review for 1938, the widely read *Bohemia* magazine recorded his retirement as one of the highlights of the year.⁷⁹ Chocolate maintained his status as a national hero and popular idol up until the very end of his professional career.

Despite the considerable fortune he earned over the course of his career, after his

⁷² "Boxing in Cuba," *The Ring* 17 (June 1938), p. 61; *New York Times*, March 21, 1938, p. 10; *La Prensa*, March 21, 1938, p. 6.

⁷³ *La Prensa*, March 21, 1938, p. 6.

⁷⁴ "Boxing in Cuba," *The Ring* 17 (January 1939), p. 58; Eladio Secades, "Reacciona el deportismo Cubano bajo nuevas esperanzas de gloria," *Bohemia* 30 (October 30, 1938), p. 27. See below for a more detailed discussion of the role of Pincho Gutiérrez with the Cuban boxing commission beginning in 1938.

⁷⁵ Eladio Secades, "Kid Chocolate hace mutis," *Bohemia* 30 (December 25, 1938), pp. 32-33.

⁷⁶ *New York Times*, 19, 1938, p. 28.

⁷⁷ Secades, "Kid Chocolate hace mutis," pp. 32-33; *New York Times*, December 20, 1938, p. 34.

⁷⁸ Milton Baron, "Boxing in Cuba," *The Ring* 18 (February 1939), p. 63.

⁷⁹ "Cuba en 1938," *Bohemia* 31 (January 8, 1939), p. 39.

retirement his financial situation was precarious until the revolutionary government provided him with a pension after taking power in 1959. At the end of his career Chocolate seemed to have little to nothing left of the considerable income he accrued as a professional boxer. Immediately after his retirement, former manager Gutiérrez sought to hold a benefit event for the sake of generating income for the young boxer who had apparently failed to save any of his earnings.⁸⁰ As is often the case for popular and successful boxers, Chocolate had failed to convert his tremendous earnings into long-standing wealth.⁸¹ But his status as a national hero and emblem of sporting accomplishment would allow him to earn an income after retirement first as an instructor for the national boxing academy and later through a pension from the post-revolutionary government.

The Dirección General de Deportes and the Institutional Commitment to Cuban Sport

Towards the end of Chocolate's career, the Cuban government made visible efforts to promote the development of local boxers and provide institutional support for sport in general. In July 1938, six months before Chocolate officially retired as a boxer, the *Dirección General de Deportes* (DGD) was established by executive decree.⁸² The agency was charged with the oversight of all sports in Cuba and the execution of measures to promote sport on the island.⁸³ Soon after its establishment the newspaper

⁸⁰ Secades, "Kid Chocolate hace mutis," p. 53; Menéndez and Ortega, p. 157.

⁸¹ Jeffrey Sammons has observed that such a financial fate is not uncommon for boxers, noting "[o]n the average boxers have seven or eight years in which to earn a living, and few have the necessary fiscal management skills to build a nest egg prior to their retirement from the fight game. A dearth of marketable skills outside the ring has also been a major cause of economic collapse for boxers both during and after their careers." See Jeffrey Sammons, *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 241

⁸² *Hoy*, July 14, 1938, p. 9; Alfonso, *Puños dorados*, p. 34.

⁸³ *Hoy*, July 19, 1938, p. 9.

Alerta articulated the rationale and expectations for the new agency:

Sport being one of the richest aspects of the life of our nation, it is most natural and practical that there exist a center of official control, a large brain-trust, which regulates... and watches over this vast field, [and] on which depends the health and future of the youth of our race.⁸⁴

The paper not only argued that a government agency for the oversight of sport was a logical idea, it demonstrated the ways in which race and nation could be linked and conflated, especially when athletic competition was the subject at hand. In the same sentence, *Alerta* observed that sport was an important aspect of the life of the *nation*, and the future of the *race*, presumably referring to the same collectivity of people, namely Cubans, and using the categories race and nation interchangeably. With its emphasis on health, eugenic improvement and physical competition, sport served as a cultural sphere where the racialization of national identity (its frequent grounding in the supposedly biological category of race) was particularly apparent.⁸⁵ As a state agency, the DGD clearly had a role in direct relation to the nation, but at least one commentator envisioned the impact that the agency would have on the future of the “race,” however that category might be defined.

Jaime Mariné y Montes, aide to Fulgencio Batista, was appointed head of the new agency, which by one account was charged with the construction of “stadiums, sporting fields, pools, etc.,” with the intended goal that “within a short time we can count on these elements, which are of extreme necessity in producing athletes.” The DGD was

⁸⁴ *Alerta*, August 13, 1938, p. 8.

⁸⁵ Etienne Balibar provides a useful articulation on this connection between the categories of race and nation when he notes that race acts as “a concentrate of the qualities which belong to the nationals ‘as their own’; it is in the ‘race of its children’ that the nation could contemplate its own identity in the pure state.” See Etienne Balibar, “Racism and Nationalism,” in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* ed. by Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (London: Verso, 1991), p. 59.

also to direct such energies in the provinces as well as the capital of Havana.⁸⁶ Among the measures it took were the required registration and approval of all baseball clubs in the country as a requirement for participation in national, provincial or local championships.⁸⁷ The agency also sponsored games between North American major league baseball teams in Cuba and sought to bring at least one collegiate basketball team to Havana for an exhibition.⁸⁸

In late 1938 the newly built *Palacio de los Deportes* opened in Havana. The inaugural event for the building was a professional tennis match, at which Colonel Fulgencio Batista, the effective head of state, signed and threw out the first ball.⁸⁹ The building included facilities for Jai-Alai, Hand Ball, Squash, Tennis and Basketball, a boxing ring and field of sixty-four by twenty-eight meters. By the summer of 1939 the DGD had also acquired jurisdiction over two other boxing rings, a soup kitchen for struggling athletes, and academies of instruction for swimming, boxing and jai alai, as well as the *Cerveza Tropical* stadium for the purposes of staging outdoor sporting events.⁹⁰

In addition, by September 1938 Jaime Mariné y Montes named Pincho Gutiérrez the head boxing advisor for the DGD.⁹¹ One of Gutiérrez' new duties was to act as an official matchmaker for the organization, with the responsibility of presenting a "quality

⁸⁶ Salamar, "Deportes: El complemento del atleta," *Adelante* 4, no. 40 (September 1938), p. 21.

⁸⁷ *Alerta*, August 31, 1938, pp. 8 and 14.

⁸⁸ *!Éxito!* 2, no. 40 (March 6, 1941), p. 7.

⁸⁹ Jess Losada, "Inauguración del Palacio de los Deportes," *Carteles* 24 (December 11, 1938), pp. 52-53.

