

Literary Notes

Written by Thomas Hauser
Tuesday, 10 July 2012 16:06



Joe Gans was relegated long ago to a seldom-visited corner of boxing history.

Knowledgeable fight fans know that Gans was the first American-born black champion and perhaps the most technically advanced fighter of his time. Between October 23, 1893, and March 12, 1909, he had 191 professional bouts, scored an even 100 knockouts, and (including newspaper decisions) lost only 12 times. Fifteen months after retiring from the ring, he died of tuberculosis, which had almost certainly hindered him late in his career.

Now, thanks to *The Longest Fight* by William Gildea (Farrar Straus and Giroux), Gans comes to life again.

The Longest Fight will enhance any reader's appreciation and understanding of Gans. Gildea crafts a sense of time and place and a moving personal portrait of his subject. The heart of the story, he writes, "is what it was like a century ago to be black in America, to be a black boxer, to be the first black athlete to successfully cross the nation's gaping racial divide, to give early-twentieth-century African Americans hope."

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The book is keyed to the historic first fight between Gans and Battling Nelson, which took place in Goldfield, Nevada, on September 3, 1906. Gans was lightweight champion by virtue of having knocked out Frank Erne in one round four years earlier. At age thirty-one, he was past his prime. Nelson was twenty-four and peaking. Gans-Nelson was contracted as a fight to a finish. It was to continue until one of the combatants was counted out or quit on his stool.

There had been "mixed race" fights before Gans-Nelson, but never one of this magnitude. The bout attracted national attention. Arrangements were made for round-by-round summaries to be disseminated by telegraph throughout the country.

Gans was a gracious well-spoken man, gentle outside the ring, meticulous in appearance and partial to three-piece suits. Nelson was a thug. The champion, in contrast to his opponent, showed such good sportmanship in the days leading up to the fight (and during the fight itself) that a substantial number of white spectators found themselves openly rooting for him.

The bout lasted two hours forty-eight minutes, making it the longest championship fight of the twentieth century. It began in the Nevada desert at 3:23 PM under a broiling sun with temperatures in excess of one hundred degrees and ended at 6:11 PM.

Gans dominated for most of contest. The granite-jawed Nelson committed virtually every foul in the book while being beaten to a bloody pulp and was disqualified by referee George Siler for repeated deliberate low blows in the forty-second round. Most likely, the champion would have knocked his foe out earlier but for the fact that he broke his right hand in the thirty-third round.

Gans emerged from the Nelson fight as a national figure.

"People had begun to take boxing seriously, even though it was illegal in most places," Gildea writes. "Its appeal was in its simplicity, its violence, and the glamorous figures it produced. Beating Nelson made Gans prominent in a way no other black athlete had been. Money followed the fame. White fighters suddenly realized that a black man could make them a good payday. Promoters vied to gain his attention. Newspaper editorial page writers, who had ignored not only black boxers but virtually the entire black American experience, gave space to Gans."

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After beating Nelson, Gans became the first black man in his home town of Baltimore to own an automobile; a bright red Matheson touring car with a canvas top that he parked outside a hotel and saloon named The Goldfield that he opened in 1907. A half-century later, emulating Gans, Sugar Ray Robinson would park his own fuchsia Cadillac convertible outside Sugar Ray's Café in Harlem.

Gans also accepted an offer of \$6,000 a month for a midwestern vaudeville tour. Putting that number in perspective, Ty Cobb was paid \$4,800 for the entire 1908 season one year after he led the American League in hits, batting average, and RBIs.

Gans lost his championship in a rematch against Nelson on July 4, 1908. He receded further into the background with the ascendance of Jack Johnson to the heavyweight throne at the end of that year. But by then, the ripples from his life had spread throughout America.

In Gildea's words, "Gans was the first African American, after horse racing's early black jockeys and the cyclist Major Taylor, whose athletic ability even hinted at the possibility that sports could be a springboard for racial justice in American life."

How good was Gans?

Bob Fitzsimmons called him "the cleverest fighter, big or little, that ever put on a glove." And Sam Langford said of Joe Louis at his peak, "He can hit. He is fast and is no slouch at employing ring craft. He is the marvel of the age. I consider him another Gans."

It should also be noted that Gans inspired people in many ways. Goldfield was America's last mining boomtown. It was short on hotel accommodations, leaving thousands of fight fans to sleep in tents or on hard ground under the starry sky. But it had fifty-three saloons to keep them well-lubricated.

One of those saloons was owned by George Lewis Rickard, better known as "Tex". It was

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Rickard who had first suggested to local businessmen that the publicity flowing from a major fight would attract investment capital to Goldfield for mining-related ventures.

Gans-Nelson was Rickard's maiden voyage into big-time promoting. "I never knew what the fight game offered until then," he acknowledged later. "I wasn't a boxing expert. But what happened in the Gans-Nelson show made me think."

In later years, Rickard would promote the first five fights in boxing history with gates in excess of \$1,000,000; build Jack Dempsey into a superstar before the term existed; head a group that financed construction of a new Madison Square Garden on Eighth Avenue between 49th and 50th Streets in Manhattan; and play a key role in making New York City the boxing capitol of the world.

