

FIRST FIGHT

The story of the Joe Gans vs "Terrible" Terry McGovern fight held in Chicago on December 13, 1900

City Hall was besieged. Thursday night's riasco at Tattersall's was provoking an unparalleled outcry. Editorials were ceaseless in their demand for action. People across the nation had just lost thousands of dollars on the swindle. Even aldermen never noted as reform-minded joined the growing chorus of voices in denouncing the recent exhibition. The reputation of an entire metropolis was at stake.

Carter Harrison could not ignore this controversy and let those involved go unpunished lest the scandal engulf his administration. Rumors had already circulated of the mayor's involvement in the fix. Damage control was the order of the day. "If the game is too bad for the council, it certainly is too bad for me," was his honor's comment on the aldermanic resolution revoking all permits and ordering police to enforce the ruling. As duly elected mayor he would uphold the public interest and restore a city's pride.

The year was 1900 and Chicago's first major fight of the new century was threatening to become its last.

Joe Gans was born in Baltimore, Maryland on October 25, 1874. Along with Jack Johnson, the future Heavyweight champion of the world, and other famous black fighters at the turn of the century, Gans helped to build the foundation for the sport of boxing. From the little that is known of his early life, Gans started boxing in his hometown at the age of 16. Working in a fish market at the same time he began his ring career, Gans soon acquired the dubious moniker of "The Baltimore Oyster Shucker." It was during these formative years that Joe Gans entered the secret world of the battle royales- a world where his fighting spirit would be put to the ultimate test.

Battle royales were a particularly cruel and violent form of fighting, more akin to Roman gladiator contests than true pugilism. A typical battle royale consisted of a group of young, black fighters who were thrown together into one large, makeshift ring. The men were then forced to fight in a free-for-all with no-holds barred. Frequently, the fighters were blindfolded, adding to the general chaos and brutality of the situation. The last man left standing was declared the victor. If a fighter quit for any reason before the bedlam ended, he was paid nothing. Gans was always paid.

While seldom weighing more than 135 pounds, and often fighting men who outweighed him by 70 pounds or more, Joe Gans emerged victorious from every one of these unofficial contests. With his ring savvy and boxing skills growing daily, Gans was well on his way to the fateful showdown in Chicago.

Al Hereford, a restaurant owner in Baltimore, is credited with starting Gans' fabled ring career. After Gans' victories in the battle royales attracted attention, Hereford entered the fighter's life and began getting him small money bouts at local sporting clubs. While Gans quickly dispatched opponents in the ring and built a loyal following in the process, Hereford handled all the details. He handpicked competitors, determined financial arrangements, brought in sparring partners and negotiated the time and place of each match. Reports were widely circulated that Hereford did not always act in Gans' best interest.

By 1897, Joe Gans' ring triumphs were making national news. His second-round knockout of Dal Hawkins in New York City on May 25, 1900, at the St. Bartholomew Club illustrated the resiliency and punching power that was to characterize his entire career. Surviving a brutal first-round knockdown (a rare feat in itself), Gans struggled to last the round. He then summoned his fighting spirit and proceeded to flatten Hawkins in the very next round. After this victory, Joe

Gans acquired a new and more appropriate nickname. It would last the duration of his life and become etched in the minds of generations of boxing fans. He was now and for all time "The Old Master."

A rematch with the Lightweight Champion of the world, Frank Erne, loomed on the horizon. (Gans' first title attempt for Erne's crown ended in failure when the contest was stopped in the 12th round on a cut eye.) In a bid to keep his fighter's name before the public and cement the rematch with Erne, Hereford began looking for a well-known white opponent. He hoped to reap the large financial rewards that such a fight would offer to boxing fans at the dawn of the 20th century. Black versus white in the ring must surely equal green at the box office was his philosophy. The ideal man was already on the scene in one Joseph Terrence McGovern, better known as "Terrible" Terry McGovern.

"Terrible" Terry McGovern, also called the "Brooklyn Terror," was born on March 9, 1880, in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. His family moved to Brooklyn when he was six months old and it was there that he began his ring career.

