



The Legacy of Sugar Ray Robinson: Boxer, Celebrity and Businessman

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[Kenneth Shropshire](#) knows sports. He is director of Wharton's Sports Business Initiative, president of the Sports Lawyers Association, a former executive with the Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee, and a football player during his undergraduate days at Stanford. He has written *The Business of Sports; In Black and White: Race and Sports in America*, and *Basketball Jones: America Above the Rim*. He is also a professor of legal studies and business ethics at Wharton. His newest book is titled, *Being Sugar Ray: The Life of Sugar Ray Robinson, America's Greatest Boxer and First Celebrity Athlete*. He spoke with Knowledge@Wharton about why he wrote the book and what impact Sugar Ray Robinson has had on sports, society, race relations and business.

Knowledge@Wharton: Let me start by asking you, what exactly do you mean by the term celebrity athlete?

Shropshire: What I was trying to get to was the distinction between the guy that plays a great game, or the woman that plays a great game, and the athlete who has done something special that goes beyond the game, has done a lot off of the field, and has notoriety and some fame, based on those other activities. They come closer to being more like the Hollywood figure -- more like actors and entertainers than athletes.

Knowledge@Wharton: Speaking of Sugar Ray, you describe him as America's greatest boxer and the first celebrity athlete. How do you think he compares to someone like Muhammad Ali? Was there a reason why you felt Sugar Ray was a better boxer and perhaps even more of a celebrity?

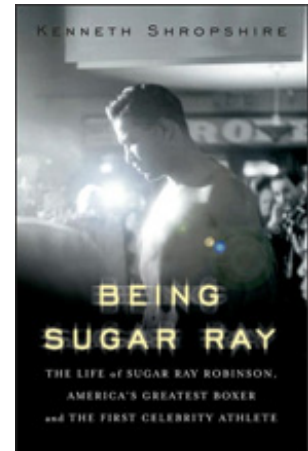
Shropshire: Well, in boxing it's a tougher call. I think that most people will give it to Sugar Ray Robinson when you put that pound for pound kind of qualifier on there. He fought as a welterweight/middleweight, so he was 147 to 160 pounds, whereas, Ali, Joe Louis and Rocky Marciano were all huge guys who were more in the 200 pound range.

So certainly, one on one, their real weights given, Robinson may not have been as successful. But, at a pound for pound level, the sheer number of fights is probably the biggest qualifier, to put him way ahead of these other guys. He fought 202 times, whereas Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali combined didn't reach half that number. And, Sugar Ray Leonard, another great boxer, needed about 120 more bouts to get anywhere close to as many as Robinson had. So, he was just stellar in that regard.

On the idea of being the first celebrity athlete, there were certainly a number of people before him who had some fame -- Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig and others around the globe. But Robinson is really the first in this modern era of the African American who is being himself and being broadly accepted across the color line. He crossed racial lines and he was the first. This was during the late 1940s and early 1950s when he accomplished this.

Knowledge@Wharton: So, you use the term "Celebrity Athlete" in a totally positive way. Or, is there some slight negative connotation to it, in the sense that should athletes act like celebrities or does that detract from their focus on what made them great?

Shropshire: There was nothing negative that came to mind while I was writing the book. Certainly there are some celebrity athletes that do some negative things. And, certainly there are those who gain celebrity and lose focus on the game. But part of what the book was trying to find and trying to look at is there can



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be a very positive use of celebrity by the few who attain it.

Robinson was not perfect. A lot about what the book does is talk about some of the flaws that he had and the problems that he had. But he is a guy who now, 50 plus years before the men and women of today, has set forth a pretty good road map of what it would take to be a fully successful and positive celebrity athlete. So, that's part of the reason, too, why his life was a good one to use.

Knowledge@Wharton: You've spoken about Sugar Ray as a boxer. How good was he at business. Was he a success there as well?

Shropshire: For a while. What was most successful and unique about him was that he had a series of businesses on 124th Street between 7th and 8th Avenue in New York City, in Harlem. He had Sugar Ray's The Restaurant Bar. He had Edna May's Lingerie Shop [this was his wife's name], Golden Glovers Barber Shop, a beauty salon and a real estate business. There were nearly a city block of businesses that he owned in the early 1950s. This was extraordinary.

This was one of the things, being at a business school, that drove me to think about looking at Robinson as this athlete entrepreneur and trying to see what drove him to do this and how did he pull this off. And certainly today, most people know about Magic Johnson, who has theatres and Starbucks Coffee Shops and that sort of stuff.

But, what is really different about what Robinson did is that he did this while he was the active athlete on top of his game. It was amazing that he pulled it off. Now when you ask, how successful was he -- well, it didn't last forever. The businesses did not continue to thrive after he finished boxing.

Knowledge@Wharton: How are the pressures placed on athletes today -- such as the constant prying into their personal lives, the pressure to use performance enhancing drugs, the push to endorse products and to make a lot of money while they are young and the pressure to be role models -- how are those different from what they were like during the past 50 or 60 years?

Shropshire: Very different: What's that relatively old song "More money, more problems"? The more money that has come into these games, the more there's been a push and more competition to use whatever it takes to be successful. It's refreshing when you see stories such as the one recently about Ryan Howard of the Philadelphia Phillies, being this kind of new era baseball player, one who says, "I never had and will never use performance enhancing drugs."

Certainly that was the mode of athletes in the late 1940s and early 50s. It was "let me see how successful I can be" and frankly there was less availability of those types of enhancements. It was interesting; I was trying to see what kinds of things Robinson may have done that were similar or if there was any kind of steroid equivalent. One of the things that the athletes did was that they did inject Vitamin B12 and things like that. There was still this aura of "We need to do something to get an edge", but it was nothing compared to the extremes that we know about today.

