George Dixon and His Contemporaries
By Colleen Aycock

George Dixon became the first black to capture a world title in the Queensberry Realm. During his successful reign, Dixon mentored a group of future champions whose careers during the 1890s and 1910s would leave a mark in the history books a hundred years later. But sadly, this legacy is beginning to decay.

During this early period, heavyweight John L. Sullivan's star faded in 1892 in New Orleans when he was beaten by Gentleman Jim Corbett. For the remainder of the decade, the heavyweight title transferred from Corbett to Bob Fitzsimmons in 1897, and then from Fitzsimmons to Jim Jeffries in 1899. Back at that Carnival of Champions in 1892, George Dixon soundly beat Jack Skelly to defend his featherweight laurels. Both Sullivan and Dixon were Bostonians, but their worlds could not have been farther apart. Sullivan drew the "color line," refusing to be matched with black heavyweight Peter Jackson. Dixon, however, stepped over the line in the lightweight division. The battles in New Orleans signaled a changing of the guard: John L.'s dominance was over and interracial matches were now being contended for world championship titles.

At a time when mixing the races was not the custom in America, how did a black man such as George Dixon get on such a high-profile ticket, particularly in the South, only thirty years after the Civil War battle for New Orleans? The short answer was that he was seen as a good bet. Boxing matches, like the horseraces, were gambling sports and the Olympic Club of New Orleans wanted a trifecta of championship matches to draw the crowds. After beating the American, English, and Australian champions, Dixon was considered by some sports as world champion of the lighter class. Dixon's challenger that night, Jack Skelly, an amateur with 30 previous fights, had a wealthy Brooklyn backer willing to post a $3000 bet. When New Orleans Councilman Charles Dickson entered the ring on the fateful occasion to announce the main event, everyone knew the significance. He announced the bout very simply as a contest between "a black man and a white man in which fair play would govern and the best man win." (**1**) After Dixon knocked out his opponent in the eighth round, Southern newspapers reported that a black man had beaten a white man to the humiliating applause of the crowd. One paper announced that it was "a mistake to bring the races together on any terms of equality, even in the prize ring." (**2**) There was no turning back the time: not only had a black battler won, he had earned an historic $17,000 in the winner-take-all contest for supremacy.

Canadian born George "Little Chocolate" Dixon began fighting in Nova Scotia in 1886. When the family moved to Boston, Dixon began his climb to boxing's upper rank, first the bantamweight, then to featherweight, and finally fighting anyone 135 pounds and below. After only three years as a professional, Dixon was fighting twenty-round and "finish" fights (fights with unlimited rounds or until the police or referee called a halt to the battle—later limited to 45-rounds). In 1890, Dixon's first challenge for America's top honor resulted in a 70-round, four-hour and forty-minute draw in Boston with Cal McCarthy. In the summer Dixon beat British champion Nunc Wallace in England. In 1891 he came back to beat Cal McCarthy and Australia's Abe Willis. After these victories, O'Rourke declared Dixon world champion. Rickard K. Fox, owner of the major sport newspaper in America, the *Police Gazette*, concurred and awarded Dixon a featherweight belt in March of 1893.

In Chicago and on the East and West Coasts, Dixon was well-liked. A few sporting types noted that it was fine to have a champion like Dixon because even though he was black, he had a "white heart." The light-skinned Dixon (his father was said to be a white British soldier) was a good fit for the sporting fraternity of predominantly Irish-English stock. He was smart, gentle, athletically skilled, and no one seemed to mind that he was married to the sister of his white manager, Tom O'Rourke. Like many of his champion counterparts in the heavier divisions, Dixon would use his title to promote various exhibition tours that would increase his visibility and pad his pocketbook through the end of the decade. And while he was promoting himself, Dixon was quietly teaching and promoting other black battlers soon to step into the championship ranks by the early 1900s.

In *Black Dynamite*, a series of books highlighting the careers of many of the great black fighters of this era, author and editor of *The Ring* magazine, Nat Fleischer referred to George Dixon, Joe Walcott, and Joe Gans as the "Three Colored Aces," recognizing them not only for their incomparable skills but also for their achievements as firsts of their race to be crowned world champions: featherweight, welterweight and lightweight. (**3**) Not to be overlooked would be the fourth Ace and subject of another book in the series, heavyweight champion Jack Johnson. Fleischer rated each of these four boxers #1 in their divisions. These boxers were so enormously talented that their likes would not be seen again until Joe Louis' heyday and later, with the elite fighters of the last half of the twentieth century.

