

## When Boxing Was THE New Year's Day Event

Written by Aaron Tallent

Thursday, 26 December 2013 13:40

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College football is the one and only sport that will be on people's minds as we ring in the New Year. January 1<sup>st</sup> will feature six games starting with the Gator Bowl at noon and ending with the Fiesta Bowl at 8:30 pm. Only a fool would schedule a boxing card on New Year's Day.

That wasn't always the case though. The Rose Bowl is known as "The Granddaddy of Them All" because it is college football's first bowl game. When it was first played in 1902, twelve fight cards were held in cities ranging from Boston to Rampart, Alaska. The year was not an anomaly either. For the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, boxing matches were held all over the United States on New Year's Day.

Until the establishment of the Bowl Championship Series (BCS) in 1998, a college bowl game pitting a No. 1-ranked team against a No. 2-ranked team was an exciting rarity. Boxing was no different. Numerous hall-of-famers, including Jack Dempsey, Harry Greb, Sam Langford, Tiger Flowers, Battling Levinsky, Gene Tunney and Dick Tiger, fought on New Year's Day, but there were very few title bouts.

The most high-profile fights occurred in the first decade of the 1900s. On January 1, 1903, Joe Gans defended his lightweight title against Gus Gardner at a casino in New Britain, Connecticut. It was the second of three fights Gans had with the Philadelphia journeyman and the only championship bout between the two. As in the other two bouts, Gans had an easy time handling Gardner, who repeatedly clinched the "Old Master" at every opportunity. In the 11<sup>th</sup> round, Gardner went too far by grabbing Gans around the waist and throwing him to the canvas. Referee John Willis disqualified Gardner and ended the match.

Gans defended his title again on New Year's Day in 1907. This time his opponent was the more formidable Kid Herman, a contender who had fought a 20-round draw with Abe Attell only six months earlier.

The lightweight's funny telegram exchanges with mother in Baltimore had become a source of entertainment to fans. When he fought Battling Nelson in September of 1906, his mom coined a now-famous phrase when she told him by telegram to "bring home the bacon." After winning by disqualification in the 42<sup>nd</sup> round, he wired back and said that he not only had the bacon, but the gravy as well. Before the Herman bout, Gans sent her a check for \$6,000 and she responded with a telegram that said, "Thanks; keep stepping, Joe."

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The two fought in an outdoor arena in Tonopah, Nevada. Unfortunately, the weather did not cooperate and about 3,000 spectators huddled together to watch Gans and Herman battle in the frigid cold. In the first round, Gans simply studied his opponent, but in the second began hitting him at will. Gans was battering his opponent so easily at the end of third round when he did not hear the bell and struck Herman on the neck after it rang. The crowd booed and Gans turned to apologize to the crowd. He then went to Herman's corner and explained that it was an accident. The crowd quickly went from booing to cheering.

The fight continued to be a one-sided affair. In the eighth round, Gans finished it by putting Herman in the corner and then dropping him with a shot to the jaw.

Boxing's grandest New Year's Day bout came the next year, when Attell and Owen Moran fought for the featherweight title. Attell was the world champion, while Moran held the British title, making the fight a match for international dominance.

To say that neither fighter had the grace or class of Gans is an understatement. Attell, the future bagman in the 1919 Black Sox Scandal, was the inventor of the corkscrew punch, a technique of slightly turning your glove when landing a punch. The result would be cuts that could potentially lead to a fight stoppage. Moran was also known for being exceptionally bullish in the ring.

"The rougher the better," said Attell before the bout. "I will go any way Moran may choose. All styles look alike to me in the ring."

When Moran showed up 2 ounces over the 120-pound weight limit, Attell was not as easygoing. He demanded that Moran forfeit \$1,500. The two compromised with Moran agreeing to give \$250 of his purse to Attell.

The 25-round fight was held in Coffroth's Arena in Colma, California. Moran and Attell battered each other for all of them, but neither connected with a knockout blow. Former heavyweight champion James J. Jeffries, who was refereeing the bout and had final say on the decision, called the bout a draw. The majority of the 7,000 spectators in attendance applauded with

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approval. Moran and Attell fought again for the title nine months in a bout that also resulted in a draw.

By the 1940s, there were five college bowl games and the number of prizefights began to dwindle. By 1960, there were eight and New Year's Day bouts in the United States virtually disappeared.

No sport controls one holiday like college football does New Year's Day. Boxing is the only sport that has even come remotely close.

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