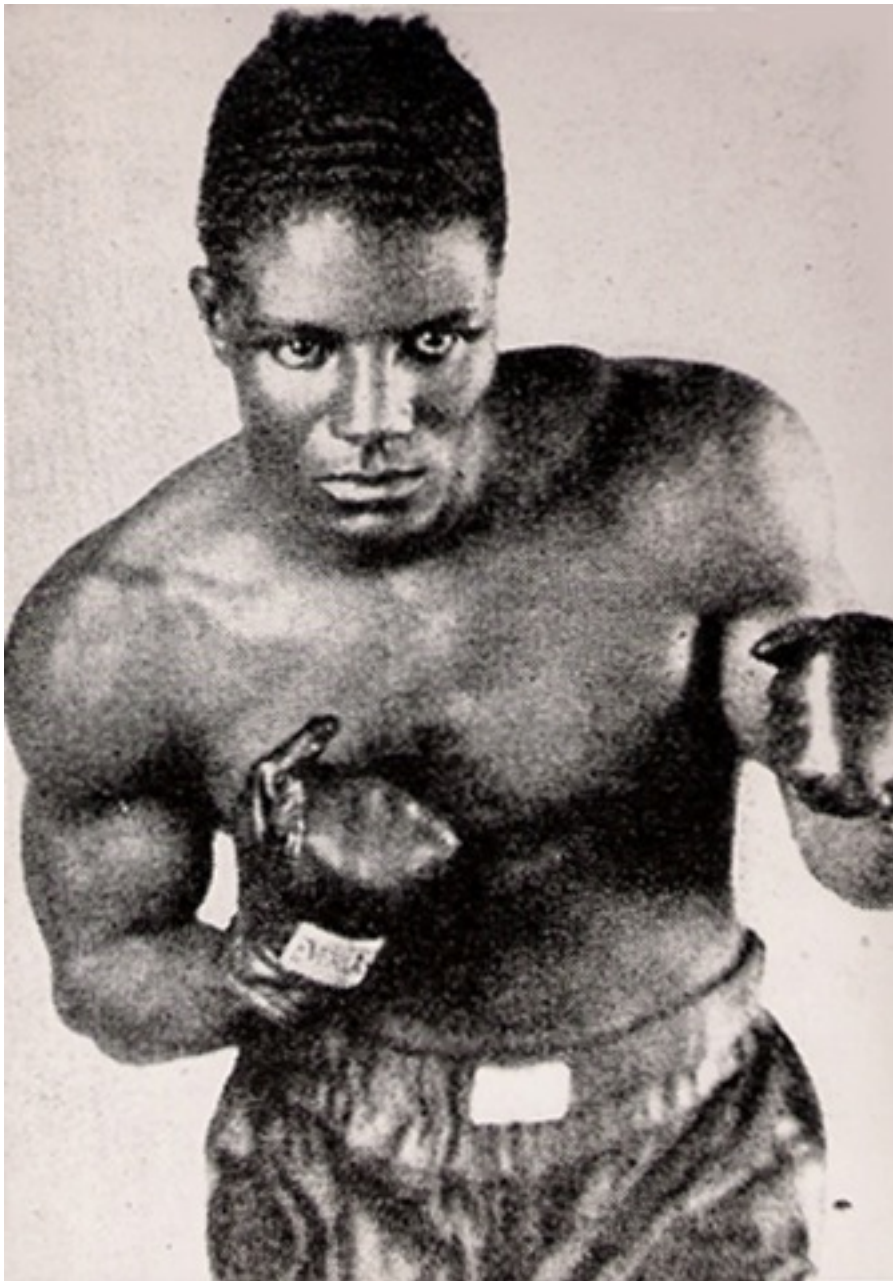


A Left Hook That Rings For the Ambulance

Written by Douglas Cavanaugh, Special To TSS
Wednesday, 31 July 2013 21:41



If boxing had a Ten Commandments, you could bet that the old adage “never hook with a hooker” would be etched pretty close to the top on that stone tablet. It is a wise rule to follow and has served many a fighter well over the decades. But it also begs the question, what happens when two “hookers” meet? Who has the advantage? Is it the man with the faster hook? Or is it the man with the harder one?