The dramatic battles involving these men of color would require more than mere physical skills in the ring. With a lynching of a black person (in the form of a beating, hanging, or burning at the stake) occurring at least twice a week in the United States, the fortitude that it took a black battler at the turn of the 19th century to enter a roped arena for the express purpose of beating a white man in front of an all-white audience is unimaginable today. The Aces all faced death threats and contended with every type of taunt, threat, or shenanigan crafted by unscrupulous promoters. But long after their careers were finished it would be the black champions, not the white champions of this era, who would leave a legacy that would be remembered a hundred years later. The question to be asked now is: how did these men step around the practical and social landmines of the day and rise to the top to dominate the most visible stage of sport?

The rise of the early black fighters caught some white critics by surprise. The notion of "superiority" had been embedded in the lexicon of the white race for centuries. A deeply rooted, imperialistic mindset of the white majority considered people of color to be naturally inferior. As a result, the white race considered it a political responsibility to dominate and civilize the "darker" nations. (**4**) When it came to sport, many believed that blacks lacked the intellectual tools to learn the art. Many thought that blacks lacked heart and could not endure the rigors of the ring. They called them "yellow." Some brutally thought that blacks were insensitive to pain.

But Americans took notice after the visit to the United States by Peter Jackson, heavyweight Australian champion. Jim Corbett would take on the Great Black Prince in San Francisco in May of 1891 in a fight which ended in no-contest after 61-grueling rounds. Fight fans wanted to see John L. Sullivan take on Jackson in that famous New Orleans fight in 1892, but Sullivan staunchly refused to fight a black man and Corbett was given the privilege. While Sullivan was busy drawing the color line in the heavyweight division, Dixon was busy winning world acclaim in the lighter division.

At a time when segregation was the norm in formal society, boxing, coming as it did from the "sporting" fringes of society, mixed the races. Few fight promoters cared about the race of their protégés as long as they were winning bets. Thus, boxing gave fighters of all races unusual financial opportunities. The early black fighters studied the sport and shared their lessons with others. And as Gans famously advised, they waited for the opportunity, and when the time came, they seized it. Most importantly, they never gave up.

Some of the obstacles facing the black fighters when coming up through the ranks were:

- physical threats,
- fighting to orders,
- earning less than their white opponents,
- having to fight more than their white counterparts,
- compromising their health to make important fights, and
- fights with fixed outcomes.

Also facing the black battlers was the fact that many cities simply closed their doors to them. After Dixon won in the Carnival of Champions in 1892, criticism was so hostile that the New Orleans Olympic Club closed its doors to mix-raced fights. After Joe Gans and Joe Walcott's fights in 1900, Chicago banned these fighters. After black fighter George Cole's battle in Chicago in 1904, the papers announced the Chicago Athletic Association had "closed its doors forever to negro fighters, a step already taken in Milwaukee, Detroit, St. Louis, and other cities." (**5**) By 1904 and 1905, the black fighters struggled to find cities willing to stage them. Some went to Europe.

The rise of so many talented black boxers at the end of the nineteenth century was not unparalleled. Another group of black professional sporting men had already climbed to fame in America, men who helped pave the way for the boxers' success in terms of visibility and social status. The black jockeys had carved out a niche of expertise in horseracing by the time the black boxers entered the championship rings. Their backgrounds were long and storied during the thirty years after the Civil War: from Old Abe in 1866 and Brown Dick, later a trainer, to Isaac Murphy of international acclaim who rode over 500 winners between 1879 and 1895. Other successful riders during this era were: Pike Barnes, of Columbus, Ohio, the leading winning jockey of 1888 (with 206 wins) and 1889 (170 wins) and Willie Simms, the leading winner in 1893 (182 wins) and 1894 (228 wins), who continued to ride successfully until 1898 with over 1000 wins in a 14-year career. Andy Hamilton rode 817 winning mounts from 1897 to1900 before moving to Austria. (**6**) One can get a sense of the fame of these jockeys a hundred years ago by comparing their successes to today's triple crown-winning jockey, Victor Espinoza who averaged 193 wins per year between 2000 and 2006.

As reported in various Chicago papers, it was said that the black riders were so strong that by the 1890s they formed a *trust* at Washington Park, Chicago and were able to control all the choice mounts. History suggests that the jockeys delivered a blue-print to the boxers in the way they mastered their sport, acquired newspaper publicity, and formed a group to help ensure their success. And with their wages at the top of the sport, the black jockeys were able to purchase valuable real estate that would ensure their security in retirement. And when their riding days were over, these jockeys were highly sought after trainers. Many of the sporting men in the "leisure-rich" circles of New York, Boston, Baltimore, Chicago and San Francisco, who frequented the races, owned horses, and gambled on the outcomes, became interested in the business of boxing for similar reasons.

