

CJP-11

Nigeria's One and Only Tiger

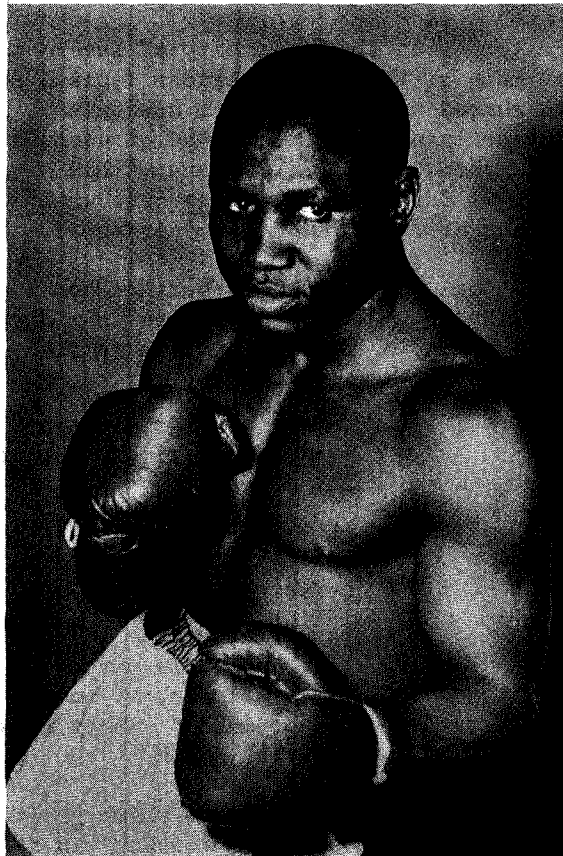
July 22, 1963
 University of Ibadan
 Ibadan, Nigeria

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
 Institute of Current World Affairs
 366 Madison Avenue
 New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Although there are no tigers in Africa there is a fierce Dick Tiger in Nigeria. Born Dick Iherigbo Ihetu in Eastern Nigeria, he has employed enough fistic malice to maul his way to the middleweight boxing championship of the world. On August 10, 1963, fifty thousand of his enthusiastic countrymen are expected in Ibadan to watch him defend his "crown" for the first time in his native land. His opponent will be the former title holder, Gene Fullmer, consistently described by sports writers as a Utah Mormon and wealthy mink rancher. This will be their third fight.

In fifteen full rounds of brutal fighting, Tiger "dethroned" Fullmer in October, 1962, in San Francisco. His victory was celebrated on the spot by a number of Nigerian notables. Clad in flowing robes they leaped into the ring and proceeded to dance the "High Life" in celebration of their compatriot's victory. Leading the dancers was Chief Joseph Modupe Johnson, Minister of Labor and Welfare. He was at ringside in his official capacity (his portfolio includes sports) to watch Dick Tiger's violent labor thousands of miles from Nigeria.



Dick Tiger

Here in Nigeria Tiger's victory was the cause of jubilation in the streets, drinking in bars and homes, and shrieking front page headlines in Nigeria's very free national press. The Daily Times proclaimed, "NIGERIA REJOICES" ; wallowing in glee, The Morning Post

claimed with some exaggeration, "TIGER BEATS FULLMER TO A PULP." The Daily Express more accurately chortled, "BLOOD FLOWS FROM FULLMER'S EYES", and the West African Pilot pontificated, "THE BEST STORY OF ALL TIME".

Such elation over a boxing triumph and such complete identification with a sports hero I once shared with millions of other Negro Americans in the heyday of Joe Louis. When the "Brown Bomber" had once again demolished a foe, or his "bum of the month" as some wry sports commentators were given to calling Joe's full and assorted bag of challengers, the adults and children of our Negro neighborhood in Fort Wayne, Indiana, would scramble into the streets, beating tin cans, blowing horns, and ringing bells in a joyful spontaneous parade. Negro weekly papers such as The Chicago Defender, The Pittsburgh Courier, and the Baltimore Afro-American blossomed forth with headlines and stories whose spirit and content were identical with those of the Dick Tiger adulating Nigerian press. For Negro Americans then, as for Nigerians now, a great deal more than a boxing championship rode on a supremely competent pair of fists. There was also race pride, hope, dreams, relief from humiliation, a chance to crow, and a sense of full equality "with the white folks", at least for a brief while.

