

Ray Actis: The Excelsior Assassin

By Dan Cuoco

In the 1930s, Ray Actis was one of the most popular figures in the San Francisco boxing scene. He was renowned for his devastating punching power, notably his devastating left hook and right cross, which frequently injured his hands due to its formidable force.

In his career, Actis beat fighters like Swede Berglund, Jimmy Smith, Frank Rowsey, and Carmen Barth, drew with Young Stuhley and Johnny Erjavec, and engaged Billy Conn, Gus Lesnevich, Ron Richards, and Johnny “Bandit” Romero. *The Ring* magazine rated him as high as the fifth world light heavyweight contender from March 1935 to June 1938.

Billy Conn claimed that Actis hit him harder than Joe Louis

Billy Conn claimed that Actis hit him harder than anyone else in his career, even harder than the legendary Joe Louis. On September 14, 1938, at the Civic Auditorium in San Francisco, Conn was knocked down by Actis's trademark left in the third round. However, Conn managed to survive the knockdown and came back to stop Actis in the eighth round. This fight turned out to be the last of Actis's seven-year career.



Actis had to retire from boxing at the young age of 27 due to chronic hand injuries. In an interview with Pete Ehrmann shortly before his passing in February 1997, he revealed, *“I hurt 'em a lot. After every fight, I had to have my gloves cut off because my hands were swollen up like balloons. My knuckles would be pushed back so far that I'd have to work them back where they belonged and then have to lay off fighting for four to five months. I knew that they were going to hold me back. If not for bad hands, I wouldn't have been afraid to punch hard.”*

Actis was nicknamed the Excelsior Assassin, and the Italian Stanley Ketchel

At 162 pounds, Actis was a natural middleweight who consistently faced light heavyweights because smaller opponents avoided him. They called him the “Excelsior Assassin” because he came from San Francisco's Excelsior district, and later, he earned another nickname, “Italian Stanley Ketchel.”

The San Francisco Examiner's Eddie Muller quoted Bay Area boxing figure Joe Herman, *“I've seen 'em all in my time, but Actis, in my book, hit harder than any fighter who climbed into the ring. I'm not kidding when I say I was scared every time I saw him fight. I actually thought he was capable of killing an opponent with one punch.”*

Actis began boxing to support his financially struggling family

He was born (according to the California birth index) as Raymond Louis Actis on August 26, 1911. The 1920 census lists his family as Charles and Matilda (maiden name Talletto) Accis (later corrected to Actis), both born in Italy, with two older brothers, Domenick and Albert. Two articles in Australia, when he fought there in 1938, said he was baptized “Raymond Actis Caporali.”

In 1932, Actis began boxing to support his financially struggling family. He found fighting more lucrative than the \$1.50 he made caddying at Bay Area golf courses.

An early press clip stated, “Actis’s broad shoulders and muscular back development have endowed him with terrific punching power. He puts his body’s full swing into play when throwing a left hook or right cross. Quite often, he purposely misses an opponent with a swinging right to place himself in position to throw a left hook. This stance gives him the appearance of a southpaw. Actis actually brings his full weight of 162 pounds into the drive”

Actis, managed by former lightweight contender Lew Powell, started his professional career in October 1931. Over the next two and a half years, he learned his craft in four—and six-round preliminary fights. He compiled a record of 23-1-3 and scored 19 kayos, nine of which were in the first round.

Actis rose to fame after a 1935 TKO victory against 1932 Olympian Johnny Miler

Actis rose to fame after a January 4, 1935, TKO victory over Johnny Miler, the seventh-ranked light heavyweight contender and 1932 Olympian. Miler was renowned for knocking down Joe Louis seven times in a one-sided decision as an amateur in 1932. At that stage in Miler's career, Maxie Rosenbloom had caused the only mark on his record - a single loss by split decision. Newspaper coverage reported his record as 30-1, 17 kayos. BoxRec lists his record at the time as 13-1-2, six kayos.