Ring Magazine once went on record as saying that Johnstown was famous for two devastating forces - the Flood of 1888 and Joseph Terrence McGovern. While the statement was made partly in jest, it did capture the awe and respect that Terry McGovern was held in by the boxing public of that era.

As was the case with Joe Gans, McGovern started fighting at an early age due to his family's poverty. Besides boxing, Terry's other great passion was baseball. (Gossip was that if McGovern hadn't been diverted into the ring, he would have become a professional baseball player.)

Unlike Joe Gans who served his ring apprenticeship in the battle royales of Baltimore, Terry McGovern earned his stripes in the street fights of Brooklyn's Irish tenements. After gaining a reputation as a street fighter "par excellence," he turned professional in 1897 registering a first-round KO of John Shea.

The year 1898 was a milestone in Terry's career as he knocked out three of the greatest bantamweights of the day - Austin Rice, George Munroe and Harry Forbes. After his 24-round KO of Munroe, Sam Harris, Munroe's manager, offered to change sides and become McGovern's new manager. This unusual offer was accepted by Charlie Mayhood, McGovern's manager, with the understanding that he be allowed to remain as the fighter's personal trainer. The trio of McGovern, Harris and Mayhood was soon to take the boxing world by storm.

On September 12, 1899, at Tuckahoe, New York, McGovern scored a spectacular knockout over the reigning Bantamweight Champion from England, Fedlar Palmer. In a match scheduled for 20 rounds, it took McGovern all of two minutes and thirty-two seconds to be proclaimed the new champion of the world. Terry was 19 years old at the time. Shortly after winning the title, the "Brooklyn Terror" went on an extended rampage scoring 9 consecutive KO victories. McGovern was now an international ring idol hailed on both sides of the Atlantic.

A lack of quality opponents and trouble making the bantamweight limit of 118 pounds soon led Sam Harris and McGovern to challenge for the Featherweight Crown. George Dixon, affectionately known as "Little Chocolate" was the defending titleholder. Dixon, the first black man in the history of pugilism to win a world championship, was revered by boxing fans of all ages. However, at the time of his bout with McGovern, he had been fighting for 14 years with 110 fights to his credit. Dixon's star was definitely fading.

The two men met on January 9, 1900, at the Broadway Athletic Club in a bout that would prove to be the last defense of Dixon's crown. For the first few rounds the champion was able to hold off the onrushing McGovern using the boxing skills acquired during his long career. By the fourth round, however, the tables turned and McGovern was able to take control of the fight. Dixon's manager could not bear to see his valiant little warrior absorb any more punishment and threw in the towel during the 8th round. Terry McGovern of Brooklyn was the new Featherweight Champion of the world.

Later that year, McGovern took on Frank Erne, the Lightweight Champion, in a non-title bout where each man agreed to enter the ring at 128 pounds. Erne fell in the third round after taking a frightful beating. McGovern's popularity soared to new and dazzling heights as 1900 was about to end.

As one of the most famous prize fighters in the world, "Terrible Terry" was regarded as all but invincible. Besides boxing, McGovern appeared in numerous theatrical performances of "The Bowery After Dark" before excited audiences. His ring and stage earnings for the year easily doubled the salary received by President William McKinley as chief executive of the United States.

There loomed in the fistic universe only one other figure of renown near his own weight whom McGovern had never met and defeated - Joe Gans. Gans was considered the "colored" champion of the lightweight division at this time. The conventional reasoning was that since McGovern held a KO victory over Frank Erne and Erne had recently stopped Gans

on a cut eye, a match between McGovern and Gans would determine the true (though uncrowned) Lightweight Champion. With the new year fast approaching, Sam Harris and Al Hereford finalized details for a fight that would pit the "Brooklyn Terror" against the "Old Master."

Chicago was selected as host city for this premier sporting event since McGovern had previously fought there and its large Irish population assured brisk ticket sales. Thousands of boxing fans from across the country, including Gentleman Jim Corbett, former Heavyweight Champion of the world and conqueror of the great John L. Sullivan, were expected to make the pilgrimage to the Windy City.

