

# Gus Lesnevich: The Neglected Hall of Famer

By Dan Cuoco

In the nineteen-forties, Gus Lesnevich reigned alongside champions Joe Louis, Sugar Ray Robinson, Willie Pep, Rocky Graziano, Tony Zale, Manuel Ortiz, Ike Williams, and Jackie Paterson.

Lesnevich's ability in the ring was acknowledged with his induction into the prestigious *Ring Boxing Hall of Fame* in 1973 and the *World Boxing Hall of Fame* in 1988. However, his legacy is yet to be fully recognized with induction into the *International Boxing Hall of Fame*.

**Tracy Callis, IBRO Director of Historical Research, wrote:** *“Lesnevich was stocky and sturdy; He was not fancy but was rugged and always ready, willing, and able to mix it up. During his career, he won the Light Heavyweight Championship of the World. Gus defeated such men as “Blackjack” Billy Fox, Tami Mauriello, Bob Olin, Alabama Kid, Jack Marshall, Joe Kahut, Freddie Mills, Melio Bettina, Jackie Aldare, Eddie “Kid” Whalen, Ray Actis, Carmen Barth, Young Stuhley, Johnny “Bandit” Romero, Herbie Katz, Lou Brouillard, Ambrose Palmer, Larry Lane, Dave Clark, Nathan Mann, Anton Christoforidis, and drew with Allen Matthews.”*



## Lesnevich Quickly Makes a Name for Himself

Lesnevich's boxing career began with a promising start as an amateur at age 17, where he quickly made a name for himself. He culminated his amateur career by winning the 1934 Intercity Golden Gloves middleweight championship. He made his professional debut at Ridgewood Grove in Brooklyn, New York, on May 5, 1934, with a second-round technical knockout victory over Justin Hoffman. This victory was the first of many, with Lesnevich winning his next ten fights before suffering his first defeat, a six-round split decision loss to Jackie Aldare at Ridgewood Grove on November 24, 1934. He avenged his loss to Aldare on December 29, 1934, at Ridgewood Grove, winning an eight-round decision. He finished his first professional year with a record of 12-1, four by knockout.

From January 12, 1935, to April 13, 1936, he made steady progress, boxing in six, eight, and eventually ten-round preliminary fights at some of the most iconic venues in the boxing world. These include Ridgewood Grove in Brooklyn, New York, known for its lively atmosphere and passionate fans; Oakland Outdoor Arena in Jersey City, New Jersey; Teterboro Airdrome in Hasbrouck Heights, New Jersey; Braddock Arena in Jersey City, New Jersey; Laurel Garden in Newark, New Jersey; Kennel Track in Fort Lee, New Jersey; Beach Arena in Miami Beach, Florida, and Madison Square Garden in New York, the 'Mecca of Boxing.' During this period, he defeated Bucky Lawless (KO-2), Jackie Aldare (W-8) in their rubber match, John Anderson (W-8, D-6), Tony Celli (W-8), Butch Lynch (W-10), Eddie “Kid” Whalen (TKO-5), and Frankie Caris (D-10. W-10).

## West Coast Campaign

On April 28, 1936, twenty-one-year-old Gus arrived in California for a campaign on the West Coast. His debut took place on an undercard at the Olympic Auditorium in Los Angeles on May 19, 1936, against Sammy Christian (W-4), followed by two six-rounders on undercards at the Legion Stadium in Hollywood on May 29, 1936, and June 19, 1936, against Johnny Sikes (TKO-1), and Louie Rogers (TKO-1). From August 21, 1936, to October 23, 1936, he stepped up to main event status at the Legion Stadium in Hollywood, defeating Ray Actis (W-10) and Carmen Barth (W-10) and drawing with Marty Simmons (D-10). In November 1936, he engaged in his final two bouts on the West Coast against Young Stuhley (KO-9) at the Civic Auditorium in San Francisco on November 4 and Freddie Steele (L-TKO-2) at the Olympic Auditorium in Los Angeles on November 17. The loss to Steele ended his twenty-two-fight unbeaten streak (19-0-3, six by kayo) and brought his overall record to 29-2-3, ten by kayo.