At the University of Ibadan and the University of Ife I discovered that much of the Negro American feeling about Joe Louis (and Jesse Owens) had been shared by some Nigerian academics. They recalled lonely student days in Great Britain when their sense of worth was given a boost by Joe's talent for ring mayhem. He had followers within Nigeria too. An example is Allah-De, a columnist for the Daily Times who wrote of his firm, passionate (but inaccurate) memories of Joe's heroics and troubles.

"The only boxing hero I worship up to this day is the hefty Negro from Harlem in New York City called Joe Louis. Joe remains my man, even in his retirement.

As far as I am concerned, he is the greatest champion of all time. I will lick the ground on which Joe treads.

When I was a puny little creature, I used to cry each time uncle told me the Brown Bomber was defeated in a fight.

Above all, I like the Brown Bomber for his humility. If you asked me one reason why I hate the United States tax men, my answer will be— "they harass Joe too much." They never let his rich purse stay with him."

The talking drums which greeted Dick Tiger when he returned to Nigeria following his championship win spoke with the same fervor as our battered tin cans. Thousands of people surged about the Lagos airport as the new champion stepped from the plane. Tiger and his "V.I.P. welcoming committee" were not able to leave the area until the efficient Nigerian Police Force had resorted to swinging batons and cracking heads, particularly those of persistent reporters and photographers. The next day the press was appropriately indignant.

While the Lagos welcome was vigorous, two receptions for the

champion in Eastern Nigeria, one in his home village of Aba and the other in the regional capital, Enugu, verged on hysteria. The Morning Post reported that in Aba, "Market traders abandoned their wares in the market, while school children deserted their classes to line... the road from the early hours of the morning to wait for the hero.... The crowds roared in cheers while a group of Amaigbowomen sang his name in praise and welcome."

Ten days later in Enugu the Morning Post could hardly contain its own enthusiasm when it described the capital's "tremendous reception for Nigeria's world middleweight champion."

"Some of the people had been in the stadium for hours defying the chilly weather following a heavy down-pour in the early hours of the day... Dick Tiger drove into the stadium amidst tremendous cheers of Dick Tiger! Dick Tiger!

"In a specially composed song the pupils of St. Peter's School said that Dick Tiger had placed the name of Nigeria on the world map. They praised him for his strong punches and said one of his blows was equal to three of his opponents.

"The song referred to Dick Tiger as a child of poor parentage but who had gradually through his own hard work in the boxing field emerged a famous man.

"The song asked his wife Abigail to sacrifice a white ram at Dick Tiger's feet as a mark of greatness."

The praise song of the young students was followed by a long series of undulating traditional dances. These were succeeded by the extended oratory of some of the Eastern Region's most successful politicians. At last Dick Tiger spoke to his rapturous admirers, "I feel like crying," he said, "because of overhappiness." "When I am in the ring fighting I must always think of Nigeria."

The throng roared approval. While more motorcades, dancing, singing, speeches, and cocktail parties attended Tiger's triumphant travels around the Federation, and as his countrymen savored his success, American boxing promoters were more concerned with the even the bigger harvest of dollars to be reaped from a second meeting of two well matched boxers who had already demonstrated a crowd pleasing willingness to receive and return mayhem. After hard and sharp bargaining, the return bout was set for Las Vegas on February 23, 1963.

Forsaking contemplation of the past victory the voluble Nigerian sports writers and the Nigerian sporting public turned their attention to the new laurels to be won for the nation in Las Vegas. The Daily Times reported, "Tiger has worked with the singlemindedness of a presidential candidate to prepare for the defence of his title and the honor of Nigeria." From the West African Pilot came a reminder that the champion had more at stake than Fullmer, a wealthy man with a mink ranch, a farm where he breeds quarter horses, and who is also the director of a bank.

"Tiger knows only boxing. He likes the feel of two hundred dollar

suits and his homburg hats, and he likes to be called 'Champ' by the youngsters of Nigeria."

The importance of the "Champ" and boxing in Nigeria is part of a thin and tensile West African tradition that was evoked by the Governor-General of Nigeria, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe in his welcome home address to Dick Tiger: "I congratulate you on your historic achievement and wish you health and strength in your emergence as a third son of Africa to win a world championship in the field of boxing. Your illustrious predecessors being Battling Siki of Senegal, who was cruiserweight champion of the world in 1925, and the other being our own national boxing coach, Hogan Kid Bassey, who was featherweight champion of the world between 1957 and 1959."