Actis spotted Miler nine pounds and suffered a badly injured left hand in the first round at Dreamland Auditorium in San Francisco. However, despite this, he managed to score a sixth-round technical knockout. The fight took an unexpected turn as Miler, who seemed to improve as the fight progressed, started the sixth round with a strong offensive. Actis stood his ground and dropped Miler with a powerful right-hand punch. Although Miler quickly got up, Actis continued to press the attack with a series of hard rights and lefts, leaving Miler stunned and exhausted, with blood coming from his nose. Seeing Miler's condition, referee Eddie Burns intervened and stopped the fight.

On May 13, 1935, Actis knocked out Jack Kearns' protégé, former middleweight contender Jimmy Smith of Philadelphia, in the first round. Smith had a record of 55-9-4 (KO 9/KO by 1) and had previously defeated Ken Overlin, Lou Brouillard, Andy DiVodi, Young Terry, Sylvan Bass, Al Diamond, and Swede Berglund in his most recent fight.

Actis quickly defeated Smith in 2 minutes and 50 seconds. Actis patiently waited for the right moment and then overwhelmed Smith with a variety of punches. A left hook and a right hand sent Smith through the ropes, and he was unable to get up before the count of ten.

On June 7, 1935, Actis lived up to his nickname, the “Italian Stanley Ketchel,” when he knocked out “Swede” Berglund in the third round at Dreamland Arena in San Francisco. Berglund entered the ring with victories over Babe Risko, Solly Krieger, Ben Jeby, Johnny “Bandit” Romero, Eddie Murdock, and Andy DiVodi, but he hit the canvas five times in the third round. In the first two rounds and most of the third round, Berglund had the advantage until he left an opening. Actis then landed a powerful left hook flush on Berglund's chin, dropping him for a nine count. Berglund went down four more times before Referee Joe Gorman stopped the fight, as Berglund was dazed and resting on the middle rope. **(Pic. Swede Berglund)**



On July 27, 1935, Actis's momentum was halted by the game and clever Young Stuhley of Chicago, who held him to a ten-round draw at Dreamland Auditorium in San Francisco. The fans expected Stuhley to be knocked out in an early round, but instead, they saw him climb off the canvas in the third round after a nine-count and put up a great battle. During the third round, one of Actis's left hooks to the body sent Stuhley down near the ropes. Although he was painfully hurt, Stuhley clicheed and made Actis miss his all-out assault by bobbing and weaving away. In the fourth round, Actis tried to finish the job but ran up against a series of left jabs from Stuhley that kept him off balance. For the next three rounds, Actis, when he did land inflicted more damage, while Stuhley delivered a higher number of punches. Stuhley tired in the closing rounds. He did his most effective work in the eighth by crossing several rights to Actis's jaw and, in one exchange, sent Actis up against the ropes with a two-fisted attack to the head. Stronger and still full of fight, Actis crowded Stuhley through the ninth and tenth. He threw more punches. Many missed their mark, but he held the upper hand as Stuhley only fought when Actis tried to wait back and set himself. The fans liked the verdict rendered by Referee Joe Gorman and gave them both a big ovation. The *San Francisco Chronicle* felt Stuhley was fortunate to get the draw, as they favored Actis 6-3-1 in rounds.



Young Stuhley

In their rematch at Dreamland Auditorium in San Francisco on August 30, 1935, Young Stuhley overcame two knockdowns to win a ten-round decision over Actis. He was knocked down for a nine-count in the second and third rounds, but wisely clinched and bobbed and weaved his way out of further damage. Actis was knocked down for a nine-count in the fifth round. Ultimately, Stuhley's superior boxing ability carried him to the decision.