⁹⁰ *La Prensa*, June 6, 1939, p. 6.

⁹¹ J. González Barros, "Valores de la dirección general de deportes: 'Pincho' Gutiérrez, Asesor de boxeo," *Carteles* 24 (September 18, 1938), p. 54; *Alerta*, August 23, 1938, p. 8. Former world chess champion José Raúl Capablanca was named the principal advisor for chess, see *Alerta*, August 31, 1938, p. 8.

boxing match” to the Havana public every Sunday.⁹² That year the Cuban Golden Gloves, a boxing tournament for aspiring amateurs, was also established.⁹³ The tournament was inspired by the event of the same name organized by North American sports writer Arch Ward in Chicago in 1926.⁹⁴ In addition to managing the Golden Gloves tournament, the *Dirección General de Deportes* created a National Boxing Academy.⁹⁵ Calls for the establishment of such an academy were articulated by journalists and considered by the government as early as April 1928,⁹⁶ but it was not until 1938, after Kid Chocolate had brilliantly demonstrated the feasibility of using sport to generate national prestige through his impressive career, that such plans actually materialized.

For his part, Kid Chocolate was a noticeable element in this new emphasis on the development of Cuban athletes. His final fight took place at the newly constructed Palacio de Deportes, and was the inaugural event in a nine week sports festival sponsored by the DGD. The festival included fencing contests, tennis tournaments, track and field meets, football games with North American teams, women’s and men’s basketball tournaments, swim meets, polo matches, horse races and a yacht regatta.⁹⁷ Soon after his retirement, Chocolate took on a position as instructor at the newly established academy of boxing.⁹⁸ Kid Chocolate not only served as an example for the feasibility of using sport to bolster national prestige and advancement, he became personally involved in efforts by

⁹² “Deportes,” *Carteles* 24 (March 13, 1938), p. 54.

⁹³ *Hoy*, May 16, 1938, p. 7.

⁹⁴ Alfonso, *Puños dorados*, p. 112.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁹⁶ *Diario de la Marina*, April 10, 1928, p. 17; *Diario de la Marina*, April 12, 1928, p. 18.

⁹⁷ *New York Times*, December 11, 1938, p. 210.

⁹⁸ Alfonso, *Puños dorados*, p. 113.

the Cuban government to continue leveraging sport towards those ends.

The new efforts by the government to promote sport were substantive enough to impress at least one foreign observer. In December 1938, legendary North American boxing pundit Nat Fleischer visited Cuba to witness the finals of the national golden gloves tournament and present special championship belts made by *The Ring* magazine to the winners of each division. In an article titled “Cuba Shows the Way: Progressive Government Develops Boxers and Shows People How to get Most Out of Sports and Physical Programme [sic],” Fleischer reported his observations to the readers of *The Ring*. He proclaimed that, “Cuba . . . is showing the way to its bigger brethren in the development of boxers,” noting, “nowhere in the world where the sport of pugilism is followed, has a system been devised that equals that organized by the *Dirección* [sic] *de Deportes*.” The degree to which Fleischer was impressed with what he witnessed on the island is difficult to overstate. “One month’s study of boxing in Cuba has convinced me that the Cuban government has something to sell to New York and other leading boxing commissions the world over. What we have been fighting for over a stretch of years has been going on in progressive Cuba.” In support of his declarations he pointed to the existence of schools for aspiring boxers, gymnasium supervision, daily medical examinations of contestants and the rating of boxers according to age, height, weight and ability. These initiatives prompted Fleischer to declare “the sport has taken tremendous strides for betterment under the Cuban Government Educational system.”⁹⁹

Fleischer credited these developments to Gutiérrez and Mariné y Montes, observing that “without the moral and financial support of Jaime Mariné y Montes,

⁹⁹ Nat Fleischer “Cuba Shows the Way: Progressive Government Develops Boxers and Shows People How to get Most Out of Sports and Physical Programme,” *The Ring* 18 (February 1939), p. 32.

Director of Sports and right-hand man of Colonel Batista, the project would be a failure.” He documented the considerable efforts made by the government and also noted the central role that Chocolate played as an inspiration to these efforts, observing that “the Kid has been a great help to the [boxing] commission. He is an inspiration to the novices, who are eager to follow in his footsteps as a fighter.” As Fleischer pointed out, the desire to produce another Kid Chocolate formed part of the motivation behind the new efforts sponsored by the Cuban government. He declared, “I’ll be very much surprised if within a short time there will not emerge one or more Kid Chocolates from that group of close to 2,000 boxers who are being so thoroughly and ably drilled in the National Boxing Academie [sic].” The Cuban boxing commission had hired “three competent teachers of the sport... who are paid by the government to teach at the boxing academy in Havana.” It had also appointed an instructor for Camaguey and one for the rest of the island. As a result, Nat Fleischer argued that the Cuban government was setting an example in its institutional support of boxers, concluding, “[n]othing like [this] has ever been attempted by any other government.”¹⁰⁰

The support of other sports also caught the attention of Fleischer, and he observed that the government was building new athletic fields in many parts of the country. He extolled Cuba as an international leader and declared that no other government had gone as far as Cuba in its attempts to promote sport. “What other boxing commission in any part of the world spends its money for such a build-up of those who follow the sport?” He ranted effusively over the construction of the new *Palacio de Deportes*, calling it “the last word in arenas south of the United States.” Fleischer described the palace as but one

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 32.

dimension of the “far-reaching sports program set by the Cuban government in its effort to make its people sports-minded and to help the tourist trade.” Initiatives were also instituted for sports such as polo and tennis, which were also tied to Cuba’s appeal as a tourist destination. “Cuba has its eyes open. It has finally... seen the advantages of the Pearl of the Antilles as an international playground for winter tourists and is taking full advantage of it under the progressive program of the Batista regime.”¹⁰¹ While Fleischer’s description of Fulgencio Batista as “progressive” may need to be taken with a grain of salt, his account leaves little doubt that Cuban institutional efforts to promote sport were significant.