Tony Galento and Al Gainer (pictured), two vicious left-hookers, one a heavyweight, the other a light-heavyweight, gave pugilism the bloody answer to that question in Yankee Stadium on June 19, 1936.

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“Two-Ton Tony” was possessor of one of the more fearsome lefts among the heavyweight contenders of the era. It had been his main agent of mayhem in stopping 36 opponents in his 57 wins up to that point. If he caught you with it, things could be all over in a hurry. That being said, Gainer was no slouch himself, having scored 30 knockouts in 56 victories as a light-heavyweight contender, his portside clout being the main weapon. In short, both men were more than capable of closing the deal when the opportunity presented itself.

The stout Galento outweighed the lithe Gainer by a whopping fifty-two pounds when they entered the ring for their shootout that night. Going by the sight test alone, it appeared as if the doomed little Monitor had returned to test the big guns of the Merrimac once again.

Ultimately the big punch (and weight advantage) would avail Galento naught on this evening. The fight was a mismatch, Galento’s cumbersome howitzer of a left hand never finding its mark, whereas Gainer’s accurate, deadly-quick blackjack of a left landed on every part of Tony’s body and head. The Connecticut slugger pounded, pummeled and pasted the New Jerseyite, easily outmaneuvering him on the inside and making sure Tony’s vaunted hooks sailed harmlessly over his head. Gainer rendered “Two-Ton Tony” all but unrecognizable to even his closest friends. The newspapers reported that he had made a “chopping block” of Galento and by the fourth round the referee had seen enough and stopped the butchery. The bleeding Italian protested vigorously, but it was a hysterically shrill protest at best.

The battle of the left hooks was over and Al Gainer was the conclusive victor.

To historians of the “Sweet Science”, the 1920s is an acknowledged “golden age” for boxing, especially among the light-heavyweights. It was a time when some of the greatest in the history of the division fought and made their mark. Many Hall of Fame 175-lb battlers contested during this era, among them Gene Tunney, Tommy Loughran, Maxie Rosenbloom, Jack Delaney, Paul Berlenbach and Georges Carpentier. Though the majority were white, there were a few black light-heavies that made an impact as well, most notably Battling Siki- who became world champion- and the studiously avoided contender Kid Norfolk. By the middle of the decade Siki was dead and Norfolk retired, leaving the division almost devoid of world class black contenders, most plying their trade in the lower weights.

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The conditions would change with the dawn of the 1930s and the arrival of an outstanding group of talented black light-heavyweights: John Henry Lewis, Tiger Jack Fox, Billy Jones and Al Gainer. Lewis and Fox are the most well known to ring historians, the former ascending to the championship of the world, while the latter procured a reputation as perhaps the most lethal contender in division history. But it is the steady, persistent Al Gainer who has perhaps been most egregiously overlooked by boxing scribes; his considerable accomplishments overshadowed by those of his more celebrated contemporaries.

Born in Gretna, Florida in 1906, Gainer lived in and fought out of New Haven, Connecticut, where he would fight 72 of his 106 professional bouts. His amateur career was successful enough to merit his picture appearing in the New Haven Evening Register during the week of his pro debut in 1930. The fight was a points loss to Bruno Sala, uncle of future middleweight contender Lee Sala. Gainer would avenge this loss two weeks later by stopping the Donora native, thus beginning a trend for turning the tables on former conquerors that would mark his career (in all he would beat ten of the eighteen men who held victories over him).

By the end of his first year as a professional, the precocious Gainer was already ranked among the top ten light-heavyweight contenders in the world. It was a position he would hold throughout the entire decade of the 1930s.

Under the management of Al Weill (who would also handle the careers of Lou Ambers and Rocky Marciano), Gainer rose rapidly, winning 19 of his next 20 bouts, 14 by the knockout route. He was proving to be an exciting performer and his fights drew big crowds in and around New Haven. By late 1931 his record stood at 21-3, all three losses avenged, including one to future light-heavyweight champion Bob Olin.