On September 30, 1935, Actis stopped tough Denver light heavyweight Chuck Heffner in eight rounds at Civic Auditorium in San Francisco. Heffner, seven pounds heavier, never took a backward step in the early rounds and stood up to Ray's terrific punching in the first and the second and broke even in the third. But Actis tagged him solidly to the head and body through the fourth and fifth rounds. In clinches, Heffner scored with many blows, although they were light. He crowded Actis in the sixth, winning the round. The seventh proved the beginning of the end when Actis cut Heffner's left eye and then dropped him flat on his back with a right cross. His seconds hauled him to his corner, but he was still in a daze when they sent him out for the eighth. Heffner was an easy mark as Actis connected solidly to the head. At this point Referee Jack Hogan wisely stepped in and stopped the fight.

On December 13, 1935, Actis stopped veteran Frank Rowsey in the third round at Legion Stadium in Hollywood, California. Actis started the first round slowly but picked up speed in the second. Rowsey did not back off and stood toe-to-toe slugging with Actis, which was a bad strategy. Actis dropped Rowsey twice for nine counts in the third round before Referee Mushy Callahan stopped the fight.

Actis had two arch nemeses: brittle hands and skillful boxers

Pete Ehrmann wrote in *Ring* magazine, "*Like most deadly punchers, Actis had two arch-nemeses. One was hands that couldn't stand up to wallops he administered, and the other was fighters who knew better than to try. Actis admitted that skillful boxers gave him hell and that if he couldn't get down underneath them, he couldn't do anything with them.*"

On January 31, 1936, at Legion Stadium in Hollywood, California Actis suffered a one-sided defeat to Swede Berglund in their second meeting. Despite being knocked down in the second round, Berglund dominated the rest of the ten-round bout and emerged as the clear winner. The referee scored the fight 7-2-1. After the fight, Actis revealed a badly bruised hand and explained that he couldn't punch effectively after the third round.

On March 13, 1936, Young Stuhley defeated Actis by a wide ten-round decision in their third match at Dreamland Auditorium in San Francisco. Stuhley outmaneuvered and outfought Actis in eight of the ten rounds, with Actis winning the third and tenth rounds. Stuhley proved far superior to Actis and skillfully avoided any close-range exchanges that might have put him in danger of a knockout punch. Once again, Actis hurt his hands, keeping him out of the action for four months.

Actis returned to the ring on July 17, 1936, at the Dreamland Auditorium in San Francisco to face Carmen Barth, the highly touted 1932 Olympic Gold Medalist from Cleveland. Carmen came into the match with a record of 36-3-2 and victories over Swede Berglund, Ralph Chong, Gus Campbell, Abie Bain, Rosie Rosales, and Joe Cardoza. Actis used his powerful left hook to knock Barth down twice, once in the second round and again in the ninth, ultimately winning a decisive ten-round decision.

In the second round, Actis dropped Barth with a left hook to the chin, and Barth was still on the canvas when the bell saved him at the count of seven. Actis dominated the next three rounds with strong body punches. Barth almost dropped Actis in the sixth round with a short right cross, but Actis recovered. After an evenly matched seventh round, Actis took the eighth round by a significant margin, with Barth fighting strictly on the defensive. In the ninth round, Actis switched his attack from the body to the head and landed a left hook to Barth's chin, dropping him for an eight count. In the tenth round, Barth launched a two-handed attack, trapping Actis in a neutral corner and landing punches to his face. Actis quickly countered with left hooks to the body and looping rights to the head as Barth moved backward around the ring until the final bell.



Carmen Barth

The brutal battle with Gus Lesnevich exacts a heavy toll

On August 21, 1936, Actis lost a ten-round decision to future light heavyweight champion Gus Lesnevich in a savage fight in front of a packed house at Legion Stadium in Hollywood, California. It was a thrilling toe-to-toe slugfest from the opening bell to the final bell, with both fighters bleeding from the ears, eyes, mouth, and chin. Referee Abe Roth didn't have to do anything but wipe blood off his shirt. There wasn't a single clinch or foul punch throughout the hard-fought fight. A knockout punch loomed in every round. Lesnevich dominated with a strong left jab, while Actis, the harder puncher, never got a chance to unleash his power punches as he held back round after round.

