



Classroom Guide for
JOE LOUIS, MY CHAMPION
written William Miller
illustrated by Rodney S. Pate

Reading Level

* Reading Level: Grade 3

Interest Level: Grades 1–5

Guided Reading Level: O

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 4.2/.5

*Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula

Themes

Sports (boxing), Role Models, Self-Esteem, Overcoming Obstacles, Famous African Americans, Sports History, African American Interest

Synopsis

It's the spring of 1937, and anticipation for the heavyweight title fight between Joe Louis and James Braddock is at a fever pitch. Sammy can hardly contain his excitement. He knows his hero, Joe Louis, will soon be the boxing champion of the world. Although he isn't big and strong, Sammy wants to be a boxer, just like Joe Louis, whose fame and success are a source of great pride and hope for African Americans. Sammy and his friend Ernie practice boxing after school, but Sammy is quickly discouraged when he keeps missing punches.

On the night of the big fight, everyone gathers around the radio in Mister Jake's store. The excited crowd listens intently as Joe Louis battles his way to victory over Braddock, round after round. The crowd finally explodes into cheers when Joe Louis is crowned heavyweight champion of the world. Louis's win makes Sammy feel like a champion too. But the next day, back at boxing practice with Ernie, Sammy is again discouraged. Ernie finally helps Sammy realize that everyone has different strengths, and Sammy should be proud that he is really smart, even if he can't box.

By the end of the story Sammy realizes that he can be a champion outside the ring. He can take his education outside the boundaries of his town and become a champion in a field other than boxing.

Background

Joe Louis is widely regarded as the finest heavyweight champion in the history of boxing. He was also the first African American to achieve hero status for all Americans—an honor previously reserved only for whites.

Joe Louis was born in Alabama in 1914 and became fascinated with boxing when his family moved to Detroit in the mid-1920s. As a boxer, Joe Louis's championship reign lasted 140 consecutive months. He was famous for his boxing skills in the ring and also for his determination, work ethic, and sportsmanship. When people gathered around their radios to listen to boxing matches in the 1940s and 1950s, they were likely thinking of these attributes as well as Louis's prowess as a fighter.

Additional information about Joe Louis can be found on the last page of the book and on the [Joe Louis Official Web Site](#).

Teaching Tip

Joe Louis, My Champion would be useful as part of a unit on legendary sports heroes and as a story to feature during your observance of Black History Month in February.

BEFORE READING

Prereading Focus Questions

Before introducing the book to students, you may wish to develop background information, tap prior knowledge, and promote anticipation with questions such as the following:

1. Have you ever seen a boxing match? What was the fight like? How did watching the match make you feel?
2. Do you know of any famous boxers? Tell us what you know about them.
3. Who are your sports heroes? Why are these people heroes to you?
4. What is discrimination? How can it affect a person or a group of people?

Exploring the Book

Write the title of the book on the chalkboard. Ask students to predict who is “speaking” in the title; to whom does “my” refer? Then show students the front cover and ask them why they think Joe Louis is the boy's champion.

Open the book and hold it so students can see the illustrations on both the front and back covers. Discuss what they notice about the illustrations. Ask students what they think the story might be about based on the illustrations.

Setting a Purpose for Reading

Have students read to find out what happens to the boy on the front cover, what he learns, and how Joe Louis affects him.

Vocabulary

Have students write a definition or description for each word or phrase below. Then have students write a sentence for each word or phrase that illustrates its meaning.

prejudice	stick and move	left cross	right hook
groaned	bob and weave	palms up	crouched
toe-to-toe	there's no quit	put him down	dodged
dropped to the mat			

AFTER READING**Discussion Questions**

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop understanding of the content. Encourage students to refer back to the text and photographs in the book to support their responses.

Literal Comprehension

1. What does Sammy want to be at the beginning of the story? How does he plan to achieve this?
2. Who are the main characters in the story, besides Sammy?
3. Does the story take place in an urban or rural setting? How can you tell?
4. What does Mister Jake have on the walls of his store? Why do you think he has those things there?
5. Where do Sammy and his family listen to the fight?
6. How would you describe the crowd at Mister Jake's on the night of the fight?
7. Who won the big fight? What title did he earn?
8. Why does Sammy become discouraged about boxing?
9. What does Sammy think he might do instead of becoming a boxer?

Extension/Higher Level Thinking

1. Why does Ernie give Sammy boxing lessons? Is Ernie a good friend to Sammy? Why do you think so?
2. What kind of person is Mister Jake? How can you tell?
3. What is the climax of the story? Why do you think so?
4. What does Sammy learned from the Joe Louis-James Braddock fight?
5. Why was Joe Lewis's victory in the boxing ring important to the African American community in which Sammy lives?