Prize-fighting in its bare-knuckle days was a popular but illegal sport operating in settings often hidden. But by the 1890s, fisticuffs, during the Queensberry Realm as the era was called by writers in the first decade of the twentieth century, was being tamed by rules sufficient enough to placate the politicians and interest entrepreneurs in establishing private and public venues for the contests. Gloves added a civilizing, sport-like effect to what had previously been seen to some as barbaric pit fighting. And while "prizefighting" was still illegal, the "sport of boxing" was seen as a distinctively new and different activity. This new sport coincided with the emergence of a physical culture age, and boxing was promoted as healthy activity for both men and women.

Boxing offered men of all ethnic groups opportunities to climb the social and economic ladders in ways unimagined before the 1890s. Good local boxers were heavily recruited by managers who established

gyms for their training and sought lucrative contracts for their matches. Boxers and their managers went from town to town, making and accepting challenges, building up their reputations and earning their livings in the new professional sport. Boxers were wildly popular, fit specimens of manhood, attractive and intelligent, and earned in their prize winnings above-average incomes that they split with their managers.

Young black prospects frequently entered the business by fighting against other blacks in a popular preliminary or post-theatrical entertainment called a *battle royal,* where multiple young contenders fought everyone in the ring until only one was left standing. American-born boxers Joe Gans and Jack Johnson began their careers in such battles and were also known to fight two-against-one battles. These contests were highly visible and their outcomes attracted managers who contracted them for their stables (another reference to the sport of horseracing). It should be noted that the boxers were not segregated, as such, by managers or in their early one-on-one battles. But as they gained wins and sought notoriety to enter the championship realms, they first earned black titles, which were readily accepted by white spectators. Joe Gans rose through the ranks winning an assortment of black titles, such as Colored Lightweight Champion of Maryland and Colored Southern Lightweight Champion. Other weight divisions had similar titles.

Because these fighters had to jump through "black hoops" before entering the championship realms, they naturally fought many more battles than their white contemporaries, and thereby gained valuable experience. This is one of the reasons why these early battlers only spent a few weeks in training—they were busy fighting, putting in anywhere from 10 to 20 fights per year. These early champions were innovative and seemed to possess super-human endurance. They could take on back-to-back opponents or finish fights under harsh elements. Keys to their success were in their scientific study of defensive moves and offensive angles. While Dixon's and Gans' lives were short—Dixon died at the age of 37 and Gans at 35—their careers were packed with hundreds of fights. The most telling difference between the Aces and their white contemporaries was the number of their bouts: Stanley Ketchel, who also died young in 1910, had a total of 64 fights, Jim Corbett and Jim Jeffries each had less than 25. Dixon, Walcott, and Gans each had over 150. George Godfrey had 123 career bouts, Dave Holly 131, Kid Norfolk 144, The Dixie Kid 154, Joe Jeanette 166, Jack Blackburn 167, George Cole 194, and Sam Langford over 300. After considering the number of his 4-round challenge exhibitions while on tour, Dixon's manager estimated the Champion fought over 800 bouts. Jack Johnson clocked in the fewest bouts of the group, only 95. By comparison to modern boxers, Sugar Ray Leonard had 40 professional fights, Joe Frazier 37, and Muhammad Ali 61. Floyd Mayweather, Jr., ended his career with 50 bouts.

The rise of these early champions occurred during one of the America's worst economic depressions. Of the three depressions after the Civil War, the one from 1893-1897 was most severe and incomes plummeted. Rural agrarian lives were simply pipedreams for the first generation of blacks born free on American soil and the thousands of immigrants entering the country. The reality was that most men, women, and children looking for work took menial jobs in fields or factories. Most men entering the work force in 1900 toiled as laborers, clocking in 10-12-hour days, 6 days a week, earning $1.50 per day. (Women and children earned less.) However, in a single prizefight a beginning boxer could earn from $2.00 to $5.00 for three or four rounds. Boxing was not only a popular entertainment of the working classes where the cultural pride of ethnic groups was tested in the ring; it was now a prized profession.

For boxers publicity and mobility were necessary for advancement. The development of the railroad moved people of all socio-economic groups around the country, and boxers spent much of their time riding the rails during their professional lives. Once boxers had beaten their local competitors, they traveled to sporting venues in Baltimore, Philadelphia, Boston, New York, Chicago, New Orleans, Louisville, Denver, Butte, Portland, and San Francisco in search of fights of regional and national importance. The more publicity for the fights, the more the fighters stood to earn.