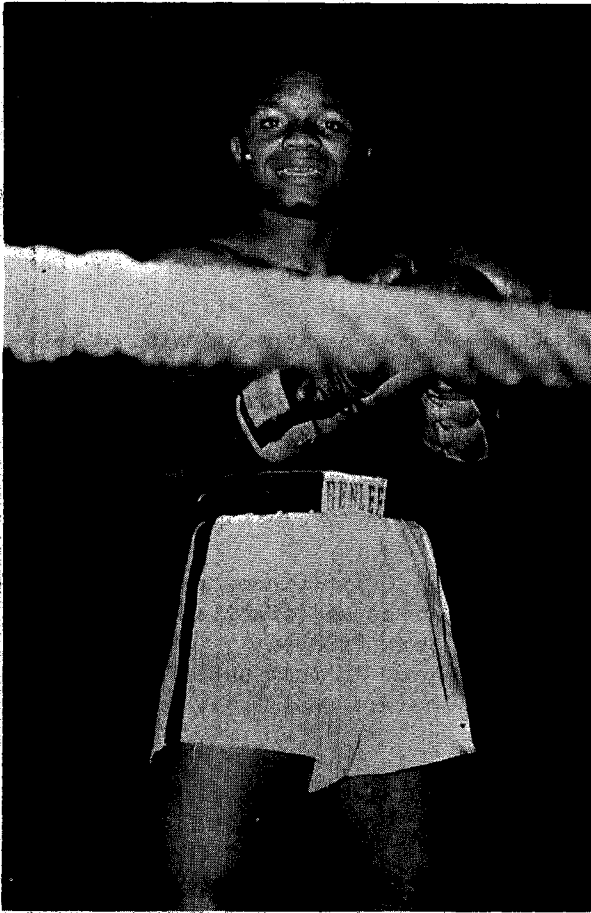
Dr. Azikiwe could have called upon a stronger, more ancient and indigenous Nigerian tradition in his praise of Dick Iherigbo Ihetu: the fierce man to man wrestling contests still carried in the villages of Eastern Nigeria. In the first sentences of his novel, Things Fall Apart, Chinua Achebe establishes the superior qualities of his doomed and tradition-bound hero by describing his victory in a wrestling contest. Like Dick Tiger "Okonkwo" was a child of poverty.

"Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. He was called the Cat because his back would never touch the earth. It was this man Ukonkwo threw in a fight which the old men agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights."

"The drums beat and the flutes sang and the spectators held their breath. Amalinze was a wily craftsman, but Okonkwo was as slippery as a fish in water. Every nerve and every muscle stood out on their arms, on their backs and their thighs, and one almost heard them stretching to the breaking point. In the end Okonkwo threw the Cat."

Boxing has long since replaced traditional village wrestling as the quick way to wealth and greatness in the growing cities of Ibadan, Lagos, Kano, Abeokuta, Enugu, and Port Harcourt. In this, as in many other things, African tradition has given way to the Western version of modernity. Tiger's hammering of other's heads is now a part of the nation's emotional drive for "progress and development."

To those who have paid close attention to the acculturation and assimilation of minority groups in the United States, this social psychological usage of boxing is a familiar one. Groups moving upward into middle class and upper class realms of American society have often been preceded by the dominance of one or more of their number in the boxing world. The rule of the Irish champions was superseded by that of victorious Jews, Poles, and Italians. They in turn have yielded hegemony to the Negroes, and the Negroes, while still much in evidence, find themselves challenged by Puerto Ricans and Mexican-Americans. Only those at the bottom of the social heap seem to possess the drive, the fierce need to rise up through such a narrow door as socially sanctioned "head busting."



Hogan Kid Bassey

Nigeria has a surplus of people at the bottom looking for a way up. There are also plenty of people roaming the streets of the cities looking for entertainment that is neither too expensive for their meager cash income, nor too alien to their traditional forms of spectator sports. Boxing fills the bill, and so thrives all over the Federation. Dick Tiger's victory has given impetus to the already flourishing sport.

