Written by Lee Wylie
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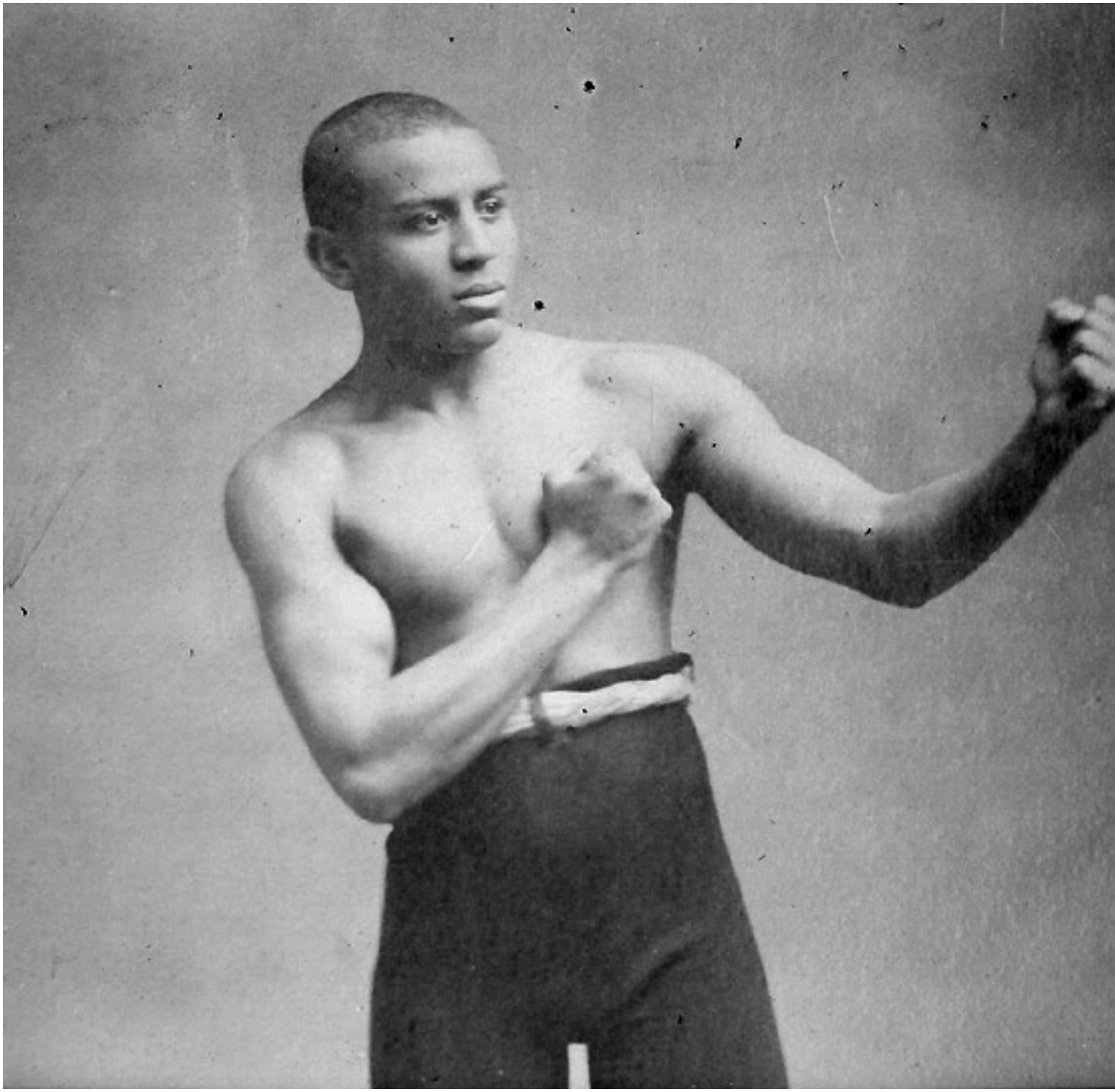

Just as it behooves politicians to go back and revisit the actions of marvels like Abraham Lincoln, fighters of today would be well served to study the old masters like "The Old Master," Joe Gans. Some of his tricks of the trade could be made use of in the rings of today.