George Pullman of Chicago, builder of luxury sleeper cars, created one of the largest all-black employee pools, drawing workers from the rural south to the industrial north. During Gans' professional life, the highly esteemed Pullman's Porters earned an average monthly pay of $34. By comparison the turpentine workers in Florida made $15-$25 per month. These monthly wages were a night's pay for a fighting journeyman. As these new professionals crossed the country, their publicity spread.

Before 1900 (and through 1940) the earnings ratio of black men to white men was generally estimated to be 45%, and for professional boxing the earnings ratios were similar. The black boxers of the early days had to fight continually since they invariably received smaller paydays. It was not unusual to find the black boxers shorted when it came to the purse. Winner-take-all purses gradually fell out of favor at the turn of the century when purses were typically divided 60/40% between the winner and the loser. In 1906 Joe Gans came into the famous Goldfield fight as Champion, yet he was contracted to fight Battling Nelson for half of what Nelson was given, regardless of who won the fight. Gans received $11,000 of the purse (which included $1000 in fight expenses) and Nelson received $22, 500 (which included $2500 fight expenses).

And, in order to get work, good black fighters were inevitably forced to make deals with fixed outcomes. In1893 George Siddons was originally matched with Jack Skelly for a $1500 fight. (Siddons is remembered for his epic 77 and 55-round battles in 1889 with Kid Lavigne.) When Skelly bowed out, George Dixon filled in. George Siddons would only fight Dixon for a prearranged draw for 12 rounds, demanding that he (Siddons) be left on his feet at the end. It is important to keep in mind when examining historical records

that many such "arrangements" may have been made with these early fighters known for their speed, powerful punch, clever defense, ring generalship, and minority status.

Also interesting is the fact that Dixon's contests would prepare a slate of fighters for Joe Gans. Dixon's star was already bright when Joe Gans began boxing, and the two became good friends in the meeting ground of Philadelphia between Boston and Baltimore. Both shared their fighting experience and scientific strategies. (Dixon would also mentor Joe Walcott in the same stable under Tom O'Rourke and he would also befriend Jack Johnson when Johnson was following Walcott.) Dixon's lineage of fights would help to set up Gans' battles with the same men: providing entrees, lending prestige to the bouts, and passing intelligence of their strengths and weaknesses. Dixon fought Siddons in 1893; Gans would fight Siddons (also to a draw) in 1895. Dixon fought Walter Edgerton, the "Kentucky Rosebud" five times in 1892 through 1894. Gans would kick-start his career fighting the Rosebud in '95. Dixon fought Young Griffo three times in '94 and '95; Gans fought him in '95 and '97. Dixon fought Martin Flaherty in '91 and '96; and although Flaherty was past his prime Gans fought him in 1901. Dixon fought Mike Leonard in 1895; Gans fought him in '97 to get West Coast attention. Like Gans, Dixon would first lose to Frank Erne and then win, in '95 and '97 respectively. Gans would fight Erne for the lightweight title and lose in 1900 and fight again and win in 1902 in Canada. Dixon fought Terry McGovern and Dal Hawkins, both opponents who would see significant ring action later with Joe Gans.

Then after a string of wins and big-moneyed fights for both Dixon and Gans, there came the strange and disastrous year of 1900. Dixon, who appeared indomitable for almost nine years, lost his title to Terry McGovern in 1900. Dixon had been revered for both his offensive and defensive skills for a decade, but Terrible Terry McGovern (perhaps the first "white hope" of the new century) was able to beat Dixon with body blows. After Dixon was knocked down eight times, Manager O'Rourke threw in the sponge in Round 8. Many couldn't believe Dixon's career had come to an end. Without film footage it is difficult to know why Dixon fared so poorly. Was Terry really that good or was there a smell to this fight like so many others of 1900? After the fight, Dixon's financial drawing power dwindled. McGovern was paid $11,000 for their first fight of 25 rounds in January and $2300 for their second fight five months later. No longer would Dixon be a big money-maker for O'Rourke, and by the end of 1901 the pair had experienced a falling out.

The year 1900 was known as the year of the fixed fights. Without film footage and only newspaper coverage, one might be tempted to think that Joe Gans' fight with Terry McGovern was on the level, and that McGovern had beaten Gans with a series of body blows like he had beaten Dixon. However, the film illustrated that Gans was a poor "fakir," and four days after the fight the Chicago City Council labeled the fight a fake. McGovern was paid $11,000 for that fight, getting 75 percent of the purse, with Gans earning 25 percent, approximately $3500.