In a period of three months there were the sixth annual Western Regional Boxing Championships, the Nigeria-Ghana International Amateur Boxing Tournament for the Dr. Azikiwe Gold Cup, the Hogan Bassey Cup Boxing Contests, the Island District Boys Clubs Boxing Tournament, the Federation of Ibadan Boys' Club Tournament, a series of "championship encounters" sponsored by the Northern Nigeria Area Boxing Council, and the amateur boxing championships organized by the Nigerian Amateur Boxing Association.

Admiration for the successful example of Negro American champions is reflected in the fighting aliases chosen by the Nigerian boxers. In legendary fashion the names of Joe

Louis, Sugar Ray Robinson, Sandy Saddler, Randy Sandy, Sam Langford, Spider Webb, and Henry Armstrong have become standard ring pseudonyms.

There is Joe Louis Anichebe and Joe Louis Onwuna, Sugar Ray Adigun and Sugar Ray Abu, Brown Sugar and a new Brown Bomber, Randy Sandy Alex and a new Sandy Saddler, Sammy Idowu Langford and Armstrong JuJu Man, Spider Raheem and Spider Okine.

Also there are uniquely Nigerian opponent-frightening noms de guerre: Dangerous Eze, Hurricane Badmus, Unworry King, Fighting Machine Abu, Trouble Power, Super Abel, Simon Tiger, Simple Joe Morris, Scorpion Okpara, Rafiu King Joe, and John Bull of Calabar.

They all aspire to the big time rank of Dick Tiger. At least two of them, Sugar Ray Adigun and Rafiu King Joe are prominent contenders in ex-world champion Hogan Bassey's featherweight class.

Others whale away in categories such as welterweight, lightweight, paperweight, flyweight, lightwelterweight, and heavyweight. They pursue such

amateur and professional titles as champion of Africa, the "holder" of the Western Nigeria "crown", the champion of Ilesha, the Northern Nigeria championship, the Nigerian championship, the Lagos champion, and the Ibadan titleholder.

Trained by the boxing fervor, the ancient man to man combat tradition of his Ibo ancestors, the racially meaningful examples of Negro-American champions, and the "honor of Nigeria" Dick Tiger faced Gene Fullmer, the simple fighting man and mink rancher, for the second time.

To everyone except the receipt-happy promoters the fight was a let-down. Spectators who had come hoping for a repeat of the San Francisco savagery were treated to a sporadic hit and run fight that ended in a draw. Fullmer fought hard but carefully. Tiger, carrying all that honor and tradition on his back, was thrown off stride by Fullmer's calculated and cautious avoidance of close-in fighting. In the end both were disconsolate; Fullmer had not regained the title and Tiger now held a blemished championship.

The emotions of Nigerian sports writers, politicians, and boxing fans seemed to swing uncertainly back and forth between satisfaction that their idol had retained the title and anger that he had been "robbed." It was only after the reports from the British sports writers came in that satisfaction was dropped and anger spurred on. The old colonial masters had legitimized the charge of "robbery" against the Americans.

In outraged concert the British and Nigerians assaulted the perfidious Yankees. "CRAZY", exclaimed the London Daily Herald; "FULMER RAN AWAY", objected the Lagos Daily Times; "FULMER SNEAKS A DRAW", sneered the London Daily Express; "SHOCKING" exploded the Lagos Morning Post; "NEAR ROBBERY" said the London Daily Sketch; "PLAIN ROBBERY" charged the Lagos Daily Express; "GENEROUS JUDGING", sniffed the London Daily Telegraph; "FANTASTIC", declared the West African Pilot. It was a clear and ringing meeting of Commonwealth minds.

Once again the Nigerian reaction aroused memories of the great days of Joe Louis. This time it was his unexpected defeat by Max Schmeling of Germany. Joe was well on his way to the heavyweight title and millions of Negro Americans were taking a heartfelt ride along with him. When Schmeling knocked out the "Brown Bomber" we could not believe it. An overwhelming sense of gloom pervaded our community, and the Negro weeklys soon made it clear that the gloom was shared by the whole race.

One of those weeklys, The Chicago Defender, (demonstrating the depth of our racial despair) came to our rescue with an unbelievable story that many of us promptly believed. In huge front page headlines, accompanied by a convincing diagram, The Defender implied that Schmeling had used a "gas gun" concealed in his glove on Joe. Our willing gullibility, child and adult, needed no reinforcement, but the paper provided it anyway by reminding us of the "diabolical cleverness" of the Nazis, then on the march in Europe.