Gainer was clearly and thoroughly outclassed for the first time in his career on November 5 when he was outpointed by perennial contender Dave Shade, a veteran of over two-hundred fights. Undaunted, Al closed out the year with a decision victory over future world heavyweight champion Jimmy Braddock. It was a rugged encounter; Gainer's left hooks caroming off the sturdy chin of the feisty Irishman, who displayed the gameness that would see him ascend to the throne three years later.

From 1932 to 1935 Gainer continued to impress, getting a revenge win over Dave Shade,

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fighting former kingpin “Slapsie” Maxie Rosenbloom to a draw and copping notable victories over Bob Olin, Lou Brouillard and Lou Scozza. But by mid-1935, any satisfaction Al may have felt by these successes was no doubt tempered with frustration over the fact that two men he had already beaten- Olin and Jimmy Braddock- were the light-heavyweight and heavyweight champions respectively. Nevertheless, he kept on winning and by 1936 Gainer was the number one contender for the light-heavyweight championship worn by John Henry Lewis, who had beaten Olin for the title.

To keep busy while he waited for his title fight, Gainer engaged in bouts with a few heavyweights. The most high profile of these was his win over Tony Galento, which took place on the undercard of the first Joe Louis-Max Schmeling bout. His impressive victory prompted promoter Mike Jacobs to proclaim Al “The best negro light-heavyweight or heavyweight contender in America. He’s got a left hook that rings for the ambulance and a right that calls out the emergency squad.” Jacobs even went so far as predicting the possibility of Gainer someday becoming heavyweight champion of the world.



Al Gainer (left) and John Henry Lewis square off.

Never one to duck a challenge, champion John Henry Lewis and his manager, Gus Greenlee, decided to give Gainer a twelve round, non-title try the following month in their Pittsburgh hometown. The highly anticipated bout was hyped as a “natural”, the proverbial classic boxer vs. puncher matchup, and the pre-sale numbers were huge.

A happy bonus for sportswriters all over was the simmering feud building in the respective

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corners of both fighters. Former heavyweight champion Jack Johnson had taken an interest in Gainer and decided to train and second him for the fight. Perhaps not so coincidentally, Jack Blackburn, Johnson's age old enemy (who had recently had him ejected from the Joe Louis camp for disparaging the future champion), took over "active charge" of Lewis's training duties shortly thereafter.

The verbal barbs soon began to fly and the press ate up every word. Blackburn was no doubt still smarting from his prize pupil's loss to Max Schmeling weeks earlier; a loss that Johnson had loudly predicted to anyone who would listen. Johnson wasted no time in pouring salt into Blackburn's raw wound. "Louis will never see the day that he is as good a fighter as either Gainer or John Henry," Johnson crowed. "They are natural born fighters. Louis is a newspaper champion." Then getting down to the business at hand, Johnson warned that "John Henry Lewis had better be in perfect condition or take the worst licking since he bagged the championship."

Gainer, a soft-spoken type who was never inclined to boast or threaten, was apparently allowing Johnson to influence him, as was evidenced by his boldly predicting a knockout over the champion. Lewis (and Blackburn) responded in kind, cautioning Al (and Johnson) not to get too cocky. "If Gainer thinks he is going to stop me, he is sadly mistaken and is going to get the surprise of his life," John Henry warned.

They met at Forbes Field on July 30, 1936. The crowd was the second largest in Pittsburgh boxing history at the time (just behind the Teddy Yarosz-Vince Dundee middleweight championship fight) and the absolute largest for a non-title bout, thus putting a crimp in the long-held belief in boxing that a match between two "colored" fighters doesn't draw at the box office.

Gainer jumped to an early lead, shading the first three rounds by pressing the champion and hooking hard to the body with his deadly left. Lewis began to come to life in the middle rounds, showcasing his boxing skills and dazzling footwork. Gainer opened up a cut on Lewis's right eye in the sixth, a favor which John Henry returned three rounds later when he split Gainer's right eye. The Pittsburgh Press commented that the two were "on each other like a pair of Bengal tigers" as they stepped up the action.