During his visit Fleischer interviewed Major Jaime Mariné y Montes about the recent initiatives, and the Major replied with a response that explicitly linked advancement in sport to the goals of national development. “To contribute to the betterment of sports is a social service. . . [Leading the DGD] was one more opportunity for being useful to Cuba, for whose liberty and progress in everything we achieved the glorious revolution of September Fourth, 1933.”¹⁰² Fleischer was a personal guest of Mariné y Montes and the Cuban government, an indicator of the government’s desire to demonstrate to North Americans their recent efforts in the sporting sphere.¹⁰³ In its April 1939 issue *The Ring* published a letter from Mariné y Montes to Nat Fleischer written in the wake of the visit. In the letter Mariné y Montes highlighted his understanding of sport as a means of fostering relations with other nations; he thanked Fleischer for “the great

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁰³ Boxing in Cuba, *The Ring* 18 (February 1939), p. 63.

publicity which [sic] your article gave to Cuba . . . in an effort to bring about a closer relationship between our two countries.”¹⁰⁴

One year after Fleischer’s visit, Pincho Gutiérrez wrote an article for *The Ring* detailing further advancements that had been made in the field of Cuban sport. He declared “[s]ports of all kinds are progressing here and our winter tourist season should be the biggest in years.” One advantage of developing athletes would be to provide attractions for potential tourists visiting the island. Thus, in an age where sports, especially boxing, had emerged as commercial enterprise, an emphasis on developing athletes had economic as well as ideological benefits. Gutiérrez noted the development of semi-professional boxing in Cuba and boasted that “[b]y the end of 1940 we will have 200 highly experienced professional fighters in our midst.” Over 2500 boxers total were registered with the Commission. In addition, “every branch of sport is part of a national program under the direct supervision of the Athletic Commission.” This emphasis was having salutary effects on the population. “Under our supervision, boys who heretofore were general nuisances to police officials are now being built by proper physical development, good nourishment and fine medical attention to healthy men.” The title of the article “Cuba’s Boxing Progress,” illustrated how athletics and the state of national sports could be used as a metaphor for national development and progress more generally.¹⁰⁵

Institutional efforts to develop boxing were to a large degree influenced by the hope that the stellar career and impact that Kid Chocolate had could be duplicated. By the end of 1939, Gutiérrez, through his role with the National Boxing Commission, was

¹⁰⁴ Nat Fleischer “Nat Fleischer Says,” *The Ring* 18 (April 1939), p. 14, 44.

¹⁰⁵ Luis Gutiérrez, “Cuba’s Boxing Progress,” *The Ring* 19 (February 1940), p. 25.

leading efforts to organize semi-professional tournaments. The Ring's Havana correspondent noted, "Cuba within a short time will boast of hundreds of first class professional fighters."¹⁰⁶ Undoubtedly, Gutiérrez and other Cuban sporting officials and critics hoped that one of these fighters would be able to duplicate the meteoric rise of Kid Chocolate. The very fact that Gutiérrez, the former manager of Kid Chocolate, was deeply involved in these new initiatives is further testimony that these initiatives in part represented an effort to repeat the success of the "*negrito del Cerro*." One description of the emergence of a new standout boxer supports this line of reasoning. Armando Puente Pi, a 14-year-old boy who weighed only 89 pounds, was "hand picked out of over 2000 fighters" by Gutiérrez as the "outstanding prospect of the year" for 1939. In reporting the news *The Ring*, "Let's see what the future holds for this lad, and if Cuba has in this boy another world's champion."¹⁰⁷

The *Dirección General de Deportes* continued to operate until it was subsumed into the *Instituto Nacional de Deportes, Educación y Recreación* (INDER) in February 1961.¹⁰⁸ Though the long-term effectiveness of the DGD prior to 1959 is unclear,¹⁰⁹ evidence suggests that the governments led by Fulgencio Batista that ruled Cuba from 1934 to 1944 and from 1952 to 1959 considered the entity to be a significant component of the Cuban state. In the 1950s the agency published a pamphlet documenting some of

¹⁰⁶ "Boxing in Cuba," *The Ring* 19 (January 1940), p. 57.

¹⁰⁷ "Boxing in Cuba," *The Ring* 19 (March 1940), p. 53.

¹⁰⁸ Paula J. Pettavino and Geralyn Pye, *Sport in Cuba: The Diamond in the Rough* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994), p. 70.

¹⁰⁹ Pettavino and Pye acknowledge its foundation in 1938 as evidence that the regime of Fulgencio Batista took some interest in sports, but argue that this was only nominal. They insist that prior to 1959 the Cuban state took little interest in physical culture. See Pettavino and Pye, ch. 2.

its efforts.¹¹⁰ The opening page contained a full size portrait of President Batista, a facsimile of the *Ciudad Deportiva* sporting complex that was to be built in Havana, and a blurb documenting his interest in promoting Cuban sport. (See figure 5.1). The text noted that Batista was “deeply concerned” about the aspirations and desire for self-improvement among the youth of Cuba, and because he was conscious of the opportunity that sport provided for such self-improvement he had already taken action that designated him in the history of Cuba as the “father (*padrecito*) of our sports.” This last statement was likely a reference to the fact that the *Dirección General de Deportes* was established during Batista’s first term in power.¹¹¹

The text went on to emphasize that what had been done in the realm of sport to date under Batista was considerable, but much more remained to be done, such as the construction of the *Ciudad Deportiva*. These efforts were due to the fact that “General Batista deeply loves and cares for his people, and desires a youth that avidly engages the old aphorism of Juvenal: a sound mind in a sound body.”¹¹² The document can certainly be read as a transparent and perhaps cynical attempt to legitimize the rule of Batista in Cuba, but the fact that efforts to promote sport could be cited as proof of genuine concern for the Cuban people indicates the degree to which such efforts were considered legitimate national and state endeavors. Moreover the document provides further evidence of the pre-revolutionary antecedents of efforts to develop sport after the 1959

¹¹⁰ “Un año de labor deportiva,” (Havana: Dirección General de Deportes, N.D.) The pamphlet has no identifiable date anywhere in the contents, but the cover is a portrait of Roberto Fernandez Miranda, who is listed as the director. Fernandez Miranda was the brother-in-law of Fulgencio Batista and was appointed director of the DGD after Batista took power through a military coup in 1952, thus the pamphlet was likely published sometime between 1952 and 1959. See Roberto Fernandez Miranda, *Mis relaciones con el general Batista* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1999), pp. 143-145.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 2.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 2.



Figure 5.1. Fulgencio Batista and the *Ciudad Deportiva*. The above dedication and image appeared in a publication printed by the Dirección General de Deportes during the 1950s. Courtesy of personal collection of Osmar Mariño, Havana.

revolution. The *Ciudad Deportiva* constructed under Batista still stands in Havana today, and serves as the present-day headquarters for INDER, which was established in 1961 by the revolutionary government. While the post-revolutionary state has certainly made significant strides in the promotion of sport in Cuba, these advances were based on a link between Cuban national pride and sport that developed during the republican era, and built on institutions established in that era.