Tattersall's, chosen as the site of the contest between Gans and McGovern, was Chicago's most famous indoor exhibition arena in 1900. Located near the city's Redlight Levee district, it intersected the corners of 16th and State Streets. Besides boxing programs, Tattersall's was used for military tournaments, elaborate horse shows, football games and parades. The building boasted impressive dimensions for its day, rising 75 feet with a length of 365 feet and width of 152 feet.

Hereford had agreed that Gans would weigh no more than 133 pounds at 7:00 P.M. on the night of the fight, a difficult task to fulfill since his battler frequently fought closer to 140 pounds. (McGovern's expected weight was 123 pounds.) Also, Hereford further agreed to the greatest obstacle that Gans would be forced to overcome, namely, his fighter could win the match only if he scored a knockout. If McGovern was still standing at the final bell, he would be declared the winner regardless of what had transpired in the ring.

Both fighters exchanged pleasantries with reporters shortly before the match. Speaking from his training headquarters in Milwaukee, McGovern displayed confidence. "I am fit as a fiddle for the fight and should Gans win he will know that he has been through a fight such as he never encountered before. I have not figured upon making it a defensive fight, but you know that if it becomes necessary I can resort to that style, as he is obliged to put me on Queen street in order to win. I could not be in better condition for the battle and I will do my best to keep the string of victories clean."

A somewhat more cautious Gans spoke at his southside Chicago gym and declared, "I see where Terry says he will fight me on the defense. Well, if he does I will be compelled to force matters in order to accomplish my attempt, but it will be a safe bet that Terry will go after me the same as he has done with others."

As to the reports that losing the weight has hurt his chances for victory, Gans added, "I have trained faithfully for over two weeks and now that I am down to 134 pounds, I feel strong as ever. I do not think taking off the other pound will weaken me in the least, for I am reducing gradually, and that way I do not notice it."

On Thursday evening, December 13, 1900, Tattersall's was jammed to capacity with the largest crowd in its history as more than 17,000 frenzied fight fans pushed inside to witness the much touted Joe Gans wage battle with "Terrible Terry." The fight generated such intense interest and newspaper coverage that the promoters decided to invest thousands of dollars and film the entire event. The recently invented motion picture camera was deployed in Tattersall's cavernous arena to catch every movement of the two celebrated combatants.

Lights of 120,000 candlepower were maneuvered over the ring so that they provided the necessary illumination for the hand-cranked camera without burning the fighters' skin as happened in the 1899 Jim Jeffries-Tom Sharkey Heavyweight bout in New York City.

"The Old Master" faced awesome challenges on two fronts: he had to lose weight to get to the 133 pound limit or risk a forfeit of \$5,000.00 and he had to knock out McGovern before the final bell to be declared the winner. The fight was scheduled for a fast six rounds. George Siler, world-famous referee and sports journalist for the Chicago Tribune, was designated as the third man in the ring.

Almost from the day the bout was announced, rumors of a "fake fight" had circulated throughout Chicago. The rumors always focused on Gans and Hereford, never McGovern and Harris. The popular story making the rounds was that Gans would go down in an early round to collect a bundle from secret wagers that Hereford had discreetly placed. Just as soon as these stories found their way into print, vehement denials would be issued by Gans' camp. Hereford even went so far as to publicly bet \$2,000.00 on Gans emerging victorious. Still, the rumors persisted.

Huge sums of money, both in Chicago and throughout the country, were being wagered each day on the outcome of Gans vs. McGovern. The odds consistently favored McGovern to win, that is, the betting people thought Terry would be standing at the end of the sixth round. Just before the fighters entered the ring, gamblers were offering odds on which round Gans would fall.

Complicating this already tumultuous situation was a local newspaper article warning of possible racial disturbances in Chicago if McGovern, the crowd favorite, lost the bout.