Also in 1900, Walcott "quit" in a fixed fight against Tommy West at Madison Square Garden. It is well known that Walcott went into that fight ordered to lose (faced with a death-threat if he refused to follow orders) in the 11th round. One must wonder how these fixes played into the history of these champions. (**7**)

The tide seemed to turn for Joe Walcott with his championship win in 1901 and for Joe Gans with his championship win in 1902. Both contests were not held in New York, but rather Ft. Erie, Canada, for fear of riots in the United States. In 1902 Dixon left the United States for Great Britain in search of fights and would remain there until 1905. At one point during his career struggles Gans pondered following Dixon to England.

Joe Walcott, the "Barbados Demon" fought during this two-decade heyday, from 1890-1911. Walcott sailed from the West Indies as a cabin boy to Boston at the age of fifteen. There Walcott met Dixon and his manager, Tom O'Rourke. After Dixon's successful wins in the early 1900s he formed a vaudeville and athletic company that toured the country, allowing locals to challenge him in four-round bouts. During these tours Dixon earned about $1000 a week to support himself and his budding entourage. At this time, Dixon mentored Joe Walcott into ring fame.

Walcott, the Giant Killer, began as a lightweight at 5'1 ½", but grew to his natural welter weight at 145 pounds. Walcott battled for the lightweight crown, twice unsuccessfully against George "Kid" Lavigne. Both battles involved conditions. In their first battle in New York in 1895, the contract stipulated that Walcott could win only by a KO. Later, in '97 in San Francisco, Walcott's stamina was compromised when forced to reduce his weight to meet the champion below 135 pounds. Walcott would move up to the welter class to win that championship in December, 1901. Six months later, Joe Gans would beat Frank Erne to become the first American-born black to win a world championship title.

At the height of their careers this band of brothers was called the most powerful and clever group ever to box. Evaluating each other, Gans called Dixon the best fighter he ever saw, and Dixon said the same about Gans. After watching Walcott, lightweight champion Jack McAuliffe said he never could have beaten Walcott in his prime. These fighters would be revered later by Joe Louis who, through his trainer Jack Blackburn (another contemporary in the group) incorporated their styles into his. These early masters of the science of boxing were so superior that when they lost, it was assumed that the referee gave their opponents the advantage (which often happened) or that the fights were fixed.

White champions used their titles to advance their interests outside the ring, primarily in real estate ventures. After Dixon, opportunities for the black champions tended to remain inside the ring where they would defend their titles by entertaining "white hopes" eager to knock them off their pedestals. In 1903 on Independence Day in copper-mine rich Butte, Montana, Gans and Walcott defended their titles in a triple-

crown event much like the championship carnival a decade earlier in New Orleans. With Gans and Walcott were stable mates Young Peter Jackson and future heavyweight champion, Jack Johnson. Middleweight Tommy Ryan would successfully defend his crown against John Willy of England, July 3rd. Welterweight Walcott weighed in at 142 to meet the local Mose LaFontise on July 4th. LaFontise had trained with another Butte local, Stanley Ketchel. It appeared that LaFontise was evenly matched with Walcott in the first two rounds. But in the third round, LaFontise was knocked out with such lightning speed that few saw the punch. Later, Walcott said it was a left followed by a right cross that landed as LaFontise was going down.

The week's festivities culminated in Joe Gans' lightweight title defense with Buddy King of Denver on July 5th, in the old ball park where seats had been built for the Jimmy Britt-Jack O'Keefe fight three weeks earlier. Spectators sat in the rain from 1:30 to 3:00 before Gans and King appeared. King tried to fight at long range, but couldn't seem to land, and he was helpless when it came to in-fighting. Gans drew first blood with a straight right to King's mouth in the 2nd. The match sputtered along until a spectator yelled "fake," which caused Gans to stop and invite the hooligan into the ring where he would show him something about fakes. This was quite unusual for the highly-poised Gans known for his gentlemanly demeanor. Walcott followed up, offering to "lick" any man in the crowd. It is unknown if Johnson added anything to the debate. The crowd hushed, and Gans went back to business, winning in the 5th by putting his opponent down three times with hard rights to the jaw and left uppercuts to the face. The cause of the incident, more than likely, was that Gans was told to carry his opponent for a number of rounds.