In addition to helping to spark the dedication of at least nominal state resources to the development of sport in Cuba, Kid Chocolate also inspired a new generation of boxers both within and outside of Cuba. His influence as a model for aspiring Cuban boxers continued well into the 1950s and beyond. In 1955, the *New York Times* ran a feature story on Cuban welterweight boxer Isaac Logart, who at the time was ranked ninth in the world. Logart, who was also Afro-Cuban, described Kid Chocolate as his “boyhood idol” and noted that Chocolate continued to be his “ideal as a fighter.” Logart got his start boxing in amateur bouts at the government sponsored athletic center in Camagüey, where Kid Chocolate himself reportedly worked as an instructor. The *Times* went on to note that such centers “founded during the first term of Fulgencio Batista” had been set up all over Cuba with the goal of providing “sports equipment, instruction and meals for youngsters from 14 to 18,” and had the effect of having “aided many of the fine boxers that have come out of Cuba.”¹¹³

While further evidence may be necessary to corroborate this story, the example of the career of Isaac Logart suggests that Kid Chocolate became a symbol of inspiration for a new generation of boxers. Moreover, the reported participation of Kid Chocolate as an

¹¹³ *New York Times*, November 11, 1955, p. 33.

instructor at the athletic center in Camagüey highlights the direct links between Kid Chocolate and state initiatives to promote sport beginning in 1938 with the establishment of the DGD. Ironically, Logart made his debut in the United States against a North American welterweight who had taken on the name Kid Chocolate, demonstrating the trans-national influence that Kid Chocolate had on a new generation of boxers.¹¹⁴

By the end of his career and well after his retirement, boxers outside as well as within Cuba were taking on variations of his stage name and attempting to follow in his footsteps. As early as February 1937 a “Baby Kid Chocolate” was boxing in the United States, though it is unclear whether or not he was Cuban.¹¹⁵ That same year a Kid Chocolate of Jamaica was also boxing in Birmingham, England.¹¹⁶ A number of African-American boxers have noted the role Kid Chocolate had in influencing their decisions to pursue a career in boxing. Joe Louis noted that his interest in boxing was piqued after he heard about the income that “fighters like Kid Chocolate and Jack Dempsey made.”¹¹⁷ One time heavyweight champion Ezzard Charles also reminisced about how meeting Kid Chocolate in the 1930s and encouraged him to go into boxing:

The Kid was driving the swankiest touring car that had ever crossed the Ohio River. And [he] was arrayed in costly haberdashery to match. Someone told Ez that Chocolate’s wardrobe consisted of 365 suits with accessories for each. ‘That’s for me,’ said Ez to himself, and he went in search of a ‘money fight.’¹¹⁸

Henry Armstrong, who would win world championships in three different weight classes over the course of his career in the 1930s and 1940s, also noted that Chocolate’s earning

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 33.

¹¹⁵ *New York Times*, February 5, 1937, p. 26.

¹¹⁶ *New York Times*, December 14, 1937, p. 34.

¹¹⁷ *New York Times*, November 5, 1948, p. 27.

¹¹⁸ *New York Times*, June 15, 1954, p. 39.

power helped push him into the world of boxing.¹¹⁹ While for Cuban government officials and intellectuals Chocolate provided an example of the national benefits of sport, for African-descended men in Cuba and beyond with limited prospects for making a living, he provided an example of the appeal of boxing as a possible career. The influence of Kid Chocolate reached beyond the island of Cuba to inspire African-descended boxers in other parts of the world, and well after his retirement he continued to serve as a racial as well as national role model.

The Legacy of Kid Chocolate – Sport and Cuban Nationality

Cuban success in international athletic competition is widely, and correctly, understood to be a function of the conversion to socialism that took place in the 1960s. The Cuban record in international athletics is among “the most recognized successes of the revolution,”¹²⁰ as well as an achievement “immeasurably beyond that which could be expected of a country of its size and economic resources.”¹²¹ Boxing in particular has been a sport in which Cuban international leadership is indisputable.¹²² While it is true that “Cuba’s surge of athletic strength is in large part a consequence of its conversion to socialism”¹²³ the impulse toward this surge preceded the revolution.

Existing scholarship on sport in Cuba has emphasized the achievements of the revolutionary regime to the point of distorting our understanding of the significance of sport in pre-revolutionary Cuba. Political scientists Paula Pettavino and GERALYN PYE have

¹¹⁹ *New York Times*, June 6, 1965, p. S9.

¹²⁰ Pettavino and Pye, p. 7.

¹²¹ John Sugden, *Boxing and Society: An International Analysis* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 170.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 134.

¹²³ Pettavino and Pye, p. 7.

argued that while there was an emphasis on sport in Cuba before 1959, government support of sporting development was lacking. They contend that pre-revolutionary Cuban governments “showed little interest in developing the sports system”¹²⁴ and did not use competition in international athletics for political benefit. “There was a lack of desire to invest in sport . . . or international sports victories were not perceived as politically beneficial.”¹²⁵ While Pettavino and Pye acknowledge the establishment of the *Dirección General de Deportes* under Batista, they argue that institutional support of boxers occurred only because of the potential they had to generate revenue.¹²⁶ Likewise sociologist Eric Wagner has asserted that the philosophies and goals of the socialist government in the realm of sport represented a “sharp break with the past,”¹²⁷ and Julie Bunck credits the Castro regime with creating “a new national sports consciousness” in Cuba, even as she asserts that it largely failed in its other efforts to transform Cuban culture.¹²⁸

Given the manner in which Kid Chocolate stimulated and redeemed Cuban nationalism in the late 1920s and 1930s, this characterization of government interest in sports must be re-examined. Historical evidence suggests that the significance of sport in

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 17.

¹²⁵ Ibid., pp. 63-64.

¹²⁶ Ibid., pp. 25 and 65.

¹²⁷ Eric Wagner, “Sport after Revolution: A Comparative Study of Cuba and Nicaragua,” in *Sport and Society in Latin America: Diffusion, Dependency and the Rise of Mass Culture* ed. Joseph L. Arbenz (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), pp. 66.

¹²⁸ Julie Marie Bunck, “The Politics of Sports in Revolutionary Cuba,” *Cuban Studies* 20 (1990), p. 111. Bunck does articulate a convincing argument that the regime did 1) shift the significance of sport by publicly decrying professional sport and 2) successfully use sport as a means of projecting international power as well as mobilizing and educating the population in a certain ideological mold. However her implicit characterization of sport in Cuba before 1959 as nothing more than a past-time of the elite or a mode of capitalist exploitation overstates the case and seems to take the rhetoric of the socialist regime at face value.

pre-revolutionary Cuba needs to be rethought. While the development of athletes may not have had direct political benefits for specific regimes or administrations, it certainly had an impact in enhancing Cuban national pride in the face of North American hegemony and refuting racist assumptions that undermined Cuban national aspiration. Furthermore, the distinction that Pettavino and Pye make between economic gain and larger political or national significance is overstated and elides the link between the two that existed in the minds of many Cubans during this period. As demonstrated in chapter three, Cuban sportswriters often cast the potential boxers had to generate revenue as a factor that could benefit the economy of the nation as a whole, especially given the difficult economic situation that the island confronted during the period under study.