In the second round, Lesnevich hit Actis so hard that he split his chin open with a two-inch gash. Actis brushed off that blow with a casual left to Lesnevich's midsection.



Gus Lesnevich

At least once during each round, Actis would land a stiff left but could not land a decent right hand until the eighth round. In the eighth round, LA Daily News sports writer Chuck Weinstock wrote, *"Positively one of the fiercest in the ring history of this city. The lads let go rights simultaneously; they both landed; the results were that Lesnevich was cut wide open over the left eye, and Actis's right ear was smashed wide apart. Think the boys slowed up? Not for an instant. They kept pummeling each other with blood spattering at each other and ringsiders."* Actis came out in the tenth to win by a kayo, and it looked like he would for a while. He cut Lesnevich's right ear open and tore after him like a wildcat to win the round, and his only one, by a big margin. The brutality of the fight caused Actis to be sidelined for an additional six months.

Actis made a comeback to the ring on February 19, 1937, and lost a ten-round decision in his second meeting with Carmen Barth, at Legion Stadium in Hollywood, California. In the second round, Actis seemed to be on the verge of winning by a knockout as he dropped Barth with a short right cross just as the bell rang to end the round. Barth was flat on his back and had to be dragged to his corner, with doubts about whether he would be able to continue. However, Barth managed to come out for the third round, dodging Actis's punches and ultimately dropping Actis to one knee with a right cross in the fourth round. Actis tired significantly as Barth won the last four rounds, scoring with uppercuts in the clinches. In the tenth round, Barth floored Actis again for a seven-count with a quick left and right as they came out of a clinch.

On March 25, 1937, hard-punching San Diego southpaw Johnny "Bandit" Romero (record 103-23-6, 66 KOs) surprised everyone with an upset knockout victory. He unleashed a savage two-fisted attack, knocking out Actis in 2 minutes and 25 seconds of the second round at Legion Stadium in Hollywood, California. Romero floored Actis four times before Referee Abe Roth counted him out as he had slumped flat on his face after taking a right hook. Just before the bell ended round one, Romero caught Actis with a right hook, causing Actis to fall to one knee, but he got up almost immediately. Early in the second round, Romero landed a left uppercut to the jaw, dropping Actis for a nine count. A right cross dropped Actis to one knee for no count, and then Romero finished the bout with a murderous right hook. *(Pic. Johnny "Bandit" Romero)*



Actis emerged victorious in a tune-up fight against Buddy Holzhauser on September 24, 1937, at the Dreamland Arena in San Francisco. He dominated the fight and knocked Holzhauser down in the tenth round, ending it.

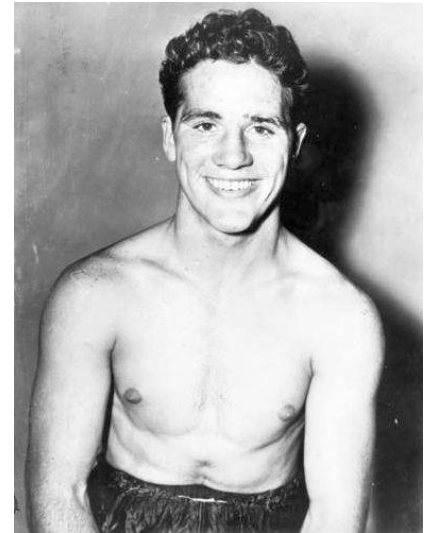
A month later, on October 29, 1937, Actis easily won a ten-round decision over Jack Gibbons, the son of boxing hall-of-famer Mike Gibbons from St. Paul, Minnesota, at the Dreamland Arena in San Francisco. Actis established a significant lead, relentlessly attacking Gibbons's body with both hands, leading Gibbons to clinch frequently. Gibbons only managed to win two rounds.

