

Cox's Corner

Joe Gans Championship Years

Setting the Record Straight

By Monte D. Cox



Official record books list the championship reign of lightweight Joe Gans from 1902-1904 and 1906-1908, despite the fact that according to newspaper accounts of the time he never lost his title in the ring. The issue appears to be muddled, with different sources giving different reasons for this discrepancy.

Record books tend to repeat each other without undertaking any significant research and investigation. But records, no matter how “official,” are amended when subsequent research uncovers the facts of a boxer’s record. I intend to show that Gans’ record in the ring has been distorted over the years; I hope to correct the official accounts of his record and prove that he was lightweight champion of the world without interruption from 1902-1908.

Consider the following two accounts of Gans’ official record:

Explanation Number One:

The Boxing Register, the Official Hall of Fame Record Book, lists under the entries for both Battling Nelson and Gans that “Gans had relinquished the title in 1904 to fight and win the welterweight title.”

On the contrary, according to newspaper reports of the time Gans and Walcott agreed to meet at a “catch weight” so neither title would be at stake, according to the prevailing rules of the period.

The Sept. 30 edition of the San Francisco Chronicle featured a sporting section with a lead story entitled “TWO CHAMPIONS FACE EACH OTHER TONIGHT.” The opening of the lead story that follows states “The acknowledged champion of all lightweights meets the undisputed king of the welterweights tonight within the squared circle at Woodward’s Pavilion. The two monarchs are to do battle on neutral grounds of 141 pounds, ringside, which is neither one nor t’other of the two weights and which involves no title.”

Nat Fleischer, founder of The Ring Magazine, echoes this in his 1938 book Black Dynamite (Vol. 3): “They agreed to make no more than 142 pounds each with no title involved” (166).

The bout between Walcott and Gans took place in San Francisco on Sept. 30, 1904. The Sept. 28, 1904, edition of the San Francisco Chronicle states “there are indications that the men with money to bet favor Gans, figuring the lightweight champion will be able to stay 20 rounds and win on points. Billy Pierce, who is somewhat of an authority on pugilistic matters, says that Walcott’s title is not involved. If Herford had let his man box at 142 pounds, the championship would be involved.” Because the fight was less than 142 pounds, the title was not considered to be at stake. The Oct. 1, 1904, edition of the Chronicle noted, “After the weighing in, Billy Jordan, announced that both were under the figure, 141 pounds.”

A large picture of Gans in the Sept. 29th Chronicle in entitled “Joe Gans, Lightweight Champion.” Both the press and public saw Gans as lightweight champion going into the Walcott match.

Now, if the welterweight title were not at stake by agreement, then why would Gans give up his lightweight title? Simply put, he wouldn’t. Two things should be remembered at this point: first, Joe Gans was clearly still seen by the press as Lightweight Champion at the time of the Walcott fight; and second Walcott’s title was not at stake due to the agreed upon weight limit, so the bout would not be considered for that title. The evidence of newspaper accounts clearly indicates that Gans did not give up his title to fight Walcott.

Explanation Number Two:

In both the Ring Record Book and The Ring: Boxing The 20th Century we find that Gans relinquished the title in November 1904, “because of difficulty making the weight.” No exact date of the forfeiture is given in either source. The reason for this omission is simple – there is no date because there is no record to be found in any newspaper account of his era quoting Gans as saying that he gave up his lightweight title.

In an Illustrated History of Boxing (Fleischer and Andre p 300) we find that “Jimmy Britt claimed that Gans had declined to make weight and thereby forfeited his title.” The problem with Britt's claim is that Gans clearly did make the weight. Press accounts prove that Gans’ weight was a big issue in the days preceding the fight, but the fight nevertheless took place on Oct. 31, 1904, in San Francisco, as a lightweight championship match. The Oct. 28, 1904, San Francisco Chronicle reported that “Last night along the line there were all sorts of discussions upon this weight problem ...it is the consensus of opinion that the colored lad is in for a hard time trimming off the surplus poundage. This being the first fight Gans ever made at 133 pounds, ringside.” The weight of 133 pounds, however, should not be considered as set in stone for the lightweight limit as the Frank Erne-Gans title fight of two years previous the combatants had agreed to a higher weight limit. “The contest was for world lightweight championship and the men agreed to scale at 136 pounds” (Fleischer BD, 153). This fact is backed up by newspaper accounts; the Chronicle May 13, 1902 reported, “The weight for the bout was 136 pounds ringside.” The now accepted weight limit of 135 pounds became standard a few years later, after Willie Ritchie won the title in 1912.