The revolutionary government has itself been eager to recognize Chocolate as a national hero and one of the forebears of the Cuban sporting tradition. In 1971 the sports weekly *Listos para vencer* articulated the significance of Kid Chocolate's legacy in post-revolutionary Cuba: "Now that sports [in Cuba] has become true social patrimony, it is just and opportune to remember those like [Kid Chocolate] who were able to bring renown and honor to the patria, overcoming the adverse conditions in which he found himself."¹²⁹ Even while affirming its own accomplishments in promoting athletic achievement, the revolutionary regime rightly traced the importance of sport in Cuban nationalism to the republican era, and acknowledged the contribution of individuals such as Kid Chocolate to this link.

Three years later, *Bohemia* magazine published a biographical essay on Kid Chocolate in its August issue to coincide with the staging of the first world amateur

¹²⁹ Enrique Capetillo, "De Ayer: Kid Chocolate," *LPV: Listos Para Vencer*, 2 (March 1971), p. 27.

boxing championships in Havana. The article called Chocolate a “genuine legend of boxing and Cuban sport” while going on to note that by the 1950s, “the last decade of capitalism in Cuba,” he was forced to live on charity, a situation that was rectified “after the triumph of the revolution” when the government provided him a pension. The article implied that under capitalism a legend like Kid Chocolate was relegated to destitution and ignominy, and it was only after the revolution that he was cared for in a manner befitting a national hero.¹³⁰ In their 1980 biography of Kid Chocolate, Elio Menéndez and Victor Joaquín Ortega point out that in 1956 Kid Chocolate was arrested for drunkenness and did not even have the 100 pesos necessary to post bond, so far had his financial situation deteriorated. The authors cited the incident as a further indictment of the nature in which capitalism as a socioeconomic system used and then discarded athletes who, as national heroes, deserved better treatment.¹³¹ Material support for Kid Chocolate after 1959 was taken as yet another way in which the post-revolutionary state had realized Cuban national aspiration that had been frustrated by capitalism and unequal social structures.

The 1974 *Bohemia* article also cast efforts by the revolutionary government to make participation in sport available to all Cubans as a present day manifestation of the legacy of Chocolate, and sought to ensure that a new generation of Cubans remained aware of this legacy just as Cuba was establishing its presence in the world of international amateur boxing by hosting the first world championships. The stated goal of the article was to provide to a new generation of Cubans, who had grown up in a “new era, when healthy sport is the right of all” a narrative of one of the legends of national

¹³⁰ Jorge Alfonso, “Campeón de campeones: Kid Chocolate,” *Bohemia* 66 (August 9, 1974), p. 42.

¹³¹ Menéndez and Ortega, pp. 161-162.

sport.¹³² To further emphasize the link between a Cuban sporting tradition and Chocolate as a foundational hero in that tradition, he was invited to the championships as a special guest. On the first day of the tournament he was introduced to the crowd before the start of competition and given a lengthy ovation.¹³³ The Cuban performance in the 1974 amateur championships, as well as the very staging of those championships in Havana, helped to establish Cuban boxers as a power in international amateur competition.¹³⁴ Journalists and sporting officials made clear and explicit links between this status and the legacy of Chocolate.

The legacy of excellence in boxing that Kid Chocolate helped to establish as the first Cuban world boxing champion continues to inspire potential boxers on the island even in the present day. As late as 1996, sociologist John Sugden noted “The glory days of Kid Chocolate and his contemporaries are retained in the collective folk memory of places like Old Havana, and this helps to sustain a subculture which encourages young Cubans to dedicate themselves to the ring.”¹³⁵ In its impressive efforts to promote sport, the revolutionary government built upon an existing pre-revolutionary tradition of leveraging sport as a means of fostering individual improvement and national prestige. The achievements of the post-revolutionary that thus need to be reinterpreted as another attempt to deliver on or redeem a Cuban nationality that was continually frustrated during

¹³² Jorge Alfonso, “Campeón de campeones: Kid Chocolate,” p. 42.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 162.

¹³⁴ Cuba won its first Olympic medal in boxing in 1968, winning two silver medals. The 1972 games in Munich were a breakout event for Cuba and heralded Cuban dominance as a boxing power. At the Munich games Cuba won a total of five medals (three gold, one silver and one bronze) in a total of eleven weight divisions, outperforming both the United States and the Soviet Union. At the 1974 amateur championships in Havana Cuba won gold medals in five out of eleven weight classes, in addition to winning one silver and two bronze medals. See Alfonso, *Puños dorados*, pp. 140, 159 and 181.

¹³⁵ Sugden, p. 169.

the republican period. That is to say, the involvement of the Cuban state in sport is more than just a means of ideologically buttressing a particular socioeconomic system or ideology. It must also be seen as a reflection of a genuine (pre-revolutionary) Cuban impulse to highlight sport as an expression of national aspiration, and thus has much more long-standing local origins than is generally understood to be the case.

The association between athletic achievement and Cuban national identity is so strong that it has also transcended divisions engendered by the revolution of 1959. In the foreword to the *Encyclopedia of Cuban Boxing* published in Miami in 1988, volume editor Willy del Pino declared that “as Cubans we have many reasons to feel proud of our glorious sporting past,” stating that the encyclopedia was an effort to “remember that happy, sentimental and generous Cuba that we left behind and for whose conquest we all fight.”¹³⁶ The encyclopedia called sport the sector where Cuba had “achieved the greatest honors,” and had, in proportion to its population, achieved success on a par with “the most advanced nation in the world... the United States.”¹³⁷ Even while claiming the legacy of Cuba as a sporting nation, the encyclopedia derided the Castro-led government for undermining this legacy. One article declared, “Cuba shone brilliantly in boxing as it did in baseball... the dimming of this constellation occurred when the communist regime came to power in Cuba, extinguishing the enthusiasm of Cuban athletes.” The article went on to insist that “there is no logical comparison between the great boxers of republican Cuba and those of enslaved Cuba.”¹³⁸ For opponents of the Castro regime, its

¹³⁶ Manolo de la Tejera and Willy del Pino, “A los lectores,” in *Enciclopedia del boxeo cubano* ed. Willy Del Pino (Miami: Manolo de la Tejera and Willy del Pino, 1988), p. 9.

¹³⁷ Pedro Martínez Baúza, “Cuba: País de campeones,” in *Enciclopedia del boxeo cubano*, p. 44.

¹³⁸ Hernández Guzmán, “Los campeonatos del periódico ‘La Noche,’ 65 años en el recuerdo,” in *Enciclopedia del boxeo cubano*, p. 25.

tarnishing of the Cuban reputation as a sporting power was one more reason to work towards the downfall of that regime.