Eventually we turned our bruised psyche to a return bout, and with a vengeance and vengeance in mind, that is what the Nigerians have finally done. In contrast to the Negro-Americans their powerful emotions have not focused

on their hero's opponent, but upon the need to recover lost prestige. They want the next fight in Nigeria. The aspiration is national honor, not race pride.

Spearheaded by the Morning Post, a daily financed by the Federal government, the "Fight-At-Home-Movement" came swiftly into being. Here is the front page editorial that launched the "bold campaign." Compared to other statements and speeches that were to follow it was reasonable and wild.

"A BIG campaign is launched today— a campaign to enhance Nigeria's prestige not only in the field of sport, but also in the world.

Last Sunday, Nigeria's Green Eagles took a serious beating from Ghana in the International soccer for the Nkrumah Gold Cup which ended 5-0 at Kumasi. Something is wrong with our sporting organisation. And to save our fortunes, we have to make a bold move forward.

Fortunately, there is still one field in which Nigeria reigns supreme— the field of boxing.

Today, Nigeria rules the world in the middleweight class of boxing. We may not continue to do so for long. While the going is good therefore, we must make the best of it.

In a bid to project Nigeria and take the fullest advantage of Dick Tiger's glorious achievements in boxing, the POST yesterday launched a campaign to stage the next world boxing fight in Nigeria.

A long distance call was put across to Las Vegas by the POST, in co-operation with the Associated Press and the reply is assuring— both Tiger and Fullmer are ready to fight in Nigeria if the money can be found. Already, a big campaign for Nigeria has started in the United States, which may spread to other parts of the world.

The campaign is backing the call of the POST that the next fight should be staged in Nigeria. The only problem is money.

Nigeria may not boast of too much money, because we are dedicated to a six-year development plan which calls for our financial resources.

But £100,000 is not too much for this country to provide. We believe that the money can be found in this country. And a world fight is one that we need very much as a pleasant diversion from the strained political problems of the past few months.

It will attract flourishing tourist business. It will possibly bring to Nigeria, businessmen who may be

able to discover for themselves, the potential for investment in this country.

The POST had worked out in detail, a fool-proof plan not only to make the event a success for Nigeria, but also to ensure that a fight of that nature will not be run at a loss.

Details of this great master-plan will be released as we go along, day by day."

Editors of the other newspapers hastily joined the campaign. They met to coordinate their efforts and soon the Fight-At-Home-Movement held screeching ascendance in the nation's press. The headlines proclaimed: "TIGER WORLD FIGHT IS A NATIONAL ISSUE," "STAGE IT HERE," "A GREAT CHALLENGE TO ALL NIGERIANS," "CHALLENGE TO OUR COUNTRY," "TIGER MUST COME HOME," "A CHALLENGE TO YOU AND ALL NIGERIA," "COME TO NATION'S RESCUE, BALEWA," and "DICK, FIGHT IT HERE."

Dick, like most other boxers, really doesn't have too much to say about the place of his fights. This is a prerogative held by a complex composed of his manager, Fullmer's, and the "promoters," all men with a sharp eye for the American dollar or the pound, be it English or Nigerian. This financial fact of boxing life led the Fight-At-Home-Movement right to the door of the Federal Treasury. Evidently, the hinges had been well oiled by the coordinated attack of the press, for responsive political leaders quickly conceded that the government's patriotic duty was to give full support to a fight "at home."

Dr. Azikiwe appealed to sports lovers and the regional governments for assistance and dedication to the cause. He reminded them that Nigeria would be the first country in Africa to stage a championship fight. "I don't see," he said, "why we shouldn't do it. We will be in a position to make history."

The Federal government set out to "do it." They offered \$56,000 as a guarantee for any losses the fight might sustain. Tiger's American manager, Jersey Jones, said it was not enough and asked for a \$200,000 warranty. This dash of cold water, plus reports of larger offers from Montana, Alberta, Los Angeles, and New York accelerated the Nigerian campaign. Urgent headlines hinted of desperation; columnists warned that "the Americans" were trying to foil Nigeria's bid for the fight; more politicians joined the fight chorus; and most practically, Chief Johnson, the dancing "Minister of Sports," succeeded in opening the doors of the three regional treasuries for the additional \$154,000.