* * *

Al Bernstein has been calling fights on television, most often as an expert analyst, for more than thirty years. The job requires an understanding of the sweet science and the ability to communicate well. But the most successful analysts have an additional quality. Viewers think that it would be fun to sit next to them on a sofa and watch a fight on television.

Al Bernstein: 30 Years, 30 Undeniable Truths about Boxing, Sports, and TV (Diversions books) reads like a conversation on the sofa. It's a collection of recollections and anecdotes about Al's life and the sport he loves. There's a moving section about Connie Bernstein's long battle with cancer and the strength of the marriage that she and Al share. And there are portraits of boxers, from legendary greats to four-round club fighters.

In one of my favorite anecdotes, Bernstein recounts how he and Charley Steiner covered the weigh-in for Mike Tyson's 1995 comeback bout against Peter McNeeley. Al was on-camera and told his ESPN audience, "Let's see if we can hear from former heavyweight champion, Mike Tyson. Mike, can we talk to you now?"

"No fucking way," Tyson answered.

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Bernstein reflected on the moment and said calmly, "I'll take that as a 'no'. Back to you, Charley."

"After more than two decades of trying to explain Tyson's chaotic behavior," Bernstein writes, "we are left with the simple explanation - he's a nut."

In the most interesting passage in the book, Al recalls hall-of-fame announcer Don Dunphy telling him, "The best advice I can give you as a sportscaster is to remember, when you are on the air, it's not about you."

Bernstein then casts aside his non-confrontational persona and declares, "The majority of sportscasters working today believe it is always about them. Amazingly, they do so with the endorsement and even encouragement of their networks and their producers. We live in a time when most networks value argument over discussion, opinion over information, and loudness over intelligence. While I don't take myself too seriously, I take sportscasting very seriously. My claim that sportscasting has changed dramatically (not for the better) is not some idle statement or sentimental bromide about 'the good old days.' It's a well-considered assessment of my profession. I am hardly known as a combative personality. I have steadfastly refused to criticize my colleagues over the years, so writing this is out of character for me. I hope that my reputation will give my words in this chapter even more meaning."

"We have seen many major boxing matches," Bernstein continues, "where three broadcasters are debating amongst themselves something only vaguely related to the match we are all watching. This debate has been known to extend for almost an entire three-minute round, while the action in the ring goes virtually unnoticed. An offshoot of this is the use of opinion to replace analysis. 'Analyst' is the title of the person sitting next to the host or play-by-play announcer. The title is not 'opinion giver.' Opinions may be part of some type of analysis, but pure opinion is never to be confused with analysis. Using opinion under the guise of calling it analysis is often the sign that a color commentator is too lazy to do the homework necessary to provide real analysis. Anyone can have an opinion on anything. Analysis is using knowledge of an athlete or team to explain something that has just happened or foreshadow something that might happen. Being considered an expert does not give you the right to do nothing but blurt out opinions to viewers. More than that is required from an analyst of a sporting event."

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Thomas Hauser can be reached by email at thouser@rcn.com. His newest book (*And the New: An Inside Look at Another Year in Boxing*) will be published later this summer by the University of Arkansas Press.

[Comment on this article](#)

Radam G says:

Super NICE! And I read it TWICE! Holla!

teaser says:

Thank's ..will be looking for the "Longest Fight ".....and i agree with Bernstien about these Boxing "analysts" that comment about everything except the fight they are watching ...brrrrrrrr HBO's 3 are bad for this ...

Radam G says:

Hehehehe! Teaser, those talking heads are often looking, but not seeing. Of course, they have to make up stuff on the fly. Holla!

GANZ says:

Sounds like a good read, will have to pick up a copy. Might try to get Willy to sign it aswell. By the way is it just me or is this a GREAT nameLOL

dino da vinci says:

[QUOTE=GANZ;18327]Sounds like a good read, will have to pick up a copy. Might try to get Willy to sign it aswell. By the way is it just me or is this a GREAT nameLOL[/QUOTE]

Funny

dino da vinci says:

By the way, I read Al Bernstein's book, (Both of them, actually) *30 Years, 30 Undeniable Truths*, and must say it was an enjoyable read. First, it had a bit more bite than I thought an Al Bernstein book would have, but knowing how accurate Al is, and that's his real value, you're allowed some insights you might not otherwise have access to that you know is reliable. Also, the guy was there only months after ESPN opened their trailer up for business, (Bristol, CT) and played his part in helping them grow it into the global beast it would become. Being part of that type of history in the making is pretty cool by itself. Most hardcore boxing fans take Al Bernstein for granted, that's how great he his. They say the great ones make it look easy. He's so good at what he does, everything so unforced, it looks like he shouldn't even be compensated for the

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effort, it comes that easy to him. But we all know the truth. Anybody who has been fortunate enough to rise to the top of there profession, worked their tails off, deserves whatever benefits they receive for their effort. And that's never truer than in the fight game, where these men and women run much greater risks than most as they try to climb their way to the top. God, what a great sport this truly is.