Honoring a native son

Photos by KEVIN M. COX/The Daily News

RIGHT: Four-year-old Spencer Collins mimics the statue of Jack Johnson at Jack Johnson Park in Galveston during a dedication ceremony for a Texas Historical Commission marker Saturday morning. Arthur John "Jack" Johnson, a Galveston native, was the first African-American world heavyweight boxing champion. ABOVE: City Councilwoman Cornelia Harris Banks, background, reads the proclamation during the dedication ceremony.

Heavyweight champ recognized by historical marker

By ALEX MACON
The Daily News

* GALVESTON
The island's most famous rock star and barrier breaker was honored Saturday at the Galveston park that bears his name.

Jack Johnson, the Galveston native who became the first African-American to win the world heavyweight boxing title during an era of prevalent and legally enforced racism, was recognized with the first historical marker in Texas dedicated to a black athlete.

Johnson's fame and notoriety was widespread during his lifetime, although it's taken years for the "Galveston Giant" to receive widespread recognition as a major 20th century figure.

Despite bipartisan congressional proposals and repeated pleas from prominent figures, Johnson has yet to receive a presidential pardon for a 1912 indictment that was racially motivated.

Under the Mann Act, a law that most historians agree was funda-

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RIGHT: Texas State University graduate student Alex Borg-

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mentally racist, Johnson was indicted in 1912 for crossing state lines with a white woman.

Johnson fled the country to avoid prison time but eventually served less than a year’s sentence from 1920 to 1921.

U.S. Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama have not acted on proposals for a pardon, a proposal that was again endorsed by speakers at Saturday’s ceremony.

The dedication of the historical marker is a step in the right direction toward recognizing Jackson’s legacy as one of the 20th century’s greatest athletes and as an international figure who lived his life the way he wanted, said Hank Thierry, chair of the Galveston Historical Foundation’s African-American Heritage Committee.

Thierry said he hopes the marker will lead to more recognition of historic African-Americans.

“The state got it right,” Thierry said. “If the honor is going to be bestowed on anyone, I’m happy it’s Jack Johnson, not just for his athletic achievements but his legacy outside of boxing.”

Passing the torch

Thierry likened Johnson’s legacy and the dedication of the historical marker to a torch passed on through the years.

Various community groups, historical foundation members and city administrators contributed to the dedication of the Jack Johnson Memorial Park at 26th Street and Avenue M, he said.

About a year ago, the torch passed to two graduate students in the public history program at Texas State University, who worked with Thierry to petition the Texas Historical Commission for a marker.

Students and Texas natives Alex Borger and Ann Landeros, the keynote speakers at Saturday’s ceremony, said the marker will educate others about Johnson’s life.

Johnson was one of the first international athletes and during his lifetime, people may have loved him or feared him, but they certainly knew him.

Now, “anyone with a few minutes to spare walking by this park can stop and read about the man,” Landeros said.

Rock star of his time

The son of former slaves, Johnson grew up in the 800 block of Broadway St. in Galveston in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He was introduced to a diversive world that was not available to many other young men.

“The city promised opportunity and experience Jack Johnson would not have found anywhere else in Texas,” Borger said.

Johnson dropped out of school and eventually took a job as a stevedore at the Galveston docks, where he boxed with other dockworkers to earn extra money.

The size of his first prize purse came in at about $1,500, said Helen Mooy, director of the Galveston County Historical Commission.

He debuted as a professional fighter in 1898, and was thrown into jail in 1901 for a fight with Galveston’s Joe Choykini — prizefighting was then illegal in the state.

Neither man could afford bail, and the pair box-hunted with each other, sparring in the jail cell in front of large crowds.

Johnson’s professional success continued, and in 1908 he defeated the reigning world heavyweight champion in a bout in Sydney, Australia.

Whites who were outraged at a black man holding the title called for a “Great White Hope” to take back the title. Johnson easily defeated former champ James Jeffries in Nevada in 1910 to keep his title.

The “Great White Hope” threw in the towel in the 15th round and race riots occurred across the U.S., but Johnson’s dominance in the ring was indisputable.

Johnson enjoyed a celebrity lifestyle and could be considered a “rock star of his time,” Mooy said. He was outspoken and even arrogant as a public figure.

Johnson confidently taunted his opponents decades before Muhammad Ali ever stood in front of a microphone, and he endorsed products and marketed himself almost a century before Michael Jordan put his name on a line of sneakers.

He also had a passion for women and fast cars, which he indulged during his lifetime.

He flouted social taboos of the time by marrying three times to white women.

Johnson also held mechanical patents, adapted to new languages and reportedly held an interest in opera and history.

“Jack Johnson, unlike his father when he was young, was a free man, and he very definitely lived his life as one,” Mooy said.

“He refused to accept that his color could be a hindrance in any way, whether against those men he fought or with the women that he loved.”

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