Malachy Hogan, sports columnist for the Chicago Times-Herald, summed up the prevailing sentiment when he wrote,—"If Terry should go down before the Baltimore lightweight, I make a guess that there will be a scene at Tattersall's. Ninety-nine men in a hundred who follow the events of the ring would be sorely disappointed if the best little man ever produced should prove to have been overmatched against a boxer who has every advantage except the possible one of fighting pluck. Not that I predict a disorderly time, but McGovern's defeat would cause a big howl of disappointment from the thousands who have reached the conclusion that he is invincible."

Hereford's box office bonanza that pitted black vs. white had captured the public's imagination so well in 1900 that it was now threatening to turn into open race war in America's second largest city.

Finally, the betting stopped. It was a few minutes past 10 P.M. when Joe Gans and Terry McGovern entered the squared circle of Tattersall's to the cheers and jeers of the packed house. The motion picture cameras began recording. Extra contingents of Chicago Police stood just outside the arena as the city took every precaution against civil disorder.

The following is the complete description of the Joe Gans vs. Terry McGovern fight as reported by the Chicago Tribune on Dec. 14, 1900.

FIRST ROUND. No sooner was the signal given for the start of hostilities than McGovern sailed into his man. He led with a left, which was parried. Then he rushed Gans to the ropes, where he peppered the colored man on the ribs with left jolts. As Gans broke away McGovern followed him, but missed with both right and left. He never stopped, however, and, catching Gans with a left on the jaw, jolted the colored man's head back. The crowd was wild with excitement and pandemonium reigned in the hall. Gans was already at sea. He had no time to think of assuming the attack himself. McGovern came at him again and this time landed right and left on the ribs. This gave Gans the opportunity to land his first blow, an uppercut under the heart. It did not feaze the Brooklyn boy, apparently, but he waited long enough for the colored man to land right and left to the face. McGovern came back with right and left on the jaw. The blows were hard and sent Gans staggering toward the ropes. McGovern followed him, raining blows upon his face. McGovern then landed a square right on the jaw, staggering Gans again, and before he could recover he was almost floored by a terrific left to the face, which landed just a little too high to be effective. McGovern, seeing he had his man going, measured carefully and knocked Gans down with a left to the jaw. Gans staid down until the count of seven. As he arose the bell rang, but McGovern had a blow started and it knocked the colored man down again after the

bell had rung. No claim of foul was made by Gans' seconds, who picked up their groggy charge and took him to his corner.

SECOND ROUND. Gans looked frightened as he came out of his corner. McGovern went right at him, landing his left twice in Gans' face, knocking the latter down. He was up quickly, only to meet a hard right, which landed on his jaw. Next he encountered a hard right to the ear, followed by a left to the mouth. McGovern then handed in two lefts to the face. Seeing he was not putting on enough steam, the "Terror" braced and sent Gans to the floor with a right to the jaw. Gans took the limit before he arose. No sooner did he arise than McGovern was on top of him, knocking him down. He took the count and, on arising was knocked down again. This performance was repeated twice. The last time it was a short jolt on the chin, and this time Gans failed to respond to the count, and the battle was over.

Reaction to the fight came swiftly. Sportswriters and fans demanded an explanation as to why Gans, the bigger man, made virtually no attempt to defend himself. His much vaunted boxing skills and punching power were nowhere in evidence. He appeared to go down from McGovern's slightest punch which made events all the more puzzling since Gans outweighed Terry by 10 pounds and towered over the Featherweight King by nearly a head.

Was Gans overtrained? Did he lose strength in making the 133 pound weight limit agreed to? McGovern and his supporters were jubilant with the victory but were also perplexed the affair had been so one-sided. All over Chicago people sought answers.

Referee Siler expressed his own doubts as to the fight's legitimacy. Writing in the Dec. 14th edition of the Chicago Tribune, he said, "I do not wish to accuse any fighter of faking, but if Gans was trying last night I don't know much about the game. Gans, of course, is entitled to the benefit of the doubt as to whether or not the numerous body blows which Terry pumped into him in close quarters during the early part of the fight weakened him. But the fact remains that the few blows he delivered were the weakest ever seen from a man of his known hitting abilities."