By 1904 many of the major fighting centers had banned the black boxers and they were forced to fight each other if they wanted a payday. Gans would finish out 1903 losing to future heavyweight great, Sam Langford in Philly. Gans had fought the day before in Baltimore and it seemed that his energy was spent. Eager to mentor the young fighter, Gans explained to Langford after the fight how he could have won more decisively. Like Dixon, Langford maintained that Gans was the greatest fighter he had ever seen. Walcott would fight Langford to a draw in 1904. These greats: Walcott, Gans, Langford, and Johnson would fight each other only once.

In 1904 with mixed-race fight opportunities dwindling, Gans fought Walcott for the welterweight crown. The battle at Woodward's Pavilion, San Francisco was considered one of the best old-time fights, going the distance of 20 action-packed rounds. The referee declared it a draw due to Walcott's aggressiveness, but gave more rounds to Gans. The next day, Spider Kelly wrote about the fight saying that Gans had it all: a hard punch, extreme cleverness, and courage. "Did you ever see a terrier play with a rat? That's the way Gans operated that night with Wolcott[sic]." (**8**)

Ultimately the white battlers had to meet the black champions if they wanted to earn an undisputed title, however they still held the controlling hand when it came to pay. After saying that he would never fight a Negro, Jimmy Britt of San Francisco decided that the only way he could be called a world champion was to fight Joe Gans. The contract was signed in San Francisco on October 8, 1904 for a fight to be held on Oct. 31 with Gans set to receive the lesser share. The contract stipulated: "the fighters are to receive sixty percent of the gross receipts as follows: Britt is to receive seventy-five percent if he wins, fifty percent if it is a draw and fifty percent if he loses; Gans to receive fifty percent if he wins, fifty percent if it is a draw, and twenty-five percent if he loses." (**9**) Gans won the fight, retaining his title.

It would take three gladiatorial bouts for Oscar Nelson to finally beat Joe Gans and end the Master's career. Gans won their first bout on September 3, 1906 after 42 grueling rounds, and Nelson won their last two bouts in 1908 when Gans was in the late stages of tuberculosis.

The 1906 Gans vs. Nelson lightweight title bout is one of the most notable fights in boxing history for many reasons. It was Tex Rickard's first "Great Fight of the Century," the first of his many colossal promotions. The Texas cattle drover turned sheriff turned Gold Rush saloon owner would go on to promote the Jack Johnson—Jim Jeffries fight, to guide Jack Dempsey into the million-dollar stratosphere, and to establish Madison Square Garden as the premier boxing arena in the United States. Tex Rickard generated such hype for the 1906 match that news editors admitted that nothing but a presidential election could garner more sustained interest than the Labor Day fight. It helped that Rickard posted the largest purse of its time: $30,000 in gold coins. (**10**)

The Gans-Nelson fight was essentially another "Great White Hope" fight. Newspapers caricatured Nelson with a grin, wild straw hair and square jaw, a good-looking Viking-type with manly resolve to wrest the title away from Joe Gans. Nelson bragged of his "coon graveyard," pointing to a list of black boxers he had defeated. (**11**) Illustrators depicted Gans with a sloping forehead, bug eyes, and thick white lips, a demeaning caricature of a handsome man. The parodies were the reverse of reality. Gans was known as a gentleman his entire life; Nelson was labeled famously as a classic "brute" by Jack London in his literary coverage of an earlier Nelson-Britt fight in California. (**12**)

Like Jack Johnson in 1910, Oscar "Battling" Nelson, had youth and stamina on his side in 1906. Nelson was a rugged brawler, like Elbows McFadden, another tough lightweight who fought Gans in long, memorable battles. Nelson was known for his brutal fouls and his superhuman ability to shake off punishing blows. However, Nelson had never faced a boxer with a punch as hard as Gans'. In the fight following the first Nelson bout, Gans would be filmed knocking out Pete "Kid" Herman with the hand he had broken four months earlier. Herman remained unconscious for five minutes.

The 1906 Gans bout was remarkable in that it highlighted the acceptance of a black man who was one of the first to assert his full rights and expect equal treatment. Thus the Rev. Francis Grimke said that Gans had done more to help "the cause" than Booker T. Washington. (**13**) The *San Francisco Examiner* noted that Gans was the "first Negro ever allowed to take a drink in a Goldfield saloon." (**14**) While the white upper classes, included Tex Rickard, bet their money on Nelson, newspapers singled out Gans for his popularity with the Goldfield miners who saw him as a man of their own ilk. In the haggling over details in the Articles of Agreement regarding division of the purse, Gans told the press that he expected Nelson's manager to follow "the rules of the game." He stated emphatically, "I know what I am entitled to and I will not let such a fellow as Nolan do me out of my just rights." (**15**) These are words of strength and conviction coming from a public figure at the top of the sport he dominated. Gans even said to Nolan, "I wish I could get you in the ring instead of Nelson." (**16**) Publicity of the contest in and out of the ring put the entire country on edge.