Known as the first black American prizefighter to ever capture a world championship, Joe Gans would soon become better known for his exquisite boxing skill. A pioneer in the art of scientific

boxing -hitting without being hit in return- Gans could make an opponent fall just short with a subtle turn of the head, before countering with ultra-precision. While facing formidable opposition like Sam Langford, Battling Nelson, Jack Blackburn, Young Griffo, Dave Holly, “Barbados” Joe Walcott, Frank Erne and Terry McGovern, Gans became distinguished for his ability to determine his opponent’s strengths and weaknesses, and then play out the fight to his own strengths and his opponent’s weaknesses. Gans was the ultimate student of the game. Borrowing from the likes of James J. Corbett and Bob Fitzsimmons, Gans would absorb what was useful and integrate his findings into his own style. He even devised some new techniques and strategies of his own. Gans may or may not have invented the jab, but the way Gans used it, employing it both as a defensive weapon to intercept the attack of his opponents and as an offensive weapon to create openings and set up his right hand and his uppercut --another punch Gans has been credited with inventing--was considered revolutionary at the time.

A thinking fighter if ever there was one, Gans, alongside the likes of Bob Fitzsimmons, Benny Leonard and Archie Moore, is one of the smartest fighters to have ever lived. One example of his vast ring IQ came in 1902, during the rematch with Frank Erne. Having previously lost to Erne, Gans trained for the rematch with the intention of implementing something he had noted in their first fight –just as Erne would initiate his left, he would check his opponent’s reaction. If his opponent brought their rear hand down to parry the left jab, he’d turn it over into a left hook. On the other hand, if the opponent would cover the right side of their head in anticipation of a left hook, he’d