Ron Richards and Billy Conn

Actis's fragile hands kept him out of the ring for seven months. After they finally healed, he agreed to a match with world light heavyweight contender Ron Richards in Australia.

On May 12, 1938, Ron Richards achieved one of the quickest victories of his seven-year boxing career by knocking out Actis in just 55 seconds of the opening round at the Redfern Sports Arena in NSW Sydney, Australia. Actis attempted to attack and landed a light left lead, to which Richards responded with a left hook to the ear. He followed up with rights and lefts to the head, and before Actis could throw another punch, Richards landed a heavy right on the chin. Actis fell on his back and was counted out by Referee Jack Haines. *"I traveled nearly 12,000 miles to step into an open-air ring on a bleak night, and before I had time to warm up, I caught that terrific punch,"* Actis explained afterward. Referee Haines commented that the knockout punch was the best he had ever seen, saying, *"It traveled only about 12 inches."*

On September 14, 1938, at the Civic Auditorium in San Francisco, Billy Conn recovered from an early knockdown to register an eighth-round technical knockout over Actis. Below is coverage of the fight by San Francisco Examiner sports editor Eddie Muller.



Billy Conn

“Perhaps there’ll be others just as good or better, but last night’s humdinger between Billy Conn and Ray Actis will do until another comes along. In a blistering swat fest that kept the customers in an uproar, Conn registered a technical knockout over Actis after 2 minutes and 31 seconds of the eighth round. Staggering on wobbly pins and blood dripping from a cut over his left eye, Actis was taking an unmerciful lacing when Referee Joe Gorman halted the fight.

By no means was the vicious battle one-sided in the early sessions. Conn came close to being knocked out in the third round. Only his gameness and fighting instinct saved him. Actis nailed Conn with one of his pet socks, a left-hook flush on the chin. It sat Billy down in mid-ring. It looked like it was over. Actis rushed in to finish Conn. Much to his surprise Conn fought him tooth and nail, trading punch for punch until the bell broke up the starring rally.

Carrying his left hand high to protect himself from another left, Conn switched his attack to Actis’s body in the fourth. It was a smart move. He ripped lefts and rights to the midsection and, near the end of the fourth, lashed out with a short right which spilled Actis to one knee. Ray was up, however, without taking a count. Conn, much faster and the better boxer, peppered Actis continually with stiff left jabs throughout the fifth. Once again in the sixth, Actis unloaded his heavy artillery. He smashed Conn with a hard right on the jaw and a terrific left hook, but Billy remained upright. The eighth, and what proved to be the last canto, was a torrid one. Both received cuts, Actis above the eye and Conn on the bridge of the nose.”

In the end, opponents didn't beat him; his hands did

Actis did not amass wealth through fighting - his highest earnings were only \$1,600. He retired after the Conn bout and spent the next 30 years driving a truck to support his family. He and his wife Yolanda, whom he married in 1936, had two daughters, five grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren.

Former heavyweight contender Pat Valentino stated, *“I kept telling him he should have had a title fight but he never did. He had a tough time getting bouts. Nobody wanted to fight him. In the end, opponents - of whatever weight - didn't beat him; his hands did.”*

In his later years, arthritis, failing eyesight, and a blood condition slowed him down. Actis actively helped kids in the San Francisco Little Fisherman program, was inducted into the California Boxing Hall of Fame in 1981, and was a charter member of the Northern California Veteran Boxers Association. *“He was very modest and unassuming, a very gentle man in a very tough sport,”* said association president Jack Campbell.

On February 14, 1997, Ray Actis passed away at the age of 85 after battling a long-term blood condition.

Sources: San Francisco Examiner, San Francisco Chronicle, LA Times, LA Daily News, Oakland Tribune, The Daily Telegram, Sydney, Australia, and Ring magazine. I sincerely thank Bob Yalen and Colleen Aycock for their insightful comments.