In spite of earlier technical problems with lights and equipment, the filming of the Gans-McGovern contest went off without a hitch. The camera showed a hesitant and confused Joe Gans hitting the canvass from relatively minor blows. There was no logical explanation to account for Gans' disastrous performance save one - the rumors were true. The most ballyhooed fight of 1900, so eagerly awaited by countless boxing fans, had been fixed from the very beginning. Denials by Gans, Hereford and Lou Houseman, the

fight's promoter, only served to infuriate public sentiment and turn it against the entire boxing community. Fugilism was about to go down for the count in Chicago.

Politicians carried the public's outrage against the sport into legislative action when Alderman Patterson introduced his resolution to the City Council. Professional prize fighting was to be eliminated from Chicago's sports scene by official edict. Mayor Harrison quickly announced his support for the measure and it was enacted with little dissent. Except for established members-only clubs like the Chicago Athletic Association on Michigan Avenue, boxing was forbidden within city limits.

Chicago's religious leaders and local reformers were overjoyed with the turn of events. They had always opposed boxing on moral grounds as they sought to rid the city of the gamblers, promoters and other "unsavory" characters long associated with the ring. Gans vs. McGovern did the job for them.

An exodus of fighters, trainers, managers and promoters began within weeks of the debacle at Tattersall's. Chicago's papers bid a not-so-fond farewell to the sport that had so tarnished an entire city's reputation. The aldermanic ban left little doubt in any fighter's mind that he had best seek his fame and fortune elsewhere. Scheduled boxing programs for 1901 were cancelled without a murmur of dissent. The sporting clubs that had flourished with numerous boxing matches before enthusiastic audiences would soon be shuttered. Only sadness and silence now competed in Chicago's rings.

While the fight in Chicago proved to be the nadir of Joe Gans' career and the zenith of McGovern's, within two years their situations would be drastically reversed. "The Old Master's" greatest ring battles were yet to come. Still feeling the shame of the McGovern loss, he was eager to make amends and did so with a vengeance.

Entering the ring two months later, he won a 6-round bout from Jack Daly on Feb. 15, 1901. On July 15th of that year, he fought three opponents on the same night, winning each contest handily.

Gans' long-sought rematch with Frank Erne (the original reason he traveled to Chicago) took place on May 15, 1902, at Fort Erie, Ontario, Canada. The result was one of the fastest knockouts in boxing history. Joe Gans was the new Lightweight Champion of the World in 64 seconds of the first round.

Proving to be a fighting champion from the very beginning of his reign, Gans fought 9 more times in 1902, registering 7

knockouts and 2 decision victories. The next several years saw him meeting some of the greatest fighters in boxing history. Joe fought Sam Langford, the fabled "Boston Tar Baby," considered the most feared boxer in the world at the time, the original Joe Walcott, known as the "Barbados Demon," who while only 5 feet one inch tall and 145 pounds, fought and beat heavyweights, Jack Blackburn, who would go on to guide Joe Louis to the Heavyweight Championship of the World, and Battling Nelson, the lightweight contender, generally conceded to have been the toughest man in boxing history.

In 1905, after having over 150 ring battles, and while still champion, Gans was diagnosed as being in the initial stages of the dreaded disease tuberculosis, then known as consumption. The constant efforts to lose weight for his fights had brought him up against an opponent who would ultimately prove victorious.

Gans finally lost his cherished title to Battling Nelson, the "Durable Dane," by a 17th round KO in San Francisco on July 4, 1908. The reign of "The Old Master" as Lightweight Champion was over.

Years after that wintry December evening in Chicago and facing the twilight of his career, Gans admitted the truth - he had intentionally faked the bout at Tattersall's. At the time of the McGovern fight, he had been heavily in debt. There was no prospect of a rematch with Lightweight Champion Frank Erne in sight so his manager, Al Hereford, proposed a daring rescue plan.

When news of the match between Gans and McGovern was first announced, the Baltimore native was installed as the heavy betting favorite. He had been fighting for 9 years at the time and had compiled one of the most outstanding records in boxing. Professional gamblers throughout the country felt that the McGovern bout would be little more than an opportunity for Gans to show off his ring wizardry.