shoot a jab straight up the middle. Fueled with this knowledge, Gans waited for Erne to telegraph his left hand. Instead of trying to block the attack, Gans came inside it with a right hand and ended matters with a little over one minute remaining in the very first round.

Although there isn’t a great deal of film available on him, the footage we do have of Gans is extensive enough to a garner a real appreciation of the man’s craft and acumen. Here, using the Joe Gans-Kid Herman fight from 1907, I’d like to highlight some of the time tested techniques that Gans used. Although the footage is lacking in quality and is a little grainy at times, I consider it a real treasure chest of technical gems!

Here’s a little reminder before viewing.

While watching the fight, it’s important to realize that boxing has changed an awful lot between then and now. For instance, fights went on a lot longer and the gloves were a lot smaller. As a result, different circumstances called for different styles and strategies and there was more emphasis placed on in-fighting which included extensive holding and wrestling for position. Also, because those gloves were a lot smaller, it was far more difficult for a fighter to simply apply the ear muffs and shell up when defending. Far more thought had to be placed on hand evasions

such as glove blocking, hence, boxing had a different look and feel to it back then.

The Fight

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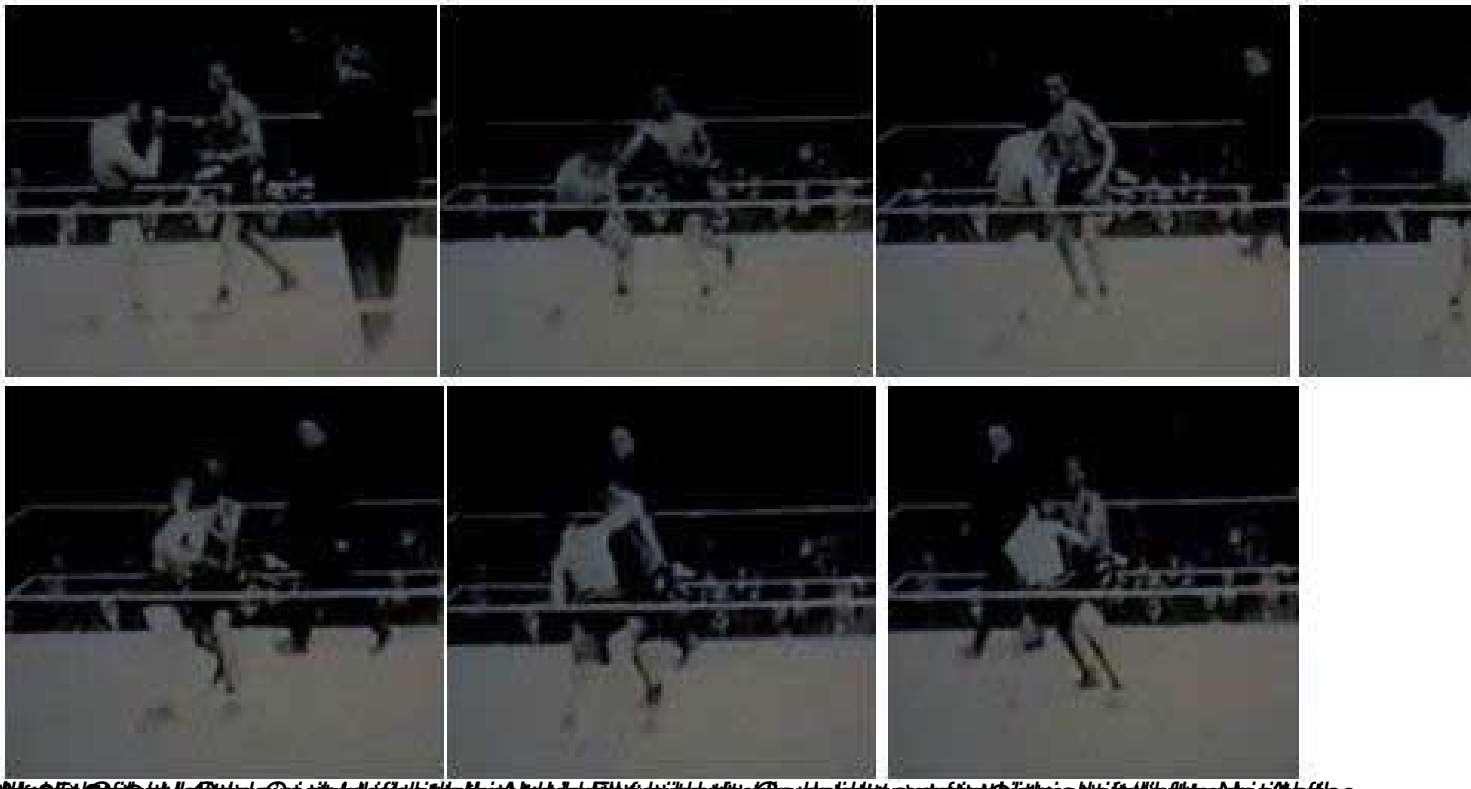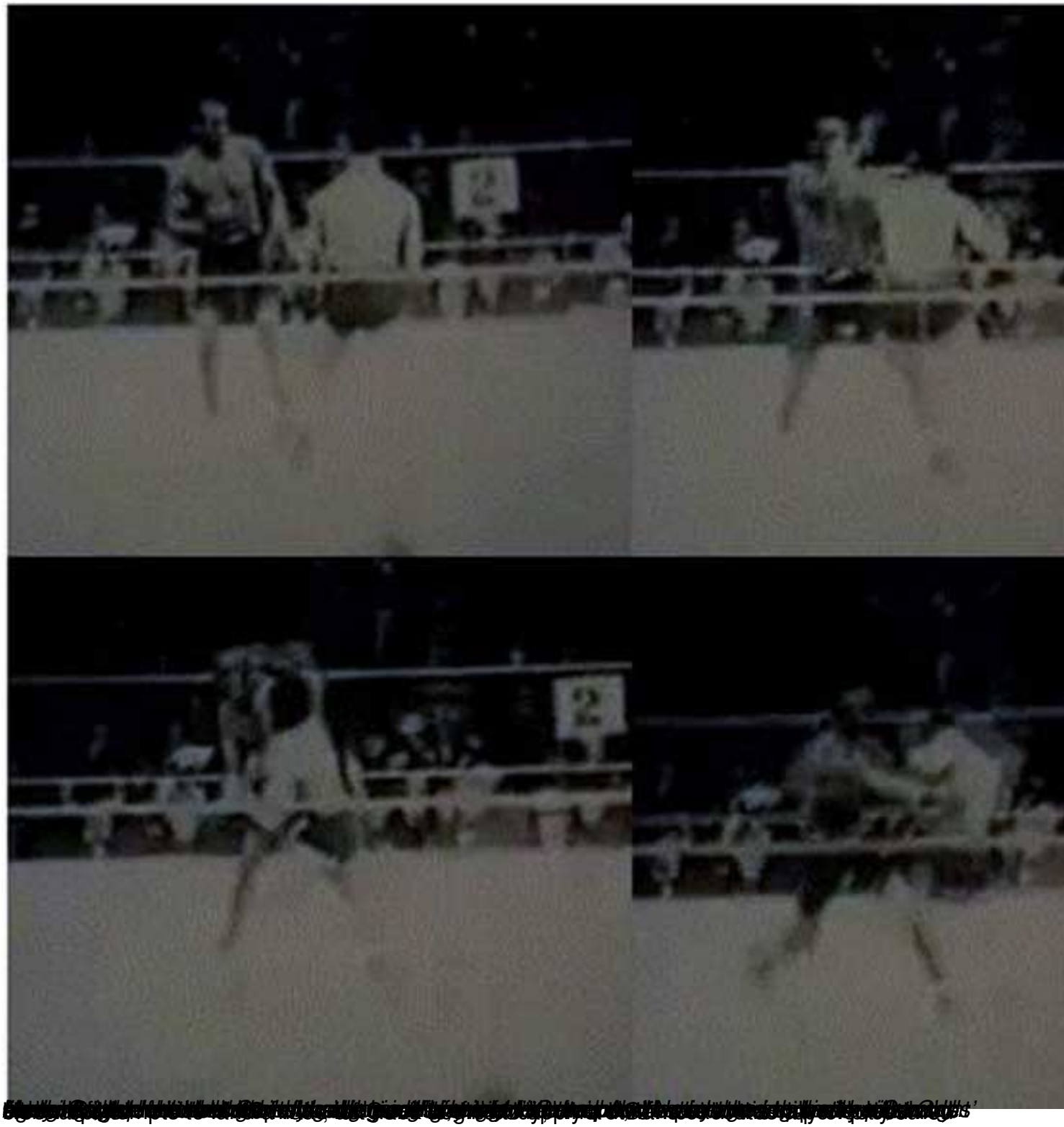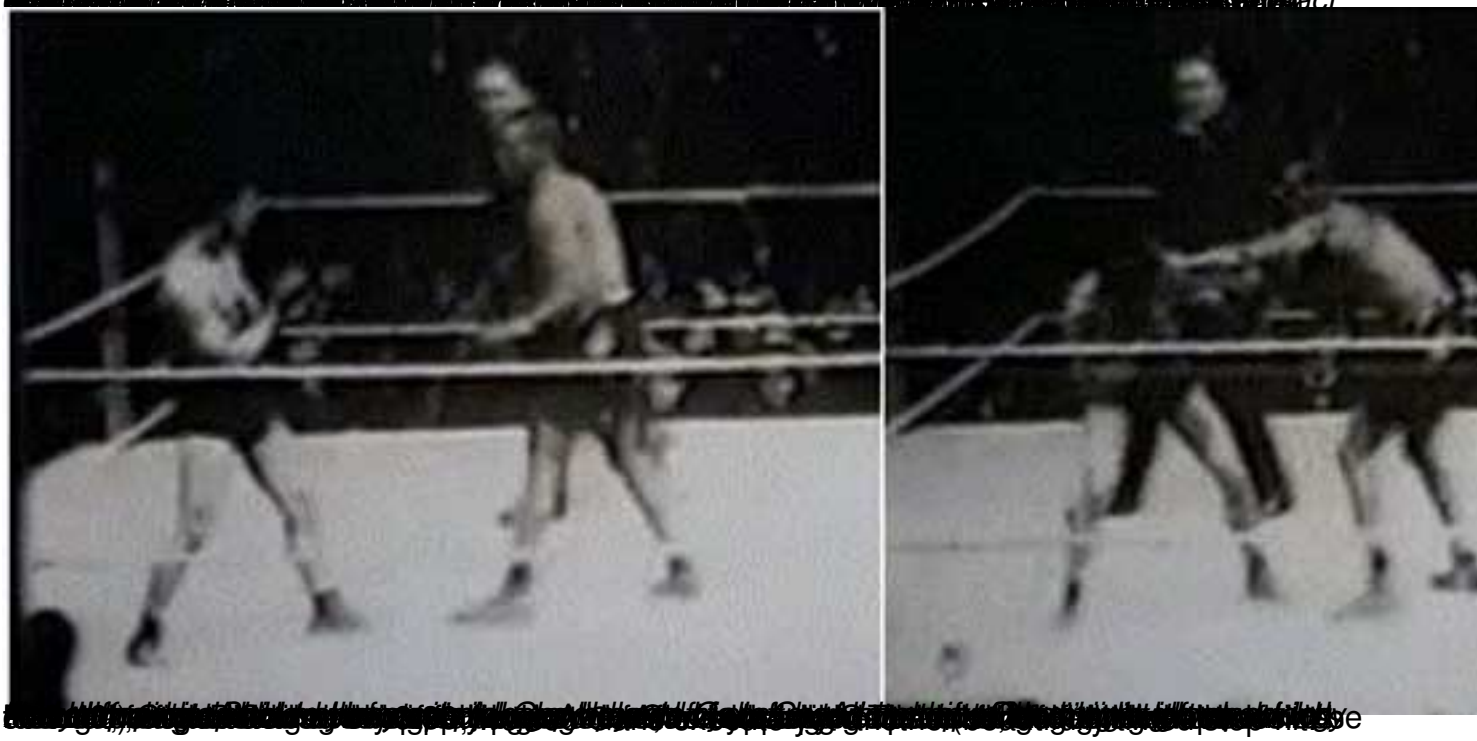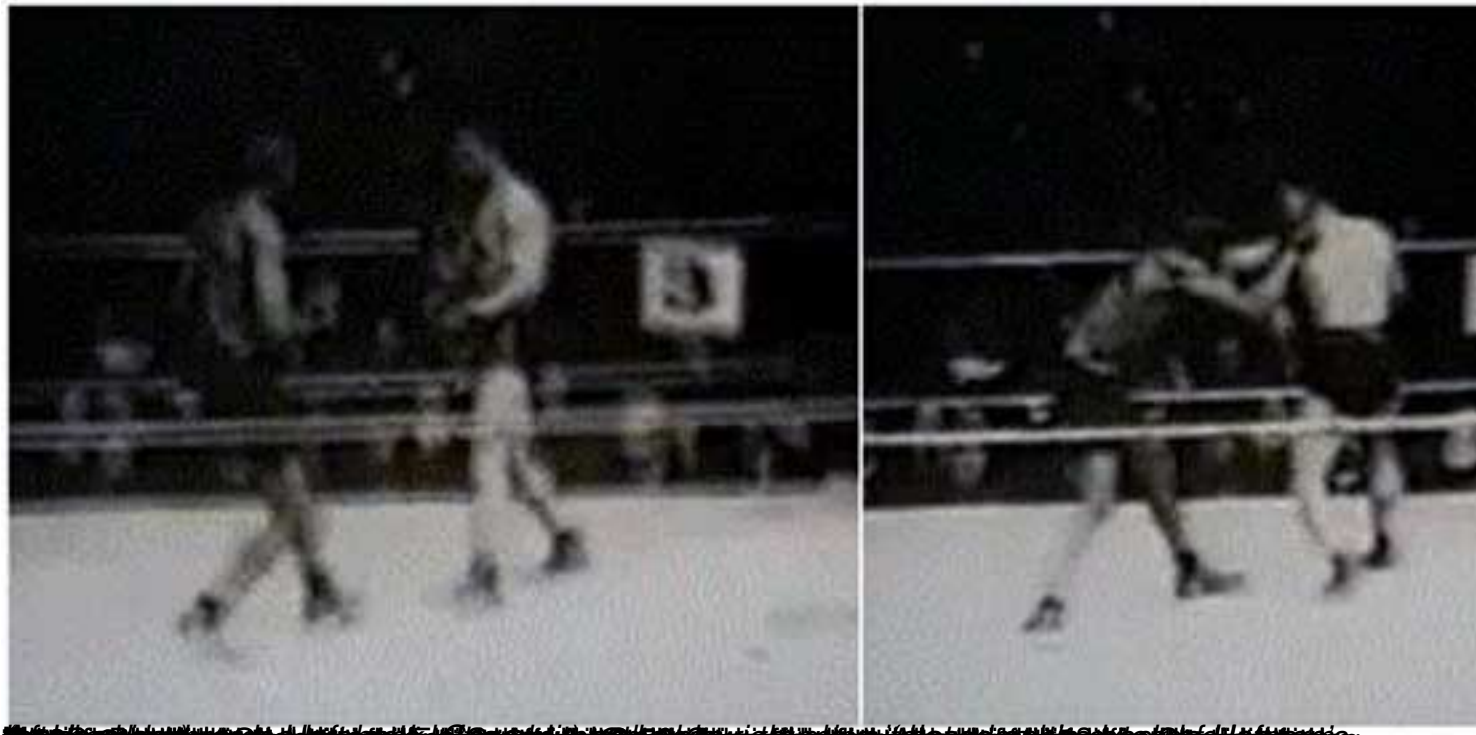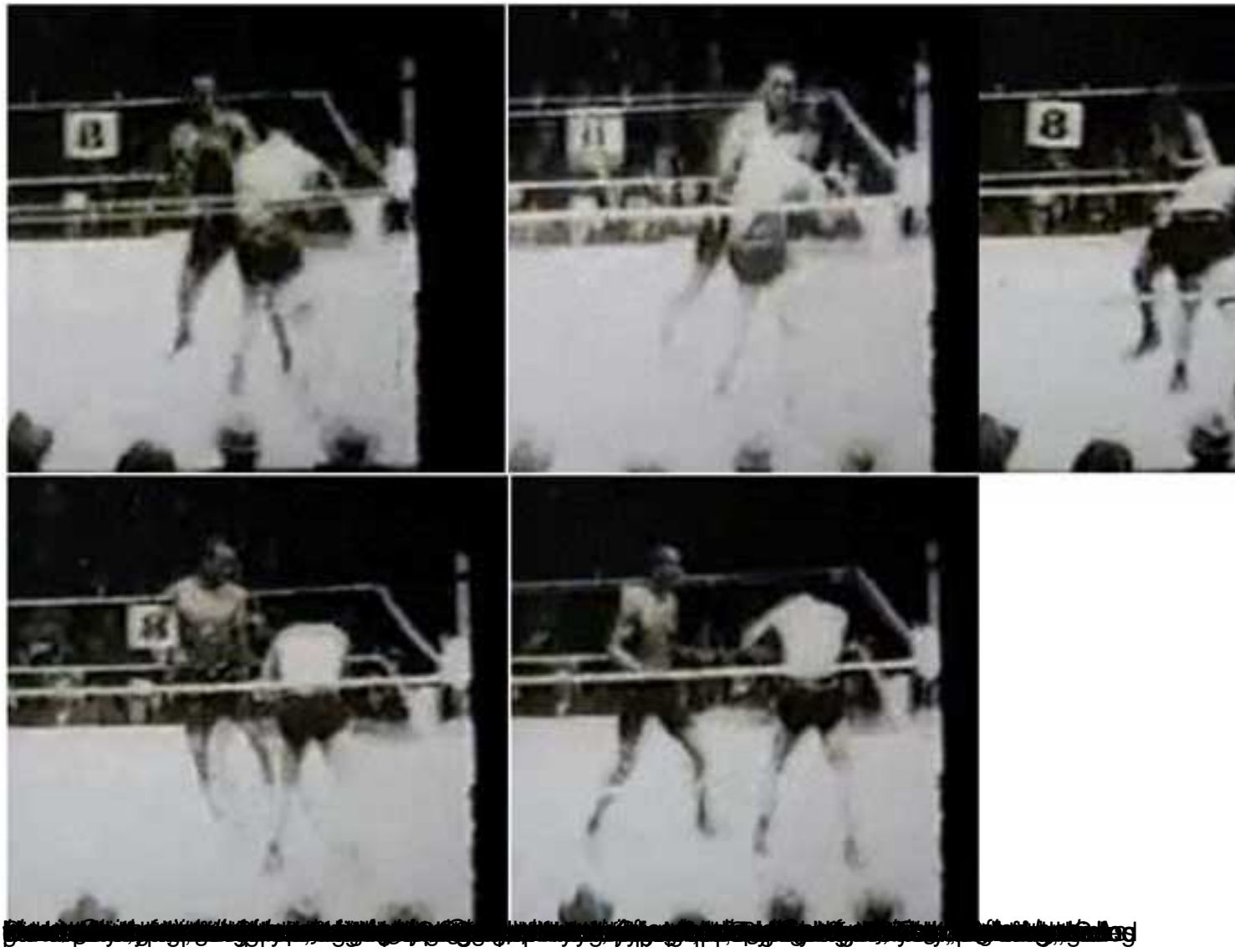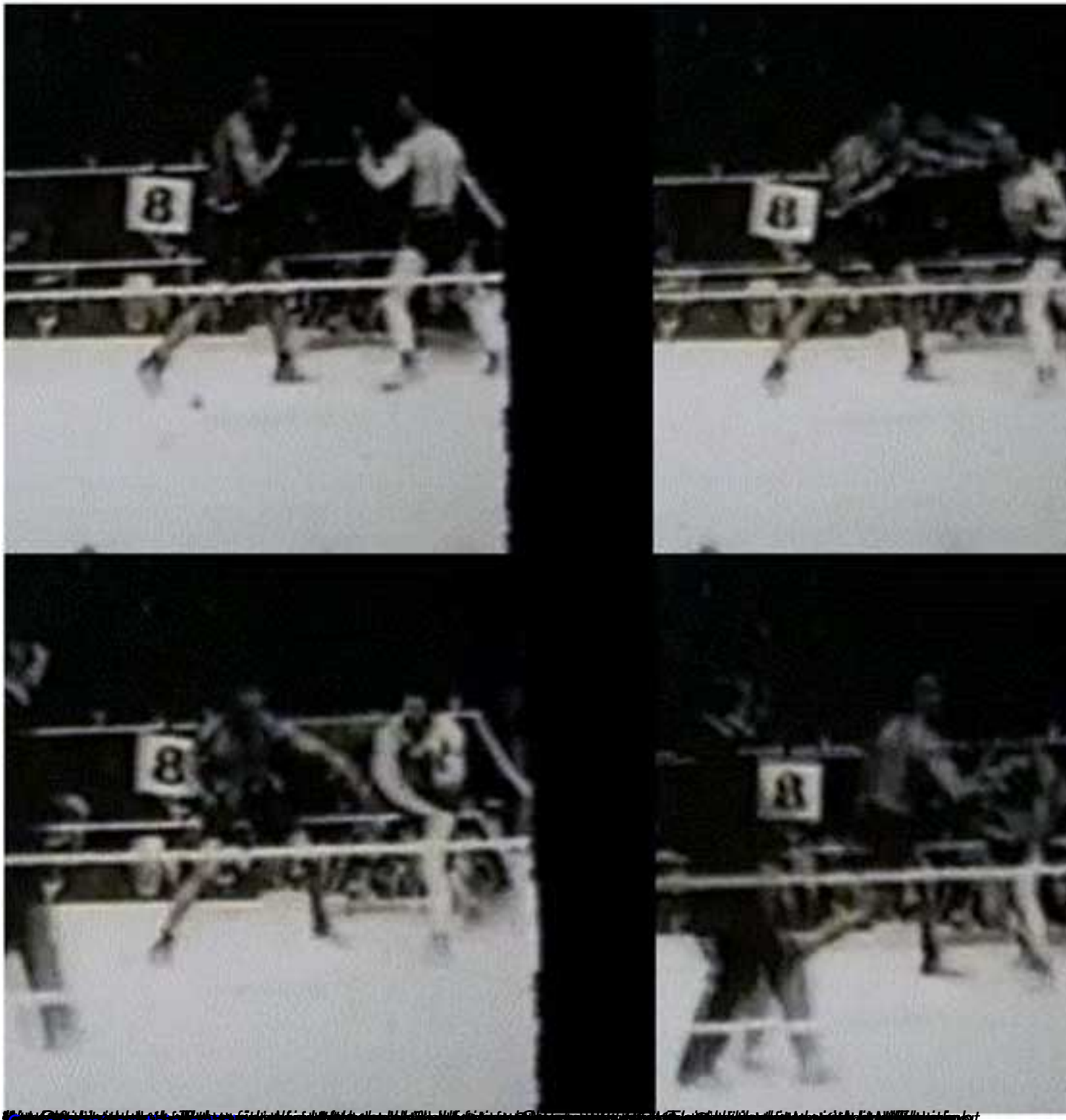
As the footage starts at the beginning of the round two, notice the stance and posture of Joe Gans. Although many have claimed that the famous Jack Blackburn/Joe Louis' stance was based around Gans', there are some notable differences which I've highlighted below.