Knowledge@Wharton: Was Sugar Ray a role model back when he was still fighting? Is he a role model today or is he just not well known any more?

Shropshire: Well, he certainly was a prominent role model in his day. He was a huge figure especially in the worlds that he lived in. He was actually a huge figure in Harlem, in Paris and in Los Angeles later on in life. And then to some extent, there was more fame that occurred as his image was projected and more of his story was told. But you have to remember that he became famous before ESPN, CNN -- before wide-ranging national TV broadcasts.

You can recognize his fame when you look at the photos and hear the stories about what he did in his Harlem neighborhood and how people looked up to him. For example, rightly or wrongly, he drove a flamingo pink Cadillac and it was labeled the "Hope Diamond of Harlem." People felt that if Sugar Ray can do it, we can do it too, so there was that positive. In some ways you can look to Robinson as the start of this whole question of should athletes be role models, are they and what impact do they really have?

Knowledge@Wharton: Did his business activities inspire other athletes to enter business or become what you refer to as the athlete entrepreneur? Has that become a more broad based phenomenon and are

there other examples of athletes who have been successful entrepreneurs?

Shropshire: There are two different answers to that. There are a few athletes who I've talked to today and I've heard interviewed today, who have said that they look right to Sugar Ray Robinson for the success that they had off the field. Sugar Ray Leonard, for example, points to him; Muhammad Ali pointed to him early on in his career. So there are some examples that look directly to Robinson.

I think for the most part, and partly what the book talks about, is that most athletes don't know who Sugar Ray Robinson was and they don't know that they are doing much of what he did before. I mentioned Magic Johnson and even lesser names like Keyshawn Johnson, a real interesting case who I actually don't talk about in the book. He's a player in the NFL and if he had been a more famous athlete, some of what he did would have received a lot more praise as well.

[One interesting thing] is that where Robinson's biggest acknowledged business was *Sugar Ray's Cafe* in Harlem, Keyshawn Johnson actually had a restaurant called *Reign* in Beverly Hills. And that was one of the big moments that a lot of people pointed to, this was in the 1990s, as, "He didn't just open up a business, he opened up a business that was in a highfalutin neighborhood." It wasn't a community-based business. He took it to the next level and he had the choice.

He had the option of building a business where others couldn't have before. And that's part of the Robinson story too, when I looked to him and started writing about him and thinking that isn't this unique that he's reinvesting in his community. What's ironic is that in the 1950s if he had wanted to build his businesses on Park Avenue, he probably would not have been allowed to.

Knowledge@Wharton: That's interesting and this leads me to another question. Do you feel that Robinson changed the way that America regarded race? Did he open the way for more black athletes? Did he have an impact on the racism that was so prevalent during that time?

Shropshire: Here's the real transitional impact of Robinson. With both athletes and race, if you look at the timeline of athletes black and white, prior to Robinson, the biggest named African-American athlete was certainly Jack Johnson in the early part of the century. Jack Johnson played a role of intimidating white America -- apart from the reasons why or how aggressively he did it -- that really was the role that he played. He was not a broadly accepted celebrity athlete.

There was a gap in between the time that African Americans were allowed to participate in major level sports and the next athlete who had the opportunity. That was Joe Louis. Those of us who recall or have read about Joe Louis know that he was specifically told by his handlers to play a role that included things like: Never be photographed with a white woman, never stand over your opponent and certainly don't smile over your opponent, never be seen going in and going out of bars and that sort of thing. So he had this restricted life that he lived, that allowed him to gain some fame in addition to the success that he had in the ring. That made him an American hero in some ways.

The next African-American athlete right around that same time was Jackie Robinson. Jackie Robinson famously made the agreement to "turn the other cheek" to be broadly accepted by white America. In timing, the next person up was Sugar Ray Robinson. Sugar Ray was flamboyant and unique; he was living his own life as an African American and gave this big vision of an African-American successful person who was living his own life and living in his own community.

Also, the big racial moment that was striking to me was that there was a photograph in *The New York Times* of him actually giving a large check to the Damon Runyon Cancer Fund while he was in Paris. He is giving it to the President of France and he takes the opportunity to kiss, four times on the cheek, the wife of the President of France, Madame Auriol. The photograph appeared in *The New York Times* and I remember reading the article and looking for what kind of hate was spewed, what kinds of problems there were. But it was just this wonderful article about Sugar Ray Robinson. That could not have happened with anybody else. He had this unique kind of presence that certainly opened up a lot of doors.

Knowledge@Wharton: Where would you put Paul Robeson on the spectrum of people you mentioned?

Shropshire: Well, Paul Robeson comes in the early 1950s. That's when the biggest impact of Robeson began to be felt and understood. The power that Robeson had was as this athlete, entertainer and political

activist. And unfortunately, because of the political positions that he took, this didn't allow him to achieve the highest stages. And also, there was this huge blackout in terms of people being able to see his works and understand who he was, until years later, until nearly at the time of his death. So Robeson, in many ways, was probably the most powerful figure to make this transition and may have sacrificed more than any of the others out there.

Knowledge@Wharton: Last question for you. What's your next book on?

Shropshire: You know, this was my first biography and when I was getting ready to write it, I talked to Arnold Rampersad who had written a great biography on Jackie Robinson. I was trying to figure out if I wanted to do this. And he said, "Well, it's more than a notion to write a biography. You really immerse yourself in someone's life when you do that." This was about 1997, when I had that conversation with him and began to do this. So, I don't know yet. I'm thinking that it might be a biography, but probably a biography of somebody who is alive, which would be a lot easier to do.

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