The post-1959 Cuban exile community has also identified Chocolate as a national hero, and staked a claim as the legitimate heirs of his legacy. The *Encyclopedia of Cuban Boxing*, dubbed Chocolate the best Cuban boxer of all time,¹³⁹ calling him the “greatest of all the great boxers that Cuba has produced,”¹⁴⁰ and insisting that “a Kid Chocolate emerges once every century, if that.”¹⁴¹ The publication devoted fourteen pages to reporting on his career while no other boxer received more than five pages of attention, and insisted that publicizing the life and exploits of “the best boxer ever born in Cuba” for younger generations was “more than a journalistic duty, [but] a sacred patriotic duty.”

142

Like other national resources, Cuban exiles also blamed the revolutionary government for neglecting to take proper care of Kid Chocolate. In the chapter on Kid Chocolate in his history of Cuban boxing, Enrique Encinosa insisted that the revolutionary government had mistreated and taken advantage of Chocolate instead of honoring him as a national hero:

Once the revolution came, Chocolate remained in the country – where he was celebrated publically but ignored as an individual – reducing the great athlete to live in poverty similar to that of his childhood. He received a modest pension from the government, but in a nation impoverished by... Marxist dictatorship, the pension was not even adequate to buy enough rum to drown his troubles.

Encinosa cited the interview of a British journalist in order to assert that Chocolate died

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁴⁰ René Molina, “Kid Chocolate: Sin dudas, el mejor,” in *Enciclopedia del boxeo cubano*, p. 71.

¹⁴¹“Eligio Sardiñas: Inmortalizo el pseudonimo de Kid Chocolate,” in *Enciclopedia del boxeo cubano* , p. 78.

¹⁴²“Kid Chocolate: Un fabuloso regalo de Reyes para Cuba,” in *Enciclopedia del boxeo cubano*, p. 77.

in “subhuman” conditions in 1988, suggesting that the neglect of the revolutionary government had caused such an unfortunate ending to the life of a national hero.¹⁴³

As with the legacy of the heroes of the independence wars, a tradition of athletic excellence is so central to Cuban national identity that it has served as contested ideological terrain between the current Cuban government and those who fiercely oppose it. Both have attempted to appropriate this tradition in an attempt to support their own vision for the proper realization of Cuban national potential. Journalists and biographers within revolutionary Cuba cited his 1956 arrest and inability to post bail as an indictment of a capitalist system that used and then discarded athletes. On the other hand, observers in exile cited the material poverty in which he died as proof of the failures of the post-1959 regime. Moreover, voices in the exile community have insisted that rather than honor and build on the Cuban legacy of athletic achievement, the revolution has actually tarnished this legacy. The accuracy of the competing claims is less relevant for the sake of this discussion than the actual object of competition. That both the revolutionary government and the Cuban exile community would lay claim to the legacy of Kid Chocolate and the self-image of Cuba as a sporting power indicates that this self-image had significant roots in the republican era and has continued to function as an integral aspect of Cuban national identity.

¹⁴³ Enrique Encinosa, *Azúcar y chocolate: Historia del boxeo Cubano* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 2004), p. 60.

Conclusion

Eligio Sardiñas died in Havana on August 8, 1988 at the age of 77. He suffered from cirrhosis of the liver and prostate cancer, and had been hospitalized for several months before he passed away. Thousands lined up at his wake to pay their last respects. In a gesture more befitting a fallen soldier, his casket was draped with a Cuban flag. Among those who attended were the current members of the national boxing team, an appearance that attested to his continuing status as a forebear of the Cuban sporting tradition. Fidel Castro sent flowers to the site of his final burial.¹ Five decades after his final fight, Kid Chocolate continued to receive the treatment due a national hero. The height of his career and renown lasted just over five years, yet Kid Chocolate retained significance as an icon of Cuban nationalism and a symbol of the importance of sport for Cuban national identity well after he retired.

The relevance of sport and the relevance of race to Cuban nationalism are closely intertwined. The close link between sport and Cuban nationalism emerged largely from attempts to reconcile racist ideology with Cuban national aspiration. Sport provided a means of addressing longstanding anxieties regarding race and prospects for national development and sovereignty. Success in athletic competition spoke to a specific set of concerns in Cuba that were paramount in the contemplation of the fate of the republic.

¹ Elio Menéndez and Víctor Joaquín Ortega, *El boxeo soy yo*, 2nd ed. (Havana: Editorial Pablo de la Torriente, 1990), pp. 269-271.

Sport provided a means of directly refuting racist ideologies that suggested that Cuban nationhood was unattainable because Cubans were an inferior people.

In the first few decades of the twentieth century many Cubans were particularly uneasy about the feasibility of Cuban nationhood and the possibility that Cuba could achieve status as a modern and progressive country. Such concerns grew largely out of a fear that the racial profile of the population presented an obstacle to the attainment of such status. This racial anxiety had long-standing roots in the struggle against Spanish colonialism, but was also exacerbated by North American interference in the independence effort and frustration of Cuban sovereignty through military occupation and the Platt Amendment. The global prevalence of theories of social Darwinism and scientific racism also undermined Cuban national aspiration. The Platt Amendment, which remained in effect until 1934, guaranteed that discussions about Cuban fitness for self-governance, and how that fitness could be established, would last well into the 1930s.

At the same time that Cubans struggled with these issues, sport was gaining ideological currency globally as a means of proving national status, power and capacity as well as attaining a certain level of civilization and modernity. Athletic contests had become symbolically charged as a metaphor for competition between races or nations. Boxing in particular was especially imbued with this symbolic significance. The fact that the 1920s constituted the “Golden Age of Boxing,” when the sport reached the height of its international popularity, further enhanced its symbolic power. The first generation of Cubans born in an independent Cuba came to maturity just as racialized notions of

athletic achievement and its relationship to national fitness and development held the most cachet.

Such was the ideological context in which Kid Chocolate emerged. Soon after arriving in the United States in the summer of 1928, Kid Chocolate became an international celebrity. Between 1928 and 1932 he was an extremely popular boxer and personality who appealed to North American fans and journalists with his ability, style and charisma. Entirely unknown upon his arrival in the United States, within months he became the talk of the boxing world. He rose from poverty to electrify North American fans and establish himself as one of the best, if not the best, all-around fighter of his day.

That a poor, black Cuban with little education could come to the United States and become a celebrity in a matter of months was a testament to the ways in which sport also formed part of an emerging global sensibility. By the early twentieth century sport constituted a cultural realm that transcended national borders, characterized by objects, rituals and ideals that were comprehensible to a wide range of individuals regardless of barriers of language or distance. The degree to which Cubans and North Americans shared similar exposure to the career of Kid Chocolate through the print media, radio and films is testament to the way in which sport marked a significant component of an nascent global culture.