6. How does Ernie help Sammy understand how to become a champion? How does Mister Jake help? How does Sammy's father help his son understand? How does Joe Louis help?
7. From what you know about Sammy, what do you think would be a good profession for him when he grows up?
8. Why do you think this book is called historical fiction?

Literature Circles

If you use literature circles during reading time, students might find the following suggestions helpful in focusing on the different roles of the group members.

- The **Questioner** might use questions similar to the ones in the Discussion Question section of this guide.
- The **Passage Locator** might look for lines in the story that show how the girl's feelings change from the beginning to the end.
- The **Illustrator** might create a poster or bulletin board of spring and summer flowers, especially purple ones.
- The **Connector** might find other stories to share with the group in which a grandparent passes away, and make connections among the stories focusing on how each child experiences this event.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of the group's reading and discussion points for each meeting.
- The **Investigator** might look for information about what causes changes in plants and flowers as the seasons and temperature change in different parts of the country.

*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Three such books you may wish to refer to are: *GETTING STARTED WITH LITERATURE CIRCLES* by Katherine L. Schlick Noe and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 1999), *LITERATURE CIRCLES: VOICE AND CHOICE IN BOOK CLUBS AND READING GROUPS* by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 2002), and *LITERATURE CIRCLES RESOURCE GUIDE* by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 2000).

Reader's Response

Use the following questions and writing activities to help students practice active reading and personalize their responses to the book. Suggest that students respond in reader's journals, essays, or oral discussion. You may also want to set aside time for students to share and discuss their written work, if they wish to.

1. In what ways is this story realistic? In what ways is it unrealistic?
2. What did you learn from this story? How might you apply what you learned to your own life?
3. How does this book affect your thinking about prejudice and the ways people are sometimes treated by others?

4. How do the illustrations add to the story? How did the illustrator highlight the portion of the story that takes place on the radio? How did this affect your experience of the fight?
5. What did you learn about boxing that you did not know before reading this story?
6. Pretend you are a reporter for the sports section of a newspaper. Write a column or blog entry about an imaginary fight in which Joe Louis participated, or describe how you felt when you saw him fighting in the ring.
7. Long after his death, people honored Joe Louis in different ways. Write a paragraph to describe what you would do to honor him.

ESL Teaching Strategies

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English language learners.

1. Assign ELL students to read the story aloud with strong English readers/speakers.
2. Have each student write three questions about the story. Then let students pair up and discuss the answers to the questions.
3. Depending on students' level of English proficiency, after the first reading:
 - Review the illustrations in order and have students summarize what is happening on each page, first orally, then in writing.
 - Have students work in pairs to retell either the plot of the story or key details. Then ask students to write a short summary, synopsis, or opinion about what they have read.
4. Have students give a short talk about what they admire about a character or central figure in the story.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

Use some of the following activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas.

Social Studies

1. Have students look up other famous (greatest) heavyweight boxing matches and create a chart listing the dates of the fights, the boxers, who won, and statistics for each match.
2. The last page of the book gives some additional information about Joe Louis's life and his role model status during his lifetime. Students may be interested in finding out more about Joe Louis. There are many sites online with complete information about Louis's life and career.

Social Studies/Careers

At the end of the story Sammy talks about becoming a teacher, a lawyer, or a doctor. Have students research and write a short report outlining the schooling and training required to become qualified in each of these professions.

Science

The people in Sammy's community listen to the boxing match on a radio. Have students research the invention of the radio and create a timeline of important events in the development and uses of radio up to the present day.

Sports

Students may be interested in watching highlights of the Joe Louis vs. James Braddock heavyweight match. The fight can be seen in many variations on You Tube. [Here is one](#) that ends with a slow motion replay of the final knockout.

Writing/Language Arts

Boxing has been part of the summer Olympic Games since 1904. Women's boxing was included in the program starting with the 2012 London Olympics. Have students develop a list of pros and cons for including women's boxing, or let students organize a debate about the issue.

Language Arts/Art

Suggest that students compile special dictionaries of boxing terms and their meanings. They may also wish to illustrate some of the entries with their own drawings.

Art

Have students build an old radio out of cardboard, cardboard tubes, construction paper, paint, and collage materials.

About the Author and Illustrator

William Miller is the author of many award-winning books for children published by LEE & LOW BOOKS. For many years Miller taught African American literature and creative writing at York College in York, Pennsylvania. He currently lives in New Orleans.

Rodney S. Pate has been illustrating books for children for more than twenty-five years, and his fine art work has been exhibited at the Society of Illustrators in New York City. Pate also works as a graphic designer for a software company. He lives in Bloomfield, New Jersey.

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RESOURCES ON THE WEB

Learn more about **Joe Louis, My Champion** at:

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/70/pb/joe_louis_my_champion

Order Information**On the Web:**

<http://www.leeandlow.com/order> (general order information)

By Phone:

212-779-4400 ext. 25

212-683-1894

By Mail:

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