Off to London went JMJ, as the Chief is called, and there contracts were signed with "Britain's leading boxing promoter," Jack Solomons, for a July 10th fight at Liberty Stadium, Ibadan. The \$200,000 is a guarantee for the sale of 45,000 tickets. Hogan Kid Bassey is listed as co-promotor, a sensible genuflection to Nigerian nationalism and pride.

After the signing JMJ attempted to clarify the Nigerian government's interest in a prize fight. His words had apologetic overtones: "Though the promotion of professional sports is not the responsibility of a government, we

felt that the yearning of our countrymen and women to see Tiger should be encouraged. We are not taking on the role of promoters; all we are doing is to guarantee the sale of all the tickets." He added that if all tickets are not sold, the government would insure a full house by giving the unsold tickets "to schools, orphanages, and other charities."

The Fight-At-Home-Movement won, its supporters turned their attention to the task of making the fight a "success." In a mode reminiscent of Alexander the Great's summons to the "sons of men of Pella and Amphikton, Thessalians and Lacedemonians" to come to Macedonia, the Daily Times in a lead editorial called to the Ibos, the Yorubas, the Hausas, the Fulani, the Kanuri, the Idoma, and the Kalabari: "LET US GO TO IBADAN."

Under this ringing headline The Times offered "heartly congratulations to the Federal government and the Regional governments for seeing it through that the Tiger-Fullmer world title fight will definitely take place in Nigeria."

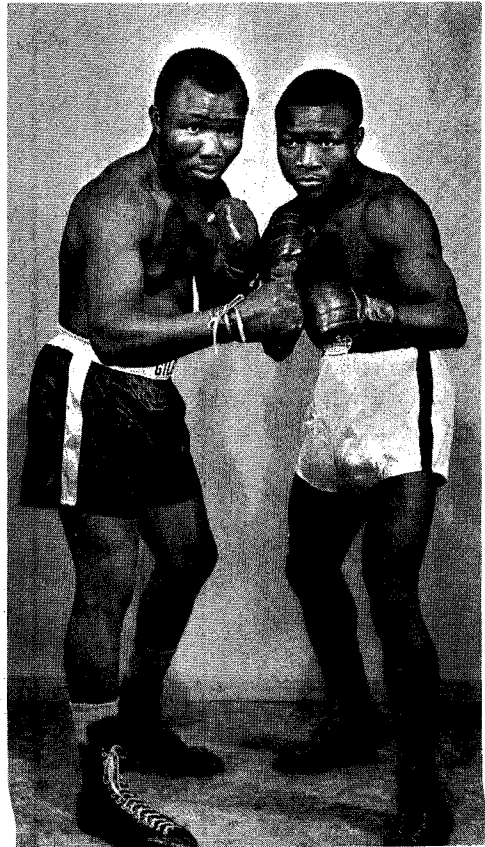
The editorial had more to say:

"The signing of the fight in London on Saturday will no doubt gladden the hearts of all Nigerian sport lovers because Nigeria will be making history as the first African country where a world boxing title contest is taking place.

"There have been critics who think that our Governments are being prodigal by guaranteeing £65,000 for the fight, because, according to them, the money could be more usefully expended in providing social amenities for the country.

"Whatever the merits of this argument might be, it is only right that they should be punctured. And the only way to do this is by making the fight an all-ticket affair.

"We are sure that there are Nigerians patriotic enough to pay ten guineas for ringside seats and five guineas, three guineas, one guinea, and half-a-guinea to watch the big fight. If critics are sincere that our Governments need not guarantee the £65,000, then they should immediately start a campaign to get a full house for the fight. The Daily Times urges all Nigerians to make July 13, 1963, a gala day, by streaming into Ibadan in such a large number that our governments will not need to spend a penny of the tax-payers' money for the fight."



Fatai Paso and Rafiu King

In spite of the overwhelming political and press approval, some

dissenters did have their say. "The HAVES in this country," wrote Allah-Do, "should contribute THAT 65,000 pounds toward the six year plan rather than a ring brutality plan." A reporter for Nigerian monthly, "Spear," saw a number of better uses for the guarantee.

