Written by **Thomas Sowell** on July 12, 2011

Forgotten Stars: Musial, Greenberg, Louis

Three recent sports biographies — two about baseball stars Stan Musial and Hank Greenberg, and another about boxing great Joe Louis — are not only interesting in themselves, but also recall an era that now seems as irretrievably past as the Roman Empire.

They also raise questions about who is remembered and why.

The St. Louis Cardinals' great hitter Stan Musial was one of those stars who dominated his era in the 1940s and 1950s, and yet is almost forgotten today, even among baseball fans. Mention baseball in the 1940s and 1950s, and the names that come to mind immediately are Ted Williams and Joe DiMaggio.

Yet Stan Musial had a higher lifetime batting average than Joe DiMaggio — and Hank Greenberg hit more home runs in a season, and had more runs batted in, than either Williams or DiMaggio.

Maybe the reason for the difference is that it is easier to remember some things when they are associated with other things. Ted Williams was the last .400 hitter and Joe DiMaggio's 56-game hitting streak is a record that may never be broken.

There are no similarly spectacular records associated with Hank Greenberg or Stan Musial. Greenberg hit 58 home runs in a season, so that two more would have tied Babe Ruth's record at the time. Greenberg also had 183 runs batted in, just one short of Lou Gehrig's American League record. But close only counts when pitching horseshoes or throwing hand grenades.

Mark Kurlansky's biography says in its preface, "Hank Greenberg was a baseball player who hit a lot of home runs before most of us were born." But not all of us. The longest home run I ever saw was hit by Hank Greenberg, deep into Yankee Stadium's 3rd deck, back when it was 415 feet down the left field foul line.

The book about Musial is titled *Stan Musial: An American Life* by George Vecsey. It is more about his life than about baseball. In it, Musial recalls that, back in his childhood, creating mischief far from his own neighborhood was still risky, because relatives who lived in other neighborhoods would not hesitate to grab you and spank your behinds.

Ah, but we are so much more enlightened today — or are we? Will anyone ever call us "the greatest generation"?

The cover of the recent book about Louis, by Randy Roberts, simply says *Joe Louis* — a name with enormous impact in his era. It too is more about the life of the man, and the great but forgotten role he played in the history of American race relations.

Joe Louis was the first black hero of white Americans, as well as black Americans. The dignity and sportsmanship with which he conducted himself had much to do with changing the image of black people in general, and eventually opening many doors for them.

In those days, you didn't have to act like a lout to try to show that you were black. Acting like a gentleman was something admired by blacks and whites alike.

Louis engaged in none of the cheap, show-off antics that have become all too common among boxers of a later era. He came to the ring to do a job, and he did it professionally, skillfully and with devastating results. He still holds the record for the most one-round knockouts in heavyweight championship fights.

With all his fine qualities, Joe Louis also had his flaws as both a man and a boxer. Author Randy Roberts covers both the good and the bad, and clearly sees the good as far more predominant.

The central boxing dramas of Joe Louis' career were his two fights with Max Schmeling. In the first fight, when Louis was a new young sensation bursting onto the boxing scene, and clearly headed toward a championship fight, he still had both defensive vulnerabilities and an over-confidence born of his unbroken string of victories.

The older and canny Schmeling studied Louis' fights, spotted his flaws and took advantage of them to score an upset knockout. As Louis' own manager said at the time, it was probably the best thing that could have happened to a young Joe Louis.

That defeat got Louis' full attention, focused his mind, and dominated his work. So intense was Louis' focus on vindication that, before the second fight, he confessed to an astonished friend that he was scared — scared that he might kill Schmeling.

As it turned out, he sent Schmeling to the hospital, after a devastating one-round knockout that shocked the boxing audience.

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