The fight was either man's for the taking as they neared the end, but it was Lewis who stepped it up in the final stanzas, using his superior versatility and speed to outbox Gainer, who was briefly floored in the final seconds of the bout. Both men bled freely at the end, but it was the

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champion who took away the unanimous points verdict after a thrilling contest.

It was a setback that would force Gainer to wait another two years for a title shot, but his stellar performance enhanced, rather than detracted from, his reputation and drawing power. Promoter Elwood Rigby, similarly impressed as Mike Jacobs had been with Gainer's showing and abilities, actually proposed matching him against heavyweight contender Joe Louis for an October date. His idea was disregarded on the whole, but his overall point was very clear.

Al wasted no time ruminating on the Lewis loss, racking up twelve straight victories and winning fifteen of his next sixteen bouts, thus preserving his status as a top contender. His only loss would come via decision to heavyweight spoiler Eddie Blunt, who outweighed him by forty-four pounds. Most impressive were his wins over Johnny "Bandit" Romero and the dangerous slugger Oscar Rankins, with whom he engaged in a thrilling shootout.

The Rankins bout- along with the Lewis fight- established Al as a top attraction in Pittsburgh, where he would fight often over the next two years and develop a large following. It was a sound strategy, not only from a financial standpoint, but because it kept Gainer fighting right in the backyard and under the nose of John Henry Lewis, with whom he was desirous of a rematch. It would be hard for the champion to ignore him for long.

Before a title shot could be secured, a fighter named Red Bruce would have to be dealt with first. A stablemate of Lewis, Bruce was used by manager Gus Greenlee to "run interference" for the champion. He was a formidable fighter when focused and in condition, Archie Moore once remembering him as "a terror whom middleweights and light-heavyweights feared." Though his knockout record is not overly-impressive at first glance, Bruce was indeed a hurtful puncher who could kayo with a single wallop and he frequently staggered and floored opponents. He was the unofficial "gatekeeper" to the light-heavyweight throne and the bottom line was that anyone seeking a shot at Greenlee's champion would have to go through him first.

They met on June 24, 1937 at Hickey Park. An inspired Bruce went after Gainer with blood in his eye, hammering him at will for the first six rounds of the bout. Seeing his fighter's title hopes quickly slipping away, Al Weill worked furiously in the corner, pleading with Gainer to step it up and shouting "This is the round!" as the seventh stanza began. His words were both rejuvenating and prophetic as Gainer exploded into action. With a desperate fusillade of blows he floored Bruce three times, the final knockdown for the ten-count.

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The knockout of Bruce meant only one obstacle remained to be dealt with, that being the awkward and highly dangerous contender Tiger Jack Fox. There was a great demand for this fight, as it would mean a showdown between two of boxing's premiere KO artists. Together they had a combined record of over 100 knockout wins. The articles were quickly signed and the city of Pittsburgh was the chosen location. The wheels of the hype machine turned full throttle for months, the boxing world buzzing with anticipation.

The bout, which took place on November 22, 1937 at Duquesne Gardens, lived up to the lofty expectations. Battling the most feared fighter in the division meant Al had to tone down his aggressive style and use a bit more caution than usual. He boxed methodically, beating his opponent to the punch with fast, hard shots in between weathering the erratic and inconsistent bursts of violence from Fox. Both were bloodied at the final bell, but in the end Gainer's speed and ability to survive the furious onslaughts of Tiger Jack enabled him to secure a fifteen round decision win.

John Henry Lewis, as honorable a champion as the division has ever seen, didn't drag his feet or make excuses for not facing the man who was now unquestionably the number one threat to his title. His confidence in his own abilities was such that he and manager Gus Greenlee agreed on holding the bout in New Haven, Connecticut; Gainer's hometown.

When Al Gainer and John Henry Lewis met for the light-heavyweight championship of the world on October 28, 1938, it would be the first all-black world title bout since Jack Johnson met Battling Jim Johnson a quarter century earlier.