"This could well be injected into a place in the much-talked-about nation's six-year development plan. It could be spent in the training of many of the university undergraduates whose chances have been threatened by some of the nation's University Colleges for want of fees. Alternatively this huge money could also be utilised in building more schools all over the Federation particularly in Lagos, which is bursting with children of school age who cannot get accommodation in existing schools."

Off Beat Sam used his column in the Daily Times to inform the government that he was not enthusiastic about its plan to give away the unsold tickets. "Speaking as one of those in dire need of charity (by virtue of my straitened circumstances) may I suggest, Mr. Minister, that instead of a ticket to the show, I would prefer a guarantee of three square meals. If we charities must be helped, then it must be in the way we need."

Off Beat Sam and his fellow skeptics, including the academics whose memories of Joe Louis were so warm, were really off beat, for their opposition was drowned out by accusations of "sabotage" and lack of patriotism. Sabotage was charged again when the fight was postponed until July 27th, and then until August 10th. The delays, attributed by Fuller to a foot injury, stimulated the suspicions of one Lagos sports editor. He cautioned his readers that "the fight game is a tricky one, particularly where the Yanks are concerned... the fight could still be as far from Nigeria as the moon from the earth."

While some writers are yelling outrage and others are counseling patience, the plans for the fight and other events associated with it continue to unfold.

At reduced rates the Nigerian Railway Corporation will run a special train service between Lagos and Ibadan. The Nigerian Airways Corporation announced a ten percent reduction in fares for all those travelling to the fight via their facilities. The tickets will cost \$30.00, \$15.00, \$9.00, \$3.00 and \$1.50.

Football pools are offering fight tickets as bonus prizes for their winners.

The Ghana Boxing Authority is chartering a plane to bring "eminent" Ghanaians to the fight. "Hundreds," says Hogan Bassey, "are coming by road."

Half of the Nigerian Police Force is ready to control the crowds in Ibadan. They will be assisted by 650 soldiers, some of whom have seen duty in the Congo.

Fifty years old, weighing 224 pounds, and more than six feet tall, JMW plans to fight a four round preliminary bout with a Ghanaian. His challenge has been accepted by two Ghanaian Members of Parliament, the Chairman of the Ghana Housing Corporation, and the Vice-Chairman of the Ghana Boxing Authority. His wife thinks he is "mad." The Nigerian Boxing Board of Control must think so too, they have refused to give him a license.



Entrance to Liberty Stadium, Ibadan

Jack Hart, "the most experienced ring official in Britain," will referee the fight. If the fight goes the full fifteen rounds, following the British system, Hart will be the sole judge of winner and loser. The Nigerian press made it clear early in the game that an American referee would not be welcome. Considering the circumstances it is just as well.

Television and film rights were signed over to the promoter by JMJ.. When the government-owned Nigerian Television Service wished to make arrangements for filming or televising the fight, Solomons offered to return the rights for around a \$100,000. So far there has been no deal.

Fullmer is scheduled to arrive in Nigeria on July 28th. Chief Johnson has sent him a cablegram assuring him of a "warm welcome" and "enjoyment of Nigeria's well known hospitality." The displays of temper when the two postponements were announced suggest this assurance may be premature. The news that Fullmer is "bringing his own water and food" has increased the heat, not the warmth. Off Beat Sam says, "Perhaps he is bringing it in a private charter plane. I always said these Yankees have more money than sense. Just what are they taught at school-- boxing?"

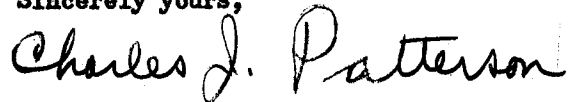
Tiger made the Queen's Birthday Honors list. He is now a member of the Civil Division of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire. In this age of nationalism that "Empire" has a brass ring, but so far only praise for the honor has been heard.

Tiger has been undergoing the usual intensive training while these things have been happening. He is skipping rope, slugging sparring partners, punching the bag, shuffling, ducking, and dodging. He looks strong and fast and the country's honor seems to rest lightly on his dark shoulders.

Still, distastefully remembering Max Schmeling, a question keeps

nagging me that does not seem to have occurred to the government, the press, the fans, and the other upholders of the nation's prestige: After all of this, what if Tiger loses?

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Charles J. Patterson". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Charles J. Patterson