

# THE HISTORY OF BOXING IN NIGERIA

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My research examines the development of Nigeria's boxing culture in Lagos from the 1920s to the early 1970s and the influence of Nigerian fighters abroad.

Through the case study of Lagos, Nigeria's largest city and economic capital, this work demonstrates the role and importance of boxing in constructions of masculinity, urban and Atlantic migration, urbanization, and conceptions of "Empire" and later "Commonwealth." Boxing was one of the most popular leisure enterprises during the post-WWII era in Nigeria up until the early 1970s. Although soccer is by far Nigeria's most popular sport today, boxing was as popular, if not more so at the end of colonialism within Nigeria. In fact many of their first sporting 'stars' were boxers. They were in many cases the first professional athletes to leave their colonies for the wider world, and they were heavily followed in the press, radio, and later television. Their success paved the way for a rising generation of sports stars in independent Africa. But boxing declined in popularity in recent decades. The story of its rapid rise in popularity is just as important as the decline. The stories of Nigerian boxers' careers highlights the ending of colonialism in Africa after WWII, the transition from Empire to Commonwealth, and the creation of a Nigerian diaspora

during a time of heightened nationalism and the euphoria of independence. The hopes of the emerging nation was vested in these boxers and they did not disappoint.

In the Fall of 2013 I published my first article in the *International Journal of the History of Sport* entitled, "The Whole Place is in Pandemonium?: Dick Tiger Versus Gene Fullmer III, and the Consumption of Sport in Nigeria" based on a chapter of my dissertation. The article focuses on the first ever World Title fight in Africa in 1963 in Ibadan, Nigeria. Using this fight I analyze the culture and ethos of sport through boxing in Nigeria, and how that affected the various ways that Nigerian consumed sports through a multitude of media and live shows. Boxing was a part of everyday life that was hotly debated and enjoyed, and the "ring" was a site for the "performance" of masculinity, sportsmanship, and fair play to be contested and recreated.

During the summer of 2014, a Graduate School Dissertation Research Award funded my travel to Liverpool and London for 6 weeks in order to assess the impact of Nigerian boxers on local British and international boxing from the late 1940s through the early 1960s. During my travels I was able to conduct interviews with several former Liverpoolian boxers, managers, and trainers. I attended the monthly meetings of the Merseyside

Former Boxers Association and the Wirral Former Boxers Association, and met some fascinating boxers from all walks of life. The award also gave me time to consult the Liverpool Archives and the British National Archives at Kew to bolster my research. This data will inform two chapters of my dissertation: one on the creation of a Nigerian diaspora in Britain that exists until today, and another on how Nigerian boxers were part of a larger migration of Empire peoples after WWII to Britain. Empire-born boxers from across Britain's Empire, from the West Indies to Africa to India, were some of the most visible people in Liverpool, and they were instrumental in breaking down racial barriers not only in Liverpool, but across the British Isles and Empire.

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