The Oct. 21, 1904, Chronicle reported the two fighters’ managers would meet at Harry Corbett’s to “discuss the question of the referee of the championship battle between Gans and Britt.” The Oct. 23 Chronicle wrote “To the casual visitor to Gans’ camp the lightweight champion looks a trifle drawn.” Gans himself said in the same issue “If Britt wins from me I hope he will abandon all his talk about the color line. If I am beaten the lightweight

championship goes to him.” Clearly both the press and Gans considered himself champion going into the Jimmy Britt fight.

The controversy over Gans’ record seems to result from the way Gans won the fight with Britt – Britt fouled Gans in the fifth round and was disqualified. Britt was warned throughout the fight several times for fouls, including hitting low. The Nov. 1 Chronicle quoted referee Eddie Graney as saying, “He hit Gans three times while he was on his knees and there was only one thing that could possibly be done,” i.e., disqualify Britt.

Gans, then, retained the title by foul. At no time did Gans say he relinquished the title. After the fight, Gans told the Chronicle (Nov. 1, 1904) “I shall not give him a return match for two reasons. His fouls were so open that he is not entitled to another match, but besides that I am convinced I cannot be strong at 133 pounds, ringside.” Though admitting he was weak, he never said he gave up the title. He merely said that he couldn’t be strong at that weight, excusing what was reported to be an admittedly weak performance against Britt. But performing badly does not mean he lost, as we will see later on. But despite his performance, the Nov. 2 Chronicle had Gans’ manager, Al Herford, making this offer: “I will match Gans against Britt at 134 pounds ringside and will guarantee a purse of 15,000 at Baltimore.”

The November newspaper clippings on microfilm reveal that at no time did Gans abdicate the lightweight title or say he will no longer campaign at lightweight. There is no evidence whatsoever that Gans ever relinquished the title. The Nov. 19, 1904 National Police Gazette reported "Joe Gans and Jimmy Britt May be Matched Again for a Purse and The Lightweight Championship." If Gans was no longer going to fight at lightweight then why was he trying to negotiate a second Britt fight for the title?

The idea that Gans gave up the title in November 1904 seems to come from Jimmy Britt, who sought to rewrite the record books and erase his loss by appealing to the sentiments of the white press. Britt took Gans’ statement to mean that he could no longer make 133 pounds, leading Britt to believe he was to be the rightful champion. Britt claimed this because he believed publicly that he was the better man in the fight and “should” have won. This fact is backed up in Nat Fleischer’s Black Dynamite (172) "Britt and his adherents refused to yield. They declared the action of the referee was unwarranted and Britt in the eyes of the Californians was still the champion.”

The British Boxing Board of Control Boxing Yearbook 2002 on page 230 seems to quote Fleischer with the following reference:

“1904. 31 October Joe Gans W Dis 5 Jimmy Britt , San Francisco, USA. For over two years Britt had disputed the title, firstly drawing the 'colour bar' and later claiming that Gans was incapable of making 133 lbs. However, while Gans proved he could make the weight for this one it obviously left him weakened, something that was painfully exploited by Britt. The only thing that saved Gans was Britt's impetuosity. Having downed the coloured man twice in the fourth round, Britt was excused hitting him after the bell because of the din but there was no excuse in the fifth and he was finally disqualified after hitting his rival who was in the act of rising from another knockdown. Britt continued to claim the title on the grounds that the action of the referee was unwarranted and that, in the eyes of most Californians, he was still the champion.”

The first indication of this in the Californian press is the Nov. 19, 1904, edition of the San Francisco Chronicle, where Britt is attempting to negotiate a match with former featherweight champion Young Corbett, whom he bested once before. Britt was quoted as saying to Corbett “You must remember that when we fought before you were the champion...I want you to know that I am the champion now...”

The Britt and Young Corbett fight in November didn’t materialize. Instead, Battling Nelson fought Corbett and knocked him out in the tenth round. Britt and Nelson then agreed to meet in a battle of premier lightweights, it was first called the "lightweight championship of America" in the Dec 19, 1904 Boston Globe. The question now becomes “How did the Britt-Nelson fight on Dec. 20, 1904, in San Francisco, come to be regarded as a contest for the ‘world lightweight championship’ in the official Ring, IBHOF, and British Boxing Board record books?”