The vicious punching twenty-three-year-old Steele, recognized by the National Boxing Association (NBA) and New York State Athletic Commission (NYSAC) as the world's middleweight champion, entered the fight with a gaudy record of 111-2-11 and 51 kayos—his two losses, both by decision before his twentieth birthday, were later avenged. Steele stopped Gus in the second round of a non-title 10-round bout before 10,000 fans at the Olympic Auditorium.



(Pic. Freddie Steele)

Gus' corner threw the towel into the ring after 1:12 of the second round had elapsed. Gus was dropped twice in the opening round and received an ugly gash over his right eye and a bloody nose. Coming out for the second round, Steele dropped him again, and pounding hard left hooks opened an old cut over Gus's left eye. His face was a mask of blood as the towel sailed into the ring. The promoter of this show, Joe Waterman, told the *Tacoma News-Tribune*, shortly before his death in 1949, that Steele's performance was the finest he ever saw in his 40-plus years in boxing.

Gus returned to New York after the Steele fight and planned to return to the West Coast after the first of the year. His doctor expected him to be sidelined for six weeks until his eye cuts healed. In late December, *Ring* magazine and the *NBA* released their world light heavyweight ratings. Gus was ranked number four by the *Ring* and five by the *NBA*.

In January 1937, Gus signed to fight Young Corbett 111 in San Francisco in March. Before leaving for the West Coast, he easily outpointed tough Tony Celli on February 20 in an eight-round tune-up at Ridgewood Grove in Brooklyn, New York.

The Corbett fight on March 12 at the Dreamland Auditorium in San Francisco did not go as planned. Referee Toby Irwin was forced to stop the fight and award Corbett a technical knockout after one and a half minutes of fighting in the fifth round of their scheduled ten-round bout due to a torn forehead that was a maze of blood. Corbett had just opened a five-inch gash over Lesnevich's left eye. In the first round, Corbett opened a smaller but almost as nasty a wound over Gus's right eye from an apparent head butt. But Irwin explained that a slashing left by Corbett had preceded a clinch, not Corbett's head.

Gus returned to action in May looking none-the-worse for wear, finishing his West Coast campaign with victories over Johnny "Bandit" Romero (TKO-7) at Legion Stadium in Hollywood, California, Young Stuhley (W-10), Atilio Sabatino (W-10) and Alabama Kid (W-10) at the Olympic Auditorium in Los Angeles, and a ten-round draw with Allen Matthews at the Crystal Pool in Seattle, Washington. Against Matthews, Gus was hampered late in the fight by cuts and swelling, as his left eye was swollen shut and cut below the same eye. Through the eighth round, Gus appeared to have had an edge. However, Matthews swept the last two rounds. The *Seattle Times* scored the bout 4-3-3 in rounds for Gus. Matthews was warned for headbutting in the sixth round. The headbutt appeared to exacerbate the swelling. After the Matthews fight, Gus returned home and made his Madison Square Garden debut on November 17, 1937, with an eight-round decision over Herbie Katz.

### **Australian Campaign**

From January 7, 1938, to June 16, 1938, Gus extended his latest unbeaten winning streak to twelve. He engaged Joey Parks (D-10) in St. Louis, Missouri, Ben Brown (W-10) in Coral Gables, Florida, Jack Kirkland (KO-1) in Miami Beach, Florida, Lou Brouillard (W-10) in New York, Buddy Ryan (W-10), and Stanley Hasrato (KO-1) in West New York, New Jersey.

