Johnson, Jack,

byname of JOHN ARTHUR JOHNSON (b. March 31, 1878, Galveston, Texas, U.S.--d. June 10, 1946, Raleigh, N.C.),
first black to hold the heavyweight boxing championship of the world.

Johnson fought professionally from 1897 to 1928 and engaged in exhibition matches as late as 1945. He won the title by knocking out champion Tommy Burns in Sydney, Dec. 26, 1908, and lost it on a knockout by Jess Willard in 26 rounds in Havana, April 5, 1915.

Until his fight with Burns, discrimination limited Johnson's opportunities and purses. When he became champion, a hue and cry for a "Great White Hope" produced numerous opponents.

At the height of his career Johnson was excoriated by the press for having twice married white women, and he further offended white supremacists by knocking out former champion James J. Jeffries, who was induced to come out of retirement as a "Great White Hope." In connection with one of his marriages, Johnson was convicted in 1912 of violating the Mann Act in transporting his wife across state lines before their marriage. He was sentenced to a year in prison and was released on bond, pending appeal. Disguised as a member of a black baseball team, he fled to Canada, made his way to Europe, and was a fugitive for seven years.

He defended the championship three times in Paris before agreeing to fight Willard in Cuba. Some observers thought that Johnson, mistakenly believing that the charge against him would be dropped if he yielded the championship to a white man, deliberately lost to Willard. From 1897 to 1928, Johnson had 114 bouts, winning 80, 45 by knockouts.

In 1920 Johnson surrendered to U.S. marshals and served his sentence, fighting in several bouts within the federal prison at Leavenworth, Kan. After his release he fought occasionally and appeared in vaudeville and carnival acts, appearing finally with a trained flea act. He wrote two books of memoirs, Mes Combats (in French, 1914) and Jack Johnson in the Ring and Out (1927; reprinted 1975). He died in an automobile accident.