One critical element of this new global cultural realm was the belief that sport provided a means of objective comparison of individuals and, by extension, the groups to which they belonged. A significant corollary to this belief was the principle that fair play formed a core ideal of athletic competition. Sport was a site of social interaction where ability was of primary importance, and the superior competitor was always supposed to

win. As historian Allenn Guttman has observed, “the relationship between equality and the achievement principal is a vital one.”² The idea that sport provided an objective and fair means of comparison between individuals was central to its cachet as a metaphor for competition between racial and national groups. For some, sport was a cultural site where ideas about the supposed superiority of certain groups could be sustained. But through the success and fame of boxers like Kid Chocolate, it also became a site where such ideas could be challenged or inverted in ways that were intelligible to and accepted by individuals throughout the world.

As the country's first boxing world champion at a time when boxing held the most cachet as proof of metaphorical "fitness," Kid Chocolate became a true champion of the young republic. By virtue of his success as a boxer in the United States, Kid Chocolate became a national idol. It would be difficult to overstate his popularity on the island at the height of his boxing career. He enjoyed a popularity that was unmatched by any other contemporary Cuban sporting figure, and perhaps by any other Cuban at all. His success and its perceived significance became common knowledge by the early 1930s. As one observer noted, “to speak to Cuban fans of the triumphs of the Kid is to unnecessarily repeat historical phases of Cuban boxing that are in the memory of all.”³

Kid Chocolate enjoyed great popularity among Cubans because elements of his rise to fame resonated so strongly with many of the concerns that Cubans faced as a nation in the late 1920s and early 1930s. It is precisely because of the attention Chocolate drew from international sports fans and the distinction he brought to Cuban sport that he

²Allenn Guttman, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports*, updated with a new afterword (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 26.

³ *Heraldo de Cuba*, July 4, 1931, p. 15.

became a national idol. One of the dearest investments many Cubans had in his persona was the international attention and glory he brought to the nation. Chocolate was adopted as a national resource and served as a source of pride and redemption that could counter the frustrations and anxieties that several Cubans confronted in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Effectively filling his role as a champion of the nation, Chocolate provided hope and inspiration for a country beset with economic and political difficulties. His success against foreign competitors resonated with the desire of many Cubans to assert themselves as full-fledged members of the family of modern nations, and his earning power and material wealth spoke to the aspiration of many Cubans that they too might attain material comfort as they moved towards modernity. As economic conditions in Cuba and the political climate deteriorated, Kid Chocolate gave Cubans a reason to cheer.

Kid Chocolate also provided a Cuban entrée into an international ideological context in which athletic competition provided a basis for the projection of national power and prestige. His career helped to bolster a national sense of self-esteem. Just as one writer noted that Chocolate's exploits meant that he was in the end, "worthy of being placed next to men who have defined an era of world boxing history: Joe Gans, Benny Leonard, Jimmy Wilde, George Carpentier, Jack Dempsey,"⁴ it also meant that Cuba was worthy of being placed right alongside other sovereign nations in the international community. His success helped to stimulate the process through which sport became a key facet of Cuban nationalism and came to be seen as an important aspect of the nation-building project. Well aware of the ideological currency that sport had garnered globally,

⁴ "Chocolate campeón," *Bohemia* 21 (May 26, 1929), p. 49.

Cuban sportswriters in particular seized on the success of Kid Chocolate as a means of demonstrating Cuban fitness for self-rule and the feasibility of Cuban nationhood.

The emergence of sport as a site of nationalist expression occurred at a pivotal moment in the formation of Cuban national identity. Unlike other countries, sport attained tremendous cultural significance during the first few decades after Cuban independence, just as a generation of Cubans was seeking ways to express Cuban nationality and establish the viability of the nation-building project. The comparison of Kid Chocolate and his manager Pincho Gutiérrez to the heroes of the wars for independence highlights the unique nature of the link between sport and Cuban nationalism. One generation removed from the narratives of heroism that emerged from the military struggle for formal independence, intellectuals, poets and journalists in the 1920s and 1930s sought their own heroes to consolidate a sense of national identity and serve as sources of national pride.

Reactions to his career also reflected the contradictory attitudes towards the United States that characterized republican Cuba. On one hand most Cubans resented the degree of influence and control that North Americans exercised over their politics and economy. As a result, violent boxing triumphs over North American boxers were especially gratifying and provided an outlet for the frustration of Cuban national ambition. Yet at the same time many of those same Cubans also looked to the United States as an example of the prosperity and level of civilization to which they aspired. Chocolate was also admired because of his ability to acquire fame and fortune in the United States. In addition, in Cuba North American praise was often seen as proof of true greatness. Kid Chocolate gave voice to simultaneous Cuban desires to impress and

triumph over their neighbors to the north. The joy that many Cubans took in the career of Kid Chocolate not only illustrates the aspirations and anxieties that characterized the republican era, it also highlighted the role of the United States in both inspiring those aspirations as well as stimulating those anxieties.

Language describing the career of Kid Chocolate in the Cuban press reflected the ways in which a sense of racial inclusion formed a significant aspect of Cuban self-imagining and identity. While dissenting voices existed, the mainstream Cuban press pointed to Chocolate's status as a national hero as unequivocal proof that Cuba was a society devoid of racial prejudice. In contrast, his experiences in the United States were used as evidence to prove the decidedly racist nature of North American society.

Chocolate was lauded as a hero who through ability and effort overcame the racial prejudice that characterized North American society. Thus he provided hope that Cubans in general could overcome North American racism on their way to full national realization. The success of Chocolate in the midst of North American racial prejudice constituted a symbolic means of challenging those racist assumptions that undergirded North American political tutelage and economic dominance. But this challenge to racist doctrines was primarily a nationalist one that related to the implications such doctrines had for Cuban sovereignty and position in the hierarchy of nations, not to domestic racial practices.

Reactions to Kid Chocolate demonstrated the way in which the growing link between anti-racism and Cuban nationalism was more relevant for the image of Cubans abroad than a discussion of race relations at home. As Cuban nationalism and anti-racism became more and more closely linked in the 1920s and 1930s, his redemption of the

capabilities of African descended peoples became increasingly linked to his redemption of Cuban nationhood more broadly. Chocolate's status as a national hero existed in tension with, rather than in contradiction to, his status as a racial hero, because Cuban national identity was itself racialized. His ability to seamlessly inhabit the space of both racial and national hero highlighted the sometimes contradictory and tense connections between racial ideology and national identity. In one sense, Chocolate was a national hero precisely because he was a racial hero, not in spite of that fact. His physical appearance allowed for his deployment as a symbol that could refute racist notions that undermined Cuban national aspirations without the violation of a nationalist racial ideology that discouraged explicit references to race. Instead of ignoring or omitting his racial identity, Cuban journalists engaged it in subtle ways that subsumed his blackness into a larger Cuban-ness, referring to phenotype and using the distinctly national term "*negrito*" to indicate the obvious fact of his racial identity without explicitly invoking race.