In late July, Gus received an offer to fight in Australia. When Gus's manager, Joe Vella, was asked if Gus would accept, he said, "Gus'll go anywhere if the price is right." Gus sailed to Australia in mid-August and began his campaign on October 27, 1938, losing a 12-round unanimous decision to Australian middleweight and light heavyweight champion Ron Richards, at the Sydney Sports Arena, in New South Wales, Sydney. Richards displayed brilliant counterpunching, especially with the right hand, which was the deciding factor in

his victory. He dropped Gus in the third round for a nine count. Despite a badly cut and closed left eye, Gus stood and fought back strongly in the twelfth round, a testament to his bravery and capacity to take terrific punishment. Gus was gracious in defeat, stating - "He is good enough to fight for the world's light-heavyweight championship."

On December 8, 1938, in a highly competitive fight at the Sydney Sports Arena in New South Wales, Sydney, Gus won a 12-round decision over Ambrose Palmer. Gus was best at long range, while Palmer was always dangerous at close range. In *Ring* magazine's year-end light heavyweight world ratings, Gus was fourth behind Champion John Henry Lewis, Tiger Jack Fox, Melio Bettina, and Ron Richards.

Gus's final two fights in Australia, also at the Sydney Sports Arena in New South Wales, Sydney, were against the Alabama Kid (TKO-9) on January 13, 1939, and former world light heavyweight champion Bob Olin (W-12) on February 2, 1939. Against the Alabama Kid, Gus was more forceful and carried the attack to his opponent. At the end of the ninth, after the Kid had been severely punished, the Kid informed the referee that he could not continue. Gus's fight against Olin, on the other hand, was a display of sheer dominance. He won every round, but despite numerous opportunities, he failed to knock out Olin. The next day, he sailed home.

### **Billy Conn**

Back on home soil, Gus won a lop-sided ten-round unanimous decision over former light heavyweight contender Larry Lane on May 15, 1939, at the Arena in Trenton, New Jersey, followed by a startling first-round knockout over highly touted light heavyweight contender Dave Clark at the Velodrome in Nutley, New Jersey, on June 22, 1939. Gus dropped Clark four times in the first round before referee Gene Roman stopped the fight without a count as Clark's head hung over the lower rope in his own corner. It took several minutes to revive Clark. Joe Louis, who came from his training camp to second his pal, was visibly shaken by the knockout. (The knockout defeat would be the only one Clark suffered in his 39-fight career, consisting of 32-4-3 (KO 8). The win also elevated Gus to number two in the NBA ratings, earning him a world title fight with Billy Conn.

On November 17, 1939, Gus challenged Billy Conn for his NBA and NYSAC light heavyweight title before a Madison Square Garden attendance of 13,704. Conn's adaptability was on full display as he took his time getting started, allowing Gus to take the lead in the first and third rounds and holding his own in the second. But, from then on, except for a rally that split the tenth round and won the eleventh, it was all Conn. Billy won by utilizing his vast variety of punches, a stiff left jab, a short arm half hook and uppercut with his left, and a solid right cross. He blocked and parried punches beautifully and had no difficulty tying up Gus in the clinches. Several times during the fight, he staggered Gus with a combination of left hooks to the head and body and straight rights to the head. The official scores in favor of Conn were referee Johnny Monroe, 8-5-2, judge Marty Monroe, 10-5, and judge Joe Lynch, 9-6. (*Pic. Lesnevich vs Conn 1*)



Despite the setback against Conn, Gus' determination remained unshaken. He bounced back with a ten-round unanimous decision over Dave Clark on January 1, 1940, earning another shot at the title. Unfortunately, his second attempt was also unsuccessful, as he faced Conn once more, losing a 15-round unanimous decision at Madison Square Garden on June 5, 1940. The fight was almost a replay of their first bout. Conn, a notoriously slow starter, initially lost some of the early rounds but then rallied to win a unanimous decision. Gus's best round was the fifth, when he dazed Billy with a right and followed up with a sharp left. Despite Gus's early success, Conn boxed superbly the rest of the way, repeatedly beating Gus to the punch.

