Written by Sam Gregory
Monday, 18 October 2004 18:00

On Labor Day September 3, 1906 a classic championship fight took place in Goldfield, Nevada between two of the greatest lightweights to ever step in the ring. Joe Gans and Oscar “Battling” Nelson entered into a 45 round showdown for Gans’ lightweight title.

A couple things made this particular fight one of the true classic bouts of all time. First, at the time Joe Gans was considered by many boxing historians to be the pound for pound greatest fighter that ever lived. Born in Baltimore in 1874, Gans turned pro in 1891 at the age of 17. At a young age Gans already possessed great speed, power and combination punching ability. Newspapers from coast to coast wrote about Gans’ amazing speed, agility and clean hitting ability.

There was also a dispute over who was the true holder of the lightweight title. According to most modern record books, after Gans won the title in 1902 he relinquished the title in 1904 to fight welterweight Joe Walcott at a catch-weight of 142 pounds. There was no title on the line, lightweight or welterweight. Jimmy Britt supposedly won the vacated title later that year, keeping the title until losing it to Nelson in 1905. Nelson still laid clam to the title in 1906, having won the “White Lightweight Title” when he beat Jimmy Britt. The fact is Joe Gans never lost a title fight since winning it, and the press continued to recognize Gans as the true 135 lb. champ. This fight was to settle the dispute.

This classic bout was promoted by world famous promoter, Tex Rickard. The town of Goldfield, Nevada was the perfect location for the fight, being one of the great mining camps of the early 1900’s. The gate receipt was an unheard of $76,000. The purse for the fight was 33,500—Gans was to receive $11,000 and Nelson 22,500, even though Gans was favored 2-1. (In case you’re not familiar with these fighters, Joe Gans was black and Battling Nelson was white.) Rickard also put up an additional $2,000 signing bonus for each man and $500 for expenses. All told it was the largest amount of money ever offered for a lightweight title bout at that time.

The late afternoon fight that started just after 3PM saw ring temperatures exceeding 100 degrees. One of the first things ringside observers noticed was Gans entering the ring carrying an umbrella to shield himself from the hot Nevada sun. Between rounds cornermen furiously fanned the fighters from the excessive heat.

As the fight started, Gans looked impressive. He was a great boxer-puncher with excellent footwork, defensive skills, and counter-punching. Taking an early lead in the fight, Gans demonstrated why he was called the “Old Master.” Looking at a tape of the fight, by the end of the second round you can see Nelson bleeding from the ears, having taken a barrage of combination punches from Gans. It was clear from the start of the fight that Joe Gans was a very evasive fighter. Whenever Nelson tried to tie Gans up or bully him into the ropes, Joe was able to lower his center of gravity, hold his ground, then turn and keep the fight in the center of the ring. Gans was mainly a counter-puncher, but he had a fantastic jab and lead with it several times to create openings. The first knockdown of the fight came in the eighth round when Gans

caught Nelson with a right cross followed up by a left hook.

Most of the fight was fought up close, with Nelson going to the body. At the start of the ninth round Nelson was clearly the aggressor with his strong body attack, though both men kept up a strong punch output. Nelson took a tremendous amount of punches from Gans, but seemed impervious to the punishment as he continued moving forward, often leading with his head. Despite several warnings from the referee, Nelson's corner kept yelling, "Butt him, don't let him get away."

As the fight progressed, Gans knocked Nelson down two more times. Finally in the 42nd round Nelson hit Gans with a low-blow that was quickly ruled a foul. Joe Gans was declared the winner by disqualification.

This fight would go down in history not only as a great lightweight fight, but one of the all-time classic fights in the history of boxing.