Chocolate was able to challenge notions of black inferiority in a way that did not challenge the social status quo or existing racial practices within Cuban society. Instead, the construction of North Americans as particularly racist through the description of his career provided a counterpoint that helped many Cubans to imagine their society as not racist, or at least decidedly less racist than the United States. With respect to racial practices within Cuba, Chocolate was often invoked as a reason why racial discrimination was decidedly "un-Cuban," a statement that simultaneously reinforced the notion of racial fraternity as central to Cuban national identity and denied the reality of systematic racial discrimination in Cuba. Rather than confront such discrimination as a Cuban

problem, writers simply preferred to cast it as un-Cuban, and use Chocolate's heroic status for both black and white Cubans in support of this characterization.

Kid Chocolate's public persona also showed that the Cuban ethos of racial inclusion and fraternity had decidedly gendered overtones. Through his example he helped establish the niche of the hero-athlete as a means of national integration. For Afro-Cuban men, their potential to become athletic heroes opened an avenue of social inclusion that was not available to Afro-Cuban women, at least not in initial formulations of who could be a hero-athlete.⁵ This phenomenon had its limits, however. The niche of the hero-athlete resonated with pre-existing notions of the optimal role of black men in society as physical performers or patriotic warriors. Like its ideological antecedent, the trope of the loyal black insurgent, it constituted a subordinated inclusion whereby fraternity and hierarchy existed in tandem.⁶ Sport provided a new role in the nation-building project for Afro-Cuban men, but one that reinscribed their inferior position in society, even as it made them potential exemplars of certain masculine traits.⁷

⁵ While efforts by the post-revolutionary government to promote mass participation in sport among all members of society has resulted in an increased number of Cuban women participating in organized sport, women's participation continues to lag behind men's participation, and the number of women on Cuban national teams reportedly continues to be quite small. See Paula J. Pettavino and GERALYN PYE, *Sport in Cuba: The Diamond in the Rough* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994), pp. 109-123 and 229-230.

⁶ On this point R.W. Connell's notion that there are multiple masculinities or constellations of accepted male practice in a given society, which occupy hierarchical positions in relation to each other is particularly useful. R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 67-81.

⁷ Michael Messner argues that the fact that certain men may serve as exemplars of masculine aggression often serves to solidify their inferiority to other men. These men "are the heroes who 'prove' that 'we men' are superior to women. At the same time, they play the role of the 'primitive other,' against whom higher-status men define themselves as 'modern' and 'civilized.' Thus the celebrity athlete may "embody all that is valued in present cultural conceptions of hegemonic masculinity... Yet, higher status men... may also look down on him as a narrow, even atavistic, example of masculinity. Messner, *Out of Play*, p. 55-60. R.W. Connell also notes that hegemonic masculinity, or the ideal configuration of masculinity that justifies the subjugation of women as a whole, is "not necessarily what powerful men are, but what sustains their power and what large numbers of men are motivated to support." R.W. Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), p. 185. Thus as

Sport not only constituted a means of symbolically refuting the notion that Cuba could never attain status as a progressive and modern society, it also provided one means through which such status could be achieved. As in other countries throughout the world, Cuban intellectuals, journalists and policymakers came to believe that sport, through its purportedly eugenic benefits, could cultivate qualities in the populace that enabled the very process of development along “modern” lines. The fact that journalists often cited Kid Chocolate as an excellent example for others of “his kind” emphasized this particular dimension of the appeal of sport. Sport came to be seen as an especially effective way of addressing the issue of how to integrate the poor and supposedly “backward” segment of the population that many believed to be the primary obstacle to Cuban development, namely poor Afro-Cubans.

The emphasis on discipline and restraint as important ideals in the life of a successful athlete strengthened the appeal of sport as a means of “civilizing” poor Afro-Cuban men and involving them in salubrious activities with positive eugenic benefits. Sport became a means of transforming poor Afro-Cuban men from agents that inhibited Cuban modernity and advancement to agents that could foster it. Narratives constructed around Kid Chocolate’s decline as a top boxer reflected this conceptualization of the role of sport. His career became a morality tale about the importance of restraint and diligence in the achievement of athletic success. Thus sport could help to curb or even eliminate supposedly degenerate tendencies.

This study has also highlighted the ways in which racial identity and national identity have been closely linked historically. That “race” could be used in sports pages to

athletes Afro-Cuban men could express certain dimensions of hegemonic masculinity while still belonging to a subordinate group of men.

refer to conventional racial groups such as whites or blacks, national groups, or even identities based on language spoke to the slippery and contingent nature of race as a category not just diachronically, but at a single moment in historical time. Seeming confusion over the meaning of race (and its frequent conflation with nationality) permeated sports pages not just in Cuba, but also in the United States. Kid Chocolate's persona was situated at the intersection of national and racial identity and revealed that, in the world of sport especially, race and nation had considerable functional overlap as categories of difference. Considerable elasticity existed in conceptions of what constituted a nation or a race, and the consistent slippage between the two categories reflected the degree to which they converged in the minds of many individuals.

By the time Kid Chocolate retired, sport became an integral part of state efforts to build a modern and developed Cuba. With the establishment of the *Dirección General de Deportes*, the Cuban government began significant efforts to promote the development of sport on the island. Kid Chocolate's success fostered this phenomenon, giving it a momentum that it otherwise might not have had, demonstrating that it was in fact feasible to use sport as an avenue of national development and means of self-promotion as a modern and developed nation. Moreover, the memory of his career continues to serve as a foundational example of the importance of sport for Cuban national identity. The overall effectiveness of institutional efforts to foster sport before the revolution of 1959 can certainly be debated. Nonetheless, the existence of these efforts, which had direct links to Kid Chocolate and his manager Pincho Gutiérrez, is indisputable.

Certainly the post-revolutionary government was more effective at making sport accessible to the masses and achieving international sporting success than any pre-

revolutionary government. This success however reflected pre-existing beliefs about the importance of sport for national development as well as specific elements of the post-revolutionary agenda. The post-revolutionary support of sport has much more long-standing local origins than is generally understood to be the case. Success in the promotion of sport thus needs to be reinterpreted as one of the many ways in which the revolutionary state has sought to give full expression to Cuban national aspiration in radical and unprecedented ways.

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