### **Undisputed World Light Heavyweight Champion**

A year later, on May 22, 1941, Gus won a 15-round unanimous decision over the reigning NBA champion, Anton Christoforidis, at Madison Square Garden. Before this triumph, Gus faced and defeated a series of

formidable heavyweights, including Wally Sears, Henry Cooper, Jack Marshall, and Nathan Mann. The victory was surprising as Anton, a 4 to 1 favorite, proved a keen disappointment. Gus won easily and had Anton on the verge of a knockout in the 15th round, but he couldn't put him away. Initially hesitant to recognize the fight as a title bout, the NBA officially awarded the title to Gus on May 24, 1941.

On August 26, 1941, Gus defended his NBA title and added the vacant NYSAC title with a disputed 15-round split decision over Tami Mauriello at Madison Square Garden. Gus started fast, jabbing Tami's head repeatedly. He won the first two rounds, a left hook dropping Mauriello for a 9-count in the 2nd. Gus took the 3rd and 4th also, ripping open a deep cut on Tami's left eye in the 4th. After trailing early, Mauriello closed fast and apparently had won the fight. The officials decided that Gus's early edge was enough to give him the verdict. Promoter Mike Jacobs announced immediately after the fight that Gus would defend his title against Tami on November 14th.



(Pic. Lesnevich drops Mauriello 1)

Three months later, Gus left no doubt he was the better fighter by winning a 15-round unanimous decision over Tami. Both fighters displayed remarkable toughness, with Gus winning the first five rounds by a wide margin, nearly dropping Mauriello in the second and third rounds. Not one to back down, Tami won the sixth and seventh rounds, frequently rocking Gus with sweeping rights to the head. Gus's resilience was evident as he stormed back to take the eighth and tenth, but Tami's determination shone through as he came back to capture the next four rounds. Gus's dominance in the last round made the decision a foregone conclusion, but the spirit and determination of both fighters thrilled everyone in attendance. The victory also earned Gus worldwide recognition as the undisputed world light heavyweight champion.

When the United States entered World War II, Gus, a man of great patriotism, made a significant sacrifice. He put aside all potential title fights and joined the United States Coast Guard as a carpenter's mate. Before entering the Coast Guard, he fought Bob Pastor (L-10) at Madison Square Garden on January 30, 1942, and Jimmy Bivins (L-10) at the Cleveland Arena on March 11, 1942. He wouldn't enter a ring again until January 11, 1946. Moreover, his world light heavyweight title was frozen during his time in the Coast Guard.

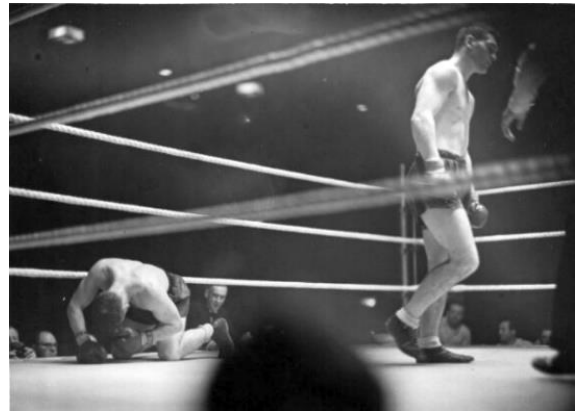
### **Lesnevich Returns to Ring Action in 1946 with Mixed Results**

When Gus was discharged from the United States Coast Guard in October 1945, he was nearly 31 years old. Despite having trained over 50,000 servicemen in the United States and South Pacific, he hadn't engaged in any fighting, was bloated and out of shape, and hadn't been in the ring for three and a half years. Gus worked tirelessly to shed thirty pounds and regain his fighting shape. Few boxing experts thought he could make a successful comeback. On January 11, 1946, Gus surprised his critics in his return against Joe Kahut in Portland, Oregon. Gus dropped Kahut twice before Kahut was counted out by referee Nat Fleischer at 2:45 of the first round. The thrill of his quick knockout was overshadowed in his next fight when he was stopped on cuts by Lee Oma at Madison Square Garden on February 22, 1946. Gus's manager, Joe Vella, admitted it was a bad mistake to take on a big guy like Oma this early in his comeback.