The day before combat, trains from San Francisco and Chicago hauled Pullman's coaches full of high-roller spectators into Goldfield on new track laid specifically for the match. The betting odds favored Gans. But the examining physician said that although both fighters were ready, Nelson was in better shape, in that Gans was feverish.

Those favoring Gans to win thought the fight would be over in fewer than 10 rounds. While Gans had fought many 20 and 25 round battles with formidable opponents, none had gone over 25 rounds. Nelson had only gone 20 rounds on three occasions. Although both fighters had scored plenty of knockouts, this match would see none.

The three-hour 42-round fight was brutal. (**17**) By mid-point both fighters and the canvas were covered in blood. In the early rounds, Gans tried to box, but the Battler's tactic was to bore in with his head to fight at close range and foul repeatedly. Gans pummelled Nelson and used multiple uppercuts and short arm jabs in the in-fighting to bloody Batt's face and ears. By the 20th round, Batt's face, said one correspondent, looked as if it had taken a beating hard enough to kill 20 Jimmy Britts. Gans' gloves were soaked in blood from Nelson's face. Whenever Gans would land one of his battle-ending blows, Nelson would appear dazed and wobbly, but the bell, on several occasions, would save him from the ten-count.

By round 33, Gans had completely shut Nelson's left eye with a flurry of blows, and had broken a bone in his right hand during the action. While Gans used his damaged hand in the remaining rounds, he could not put Nelson out with his left. By round 42, both men and the referee were war weary, the cameramen were running out of film, the day was darkening and Nelson knew that he was not likely to win a decision. When they were locked in a clinch, Nelson punched Gans below the belt sending Gans to the floor. Referee George Siler disqualified Nelson on a foul, giving the win to Gans. The crowd roared its approval.

Outside Nevada, particularly in Chicago, pro-Gans sentiments were not shared. On September 5, 1906, the *Atlanta Constitution* headline reported: "Race War is Provoked by Gans - Nelson Fight." (**18**) By September 22, Atlanta would be at war, in one of the largest race riots in American history, where as many as 10,000 whites attacked and killed as many as 30-40 blacks. The Gans-Nelson fight, one of the most highly publicized contests to date, may have given strength to black civil rights advocates; but it brought fear from the whites of an up-and-coming black segment of the population. Thus, on September 23, 1906, police stopped the welterweight championship between Joe Walcott and his challenger Billy Rhodes in Leavenworth, Kansas. Walcott would lose his title to Honey Mellody in 1906.

George Dixon hung up the gloves in December 1906. He died alone in New York in1908, impoverished after having financed his own career and the beginning of numerous others'. His boxing friends would establish a memorial fountain in his honor in New York City.

Gans, suffering from tuberculosis and in need of money, promised Nelson a rematch, and then there was a third—all fights to the 45-round limit for a total of 80 rounds. Nelson would win their second match in the 17th round, and the third match in the 21st round. Gans' losses would be offset by Jack Johnson's win of the heavyweight title from Tommy Burns in 1908.

In 1910 Gans was dying. His last time in the ring was as a second to Langford in his fight with Stanley Ketchel in Philadelphia in April. Six weeks later the storied Ketchel would be shot and killed. Gans would travel to Arizona in a last-ditch effort to cure his advanced stage of tuberculosis, still hoping to be in Reno, Nevada to serve Jack Johnson as his chief second for the Independence Day Fight. But by July, Gans was too ill to attend. He died in August. Jack Johnson would say that none of the heavyweights compared in skill to three men he knew in the lighter weight categories: George "Little Chocolate" Dixon, "Barbados" Joe Walcott, and Joe Gans, the "Old Master."

When Johnson beat Jeffries in another of Rickard's promotions in 1910, America again witnessed riots. Over time, Johnson and all of his controversies would draw media attention away from the three Aces. By 1911 the Golden Age was effectively over for the early black champions. Walcott spent his final days working as a custodian at Madison Square Garden. By 1935, Walcott was dead.