Immediately after signing for the fight, Hereford put his plan into action. Word was leaked to the black community to bet everything they had on McGovern to win the match. In this manner, Gans' supporters (and other insiders) wouldn't lose any money when their ring idol went down for the count. It was their sudden flurry of betting activity that created the big shift in the odds right up until the two men stepped into Tattersall's ring.

The final outcome of the fight accomplished two purposes. It enabled Gans and Hereford to win thousands of dollars on the secret wagers placed on Gans to lose. Also, the bout proved instrumental in Gans obtaining his rematch with Champion Frank Erne in 1902.

Although Erne had stopped Gans on a cut eye 2 years before, he had been hopelessly behind in the scoring until an accidental butt salvaged his crown. As he now had firsthand experience with Gans' ring prowess, he was not eager to engage in another battle.

After the Chicago affair, however, Erne became more amenable to meeting Gans again. Terry McGovern proved that the hard-hitting Gans could be beaten. It took two long years before Erne was coaxed back into a ring with the Baltimore native. In spite of the massive fraud perpetrated, Hereford's plan had worked!

In his last months, Gans was followed by reporters as he embarked on a desperate journey across the country in search of a cure for the disease that was wasting his body. When all medical efforts failed and hope had been abandoned, he quietly returned home to Baltimore to be with his family and friends. Joe Gans died on August 10, 1910. He was two months short of his 36th birthday.

Gans' ring career would go into the record books as 156 bouts, 120 victories, 8 losses, 10 draws, 18 no decisions and 55 knockouts.

Statistics, of course, tell just part of the story. As a final tribute to his greatness, Joe Gans is the only fighter in boxing annals to have a statue dedicated to his memory in Madison Square Garden's Hall of Fame. "The Old Master" lives on forever.

Terry McGovern lost his Featherweight Championship to Young Corbett by a 2nd round knockout in Hartford, Connecticut on Nov. 28, 1901, less than one year after his bout with Joe Gans. He would never again wear the mantle of champion.

News of McGovern's defeat spread quickly throughout the boxing world. Incredulous fans kept asking how the invincible "Brooklyn Terror" could be knocked out by a relative unknown. What the fans didn't suspect was that after every fight Terry was booked by Sam Harris to star in that town's local vaudeville play. The strain of constant travel, training for the ring and attending rehearsals for the theatre finally took its toll on McGovern.

A rematch with Young Corbett was held on March 30, 1903, in San Francisco. Terry lost as before except this time he managed to survive until the 11th round before being counted out. McGovern's career as a serious contender in the Featherweight division was at an end.

After formally retiring from the ring in 1908, McGovern suffered the first of several breakdowns. Unable to care for himself, he was placed in a succession of sanatoriums by

relatives and friends. Sam Harris and ring announcer Joe Humphreys organized benefits for the ailing fighter with the proceeds used to purchase a home for his wife and children. The thousands of dollars McGovern earned in the ring and on stage were long since dissipated.

"Terrible " Terry McGovern died on February 26, 1918, of an attack of pneumonia in his Brooklyn home, the home that his countless fans and admirers had bought for their champion from the tenements of New York. His ring record was 78 bouts, 60 victories, 4 losses, 4 draws, 10 no-decisions with 42 knockouts.

Perhaps the greatest accolade paid to him was by the late Nat Fleisher, founder of Ring Magazine and dean of modern boxing writers, who wrote, "No bantamweight or featherweight ever packed a more dangerous punch than did "Terrible Terry." No fighter of his weight piled up such a consistent record for tearing pell-mell into his adversaries and smothering them with wicked jolts, hooks, uppercuts and vicious swings. In every sense of the phrase, he was a pugilistic marvel."

Joe Gans and Terry McGovern met again many years after their infamous fight. They are enshrined together in Boxing's Hall of Fame.

Tattersall's building was heavily damaged by fire in 1907. It was torn down shortly afterwards.

In time the scandal of Chicago's first fight would be forgotten as boxing was reborn during the Roaring Twenties when a new generation of political leaders took office.

In time men like Dempsey, Tunney and Louis would wage epic battles in the Windy City as thousands cheered.

In time.