Gus's determination was evident despite the loss, and he was ready to prove himself in his next fight. So, he jumped at the tempting offer from British promoter Jack Solomons to meet Freddie Mills in a title match. On May 14, 1946, Gus retained his title by stopping Freddie Mills in 10 rounds before a capacity crowd at Harringay Arena in London. Gus floored Mills three times in the second round and twice again in the 10th before the referee stopped the fight. In between these two rough rounds, Mills did exceptionally well. *Ring* magazine correspondent Johnny Sharpe stated, "This (was) one of the greatest fights in the history of British boxing." (Pic. Lesnevich stops Mills)



After the fight, Jack Solomons came up with another tempting offer, this time for a non-title fight against British heavyweight Bruce Woodcock (27-1-0 (KO 25)). On September 17, 1946, before another packed house, Gus suffered the only actual knockout defeat of his career. Woodcock had a significant weight advantage over Gus, outweighing him by eleven pounds. Woodcock's excellent left jab and right cross kept Gus off-stride throughout the match. He put Gus down momentarily for a no-count in the second. Woodcock ended the fight in the eighth with a short right to the jaw. Gus staggered back and landed on the canvas on all fours. Gus was still on his knees when Referee Moss Deyong finished the count. Gus's manager, Joe Vella, stated that Gus might retire after two more fights. "I guess it just doesn't pay to tangle with heavyweights," said Vella. After the fight, the sports writers predicted Gus would retire.



*(Pic. Lesnevich down for the count)*

### **To the boxing world's surprise, 1947 was Gus's best year**

But to the boxing world's surprise, 1947 was Gus's best year. On February 28, 1947, in defense of his light heavyweight title before an attendance of 18,318 at Madison Square Garden, he knocked out the highly rated Billy Fox, who had come into the fight with 36 straight knockout victories (reported as 43) in the tenth round. The Associated Press reported, "Gus Lesnevich had the customers roaring for him as he's never had them. Except for the third - when Billy Fox set off his only explosion and all but flattened the champ - and the fourth, when Gus was still recovering from the fireworks, Fox didn't take a round. Lesnevich fought a fight from start to finish as though he'd written the book, moving to Billy's left out of reach of the right-hand artillery, digging both hands to the body, snapping the challenger's chin back with jabs and mixing him up with right-hand rockets. From the 6th on, Gus took charge. In the 10th, he put over a right hand that the folks ten rows back must have felt. Although Billy got up at 'eight,' he was helpless, and referee Johnny Byrne called it a night." This victory marked a turning point in Gus's career, proving that he was indeed capable of a successful comeback.



*(Pic. Fox and Lesnevich)*

On the electrifying night of May 23, 1947, Gus stepped into the ring with Melio Bettina, who was being groomed as a potential challenger for Joe Louis. In a breathtaking display of skill and power, Lesnevich knocked Bettina out in a mere 59 seconds of the first round, with Bettina hitting the canvas three times. The referee waved off the count, setting a record for the fastest knockout in a main event at Madison Square Garden. *(Pic. Bettina hits the canvas)*



To complete his year, Lesnevich twice faced his old rival, Tami Mauriello. On July 30, 1947, at Ebbets Field, Brooklyn, he won a unanimous ten-round decision, and on October 31, 1947, at Madison Square Garden, he defeated him by a seventh-round technical knockout.

His comeback in 1947 earned him *Ring Magazine's* designation as "Fighter of the Year." That year, the Boxing Writers' Association of New York also awarded him the Edward J. Neil Memorial Plaque as "Boxer of the Year."