Periodically, *The Ring* magazine has published a ranking of the all-time greatest fighters. Throughout the 1950s and up to 1975, Jim Jeffries, Bob Fitzsimmons, Jim Corbett, and Jack Johnson were all named in the top ten list of the greatest heavyweights. But by the turn of the century, only the early black boxers were left in the various top ten lists: Jack Johnson was 9th in heavyweights in 1998; Joe Gans was 4th in lightweights in the September issue of 2001; and Joe Walcott was 9th in welterweights in February 2008. In

1975 both Terry McGovern and George Dixon were listed in the top ten of the featherweights (9th and 10th). But by January of 2002, both McGovern and Dixon were no longer in the top ten. A century after being rated #1 in their divisions, the Aces were still acknowledged as being among the greatest fighters of all time; however, their boxing legacy had begun ever so slowly to slip away. One must ponder how remarkable their records might have been were it not for all the conditions placed on them. It remains to be seen how many more years these boxers will be recognized as greats—for their athletic skills, their contributions to the art they helped to develop, and for the principles they struggled and fought for: equal access, fair pay, and human dignity for all.

Footnotes:

1. "Black Wins," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, Sept. 7, 1892.
2. See the *Chicago Tribune*, *New Orleans Times Picayune*, and the *New Orleans Times-Democrat* for reports of the fight, Sept. 7, 1892.
3. Nat Fleischer, *Black Dynamite- Vol. III: The Three Colored Aces: Story of George Dixon, Joe Gans and Joe Walcott and Several contemporaries*, The Ring Athletic Library, New York, 1938.
4. Harvard professor T. Lothrop Stoddard in *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy*, published in 1921 reports, "The black race has never shown real constructive power. It has never built up a native civilization. Such progress as certain negro groups have made has been due to external pressure and has never long outlived that pressure's removal." (Reprint Ostara Pub., 59)
5. "Closes Its Doors to Negro Fighters," *Los Angeles Herald*, Feb. 5, 1904. Reporting from Chicago: "Owing to the miserable showing made by George Cole the Chicago Athletic association has closed its doors forever to negro fighters. This step has already been taken at Milwaukee. Detroit, St. Lou's and other cities. Since the days of Peter Jackson and George Dixon a lot of cheap negro boxers have come to the front and ruined the chances of the black man. Joe Gans and Joe Walcott have done much toward getting men of their color barred. Athletic managers say a negro does not draw well as a fighting attraction. When they are given a match they are forced to fight for about one-third the sum that is given a white man."
6. "Negro Jockey's Day Has Passed: Boys Now in Saddle Lack in Class: Winners of Other Years: Black Pilots of Thoroughbreds Formerly Ranked High Among the Knights of the Pigskin—Their Rise and Fall," *Los Angeles Herald*, Aug. 14, 1905.
7. For a discussion of the fixed fights of 1900, see Colleen Aycock and Mark Scott, *Joe Gans: A Biography of the First African American World Boxing Champion*, McFarland: Jefferson, NC, 63-81.
8. Spider Kelly, *San Francisco Chronicle*, Sept. 30, 1904.
9. *Police Gazette*, Oct. 22, 1904.
10. For a discussion of Tex Rickard's promotions of the black battlers, see Colleen Aycock and Mark Scott, *Tex Rickard: Boxing's Greatest Promoter*, McFarland: Jefferson, NC, 2012.
11. Oscar Matthew "Battling" Nelson, *Life, Battles and Career of Battling Nelson, Lightweight Champion of the World*, Hegewisch, Il: 1909.
12. Newspaper writer Jack London was hired by William R. Hearst to cover the Jimmy Britt-Battling Nelson fight Sept. 9, 1905 for the *San Francisco Examiner*. In that article, he called Nelson the "abysmal brute," a concept he would use again in his literature when discussing "the game." For a discussion of this, see Aycock and Scott, *Tex Rickard*, pp. 51-54.
13. Francis J. Grimke, "The Atlanta Riot: A Discourse Published by Request," Washington, D.C., Oct. 7, 1906.
14. "Fight Articles Will Be Signed Today," *San Francisco Examiner*, Aug. 11, 1906.
15. "Gans and Nelson", *San Francisco Examiner*, Aug. 10, 1906.
16. *San Francisco, Examiner*, Aug. 11, 1906.
17. For a complete round-by-round summary of the fight, see Colleen Aycock and Mark Scott, "Epic Battle in the Nevada Desert," *Joe Gans: A Biography of the First African American World Boxing Champion,* 2008.
18. "Race War is Provoked by Gans - Nelson Fight," *Atlanta Constitution,* Sept. 5, 1906. The article detailed what had occurred in Chicago as a result of the Gans-Nelson fight.