Gainer seized the moment, taking an early lead and rocking the champion several times with his patented left hook. As in their first fight, Al shaded most of the early and middle rounds by pressing Lewis and forcing him into a defensive posture. But by the tenth frame John Henry seemed to realize that he was in danger of losing his belt and came roaring back. He took an aggressive stance in the final five rounds and began laying into Gainer with sizzling counters and heavy body blows while Al appeared to tire.

The seasoned champion had the challenger in deep water and pitched a shutout in the last three stanzas. At the final bell there was little question as to who had won. Gainer had put up a tough battle. But in the final analysis, John Henry Lewis was simply the better man in a fight and the fifteen round decision in his favor was unanimous and well received.

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It was to be Lewis's final bout at 175 and he immediately rose up to challenge heavyweight champion Joe Louis (he would be knocked out in one round and then promptly retire). An elimination tournament to crown his successor was put together that would feature Al Gainer as well as Tiger Jack Fox and the difficult southpaw, Melio Bettina. The first fight of the tournament was the rematch between Gainer and Fox, who met on November 29, 1938 at the New York Coliseum in The Bronx. This time it was Fox who took the unanimous fifteen round nod in a slow, unspectacular fight that offered little in the way of thrills, Tiger Jack's strength and heavier punching making the difference.

Gainer's career began a downward slide after the loss. Though his left hook still carried its kick and his jaw remained strong, the years of rugged ring battles were beginning to leave their inevitable mark on his speed and reflexes. But the booming drums and crashing cymbals that were the soundtrack to his many ring wars were still sweet music to his ears. He soldiered on, less effective but no less respected by the younger generation of fighters on the rise. After watching Gainer lose a highly controversial split decision to a Joe Louis protégé named Dave Clark, Billy Conn commented "I'll take Clark- and how I'll take him. But you and them other guys can have that Gainer. He's still a tough old man."

Gainer's last important fight happened at Forbes Field on July 17, 1939, where another record-breaking crowd turned out to watch him tackle the popular former middleweight champion Teddy Yarosz. Al fought his usual game, hard-hitting fight but ultimately could not overcome the fluid skills and clever boxing of the iron-jawed Pole, who took a decisive ten round points win.

Gainer had five more fights- winning four- and then retired, having never once been knocked out. He spent his remaining years employed as a foundry worker in Connecticut. He died in a convalescent home on July 22, 1973 at age 66.

Thanks to Bob Yalen for his help.

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Springs Toledo says:

Rumors have been circulating for months now about Cavanaugh researching and writing about this fighter. It was worth the wait! Cavanaugh is one of the premiere boxing historians active today. Now, armed with evidence, let's contact the [B]Connecticut Boxing Hall of Fame [/B]and put pressure on them to induct [B]Al Gainer [/B] --and fellow New Haven resident [B]Cocoa Kid[/B]. They are both overdue-- and it just ain't right that they're not in there already.

Radam G says:

Witty, super informative copy. I can really dig the way that you weaved this piece together. Like an adroitly weaving spider does in weaving its web to catch super flies, your mastery of writing this piece will catch a lot of superfly readers of da game. Holla!

surf-bat says:

Thanks gents. Your words are very much appreciated and I hope to be able to contribute more useful and informative articles on this website.

Springs- One thing I didn't go into was his numerous bouts with Tony Shucco, who was from your neck of the woods. Shucco was a marvelously clever boxer and seemed to have the proverbial "Indian Sign" over Gainer. Al could never seem to get the better of the guy.

My ex-boss was a Southie native who knew Shucco well. He told me that Tony was a bouncer at a club for awhile during his post-boxing years. He approached my boss and his young pals once, concerned that he was going to be laid off. He asked them to "make a disturbance" at the club so he could quell it, which would make him look good to the owners and save his job. The guys agreed, all except my boss, who knew Tony was a tad punchy and might not be as easy on them as they thought.

Turns out my former boss was right. The guys showed up to their hang out the next day with bruises, swollen lips, black eyes and shards of teeth falling from their mouths. Shucco didn't have the self-control he once possessed and knocked the hell out of ALL of them (he apologized later). He got to keep his job though. My boss still laughs about it today.