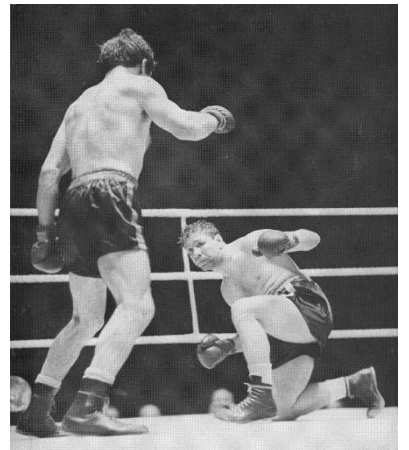
## The Beginning of the End

On March 5, 1948, Gus, recently turned thirty-three, successfully defended his title at Madison Square Garden by knocking out Billy Fox in the first round. Gus stunned Fox early in the round, then knocked him down with a right to the jaw. Although Fox managed to get up at the count of six, Gus dropped him again with a flurry of punches. Despite struggling to his feet once more, Billy ultimately fell forward and was counted out. Before facing Gus, Fox scored seven consecutive knockout victories to earn the title shot. Gus's victory over Fox was his final significant win. He only fought four more times, winning just once. *(Pic Lesnevich and Fox)*



On July 26, 1948, Gus returned to England for another big payday to defend his title against Freddie Mills before a packed White City Stadium of 46,000 in White City, London. Mills, a significant underdog, bravely and aggressively attacked Gus from the opening bell. Gus reportedly had difficulty scaling 175 pounds and lacked his usual zip, while Mills' determination was fully displayed. At the end of fifteen tough rounds, Mills emerged as the new Champion.

In the first round, Mills opened gashes over Gus's brows. They fought evenly in the second. Gus rallied to take the third. Mills went after Gus's cuts in the fourth and pounded him to the head and body. The fight remained evenly matched in the fifth and a slow sixth when the crowd began booing and yelling for action. Gus had advantages during the dull seventh and eighth and staggered Mills to take the ninth round. Mills dropped Gus twice in the tenth round and battered him in the 11th. Gus rallied to take the 13th round. Mills came back and nearly floored Gus in the 14th, opening cuts under both eyes. Gus tried for a knockout in the 15th but couldn't connect as Mill's determination and heart won the round. The fight was close on a round-by-round basis. The United Press scored six rounds for each and three even. However, under British rules, the point system determines the winner. Each round is scored based on the fighters' performance. Mills had a decided edge in British points, meaning he won more rounds according to this scoring system. *(Pic. Mills drops Gus in the 10<sup>th</sup> round)*



1949 signaled the end of the line for Gus. On March 3, he knocked out Eldrige Eatman in the first round at the Mosque Theatre in Newark, New Jersey. However, his attempt to win the vacant American Light Heavyweight title was thwarted when he lost a unanimous 15-round decision to Joey Maxim at Cincinnati Gardens in Cincinnati on May 23, 1949.

Gus's last fight was against Ezzard Charles on August 10, 1949, for Charles's NBA World Heavyweight title. Charles stopped Gus in seven rounds, marking the end of his illustrious career.

After retiring from the ring, Gus worked in public relations for the Arrow Carrier Corporation of Carlstadt, a trucking concern, and as a referee in New York and New Jersey.

On February 28, 1964, Gus's life was tragically cut short by a sudden heart attack in his doctor's office. He was only 49 years old. His wife Inga was at his side, having driven him to the doctor after he complained of stomach and chest pains earlier in the evening. In addition to his widow, he was survived by sons Gus Jr., 21, and Gary, 17, daughter Inga, 20, twins Jillian and Georgina, 15, and his 94-year-old mother Alice.

**Primary Sources: New York Times, New York Daily News, Brooklyn Daily Eagle, LA Times, Newark Star-Ledger, Chicago Tribune, Miami News, Cincinnati Enquirer, San Francisco Chronicle, Daily Telegram, and National Advocate, Sydney, Australia, Ring Magazine, Boxing Illustrated Magazine, and several online premium databases. I sincerely thank Roger Zotti for his insightful comments.**