The answer is found in the Dec. 20, 1904, edition of the Boston Globe: “Britt is the acknowledged lightweight champion of America. The decision Gans got over him, on a foul, is not considered seriously. The greater number of sporting men are convinced that the fight was a fake, and giving the decision to Gans did not help the colored boxer any. Britt showed that he was Gans’ master and that was enough. The fight tonight, therefore, is for the lightweight

championship.” The San Francisco Chronicle in the Dec. 21, 1904, issue reiterates this claim: “In the opinion of the sporting men at ringside. The victory (of Britt over Nelson) carried with it the lightweight championship of the world. Gans showed in his fight with Britt that it is an impossibility for him to make 133 pounds ringside and remain strong. The lightweight limit is 133 pounds ringside. Before last night’s bout it was generally agreed that Britt and Nelson were the best men in the world at this weight.”

Not only is the above statement unfounded and unjust, other newspaper accounts make it clear that while the press was upset with Gans’ win over Britt in the short term, in the long term they came to grips with Gans’ victory and continued to recognize him as champion. The Jan. 17, 1905 San Francisco Chronicle says of Gans “his claim on the lightweight title has placed him in a position to dictate weight to prospective opponents.” This demonstrates by newspaper accounts that Gans was still considered as lightweight champion at the beginning of 1905 even by the Californian papers. After his second fight with Mike “Twin” Sullivan, Gans said in Jan 20, 1906 Chronicle, “I will make 133 pounds” against Jimmy Britt, “I can do that now” proving he still considered himself lightweight champion, which means he never gave up the title.

The Feb 4, 1905 National Police Gazette, which is considered an authority on fistic matters reported, "Nelson and Gans Will Fight For Title" this is barely over 3 months after the Gans-Britt fight and about 6 weeks after Nelson lost to Britt in December. The Gans-Nelson fight didn’t come off at that time but the Police Gazette continues to report Gans as the champion. It seems Britt is claiming that he is the champion also, although Gans is still the recognized champion, note the following headline, "Jabez White is Here to Fight Jimmy Britt, or **Joe Gans for the Worlds Lightweight Title**" (Mar. 18, 1905 NPG).

Gans made the weight against Britt in their Oct 31, 1904 fight. He won and kept his title. For Britt or anyone else to claim “Gans can no longer make the lightweight limit” is guesswork. Do we strip champions of titles for guessing that they may not be able to make the weight the next time they fight? Clearly not. In fact, Gans made weight for subsequent lightweight championship fights, including Gans-Nelson bouts one through three, a rematch with Jimmy Britt (which incidentally Gans won by knockout) and other post 1906 bouts.

The press and public continued to recognize Joe Gans as lightweight champion. The racist “white lightweight championship” as it is referred to in The Boxing Register on Nelson’s record, between Britt and Nelson, was not taken seriously at the time. Consider the statement of San Francisco fight promoter Jim Coffroth, "Gans greatest misfortune was that he lived in the low purse days of pugilism, and that he was sadly mismanaged. I can cite no better illustration of this than to point out in 1906, **when Gans, then champion of the world**, agreed to take a \$10,000 guarantee of a \$30,000 purse, agreeing that **Battling Nelson, the challenger**, was to get \$20,000" (Ring Magazine May 1943).

The argument that the Britt-Nelson affair was for the world’s lightweight championship is just not true. First, the idea that Gans couldn’t make the weight so he gave up the title comes from Britt, and is clearly false. Secondly, the notion that Britt “should” have won is absurd; what we are discussing is the official record, and the official record clearly shows that Britt was disqualified for hitting Gans while he was down. Consequently, the Britt-Nelson fight should be recorded in record books as nothing more than a “title claimant” bout, a bout where a white fighter claims a title that justly belongs to a black champion. When The Boston Globe referred to Britt as the "lightweight champion of America" as in the Dec. 19 edition, what it really means is the "white lightweight champion." The Boston Globe admitted that Gans was the true champion before the first Gans-Nelson fight. One must realize that Joe Gans was the first African American to hold a world championship. This was over 40 years before Jackie Robinson broke through in major league baseball.

Jimmy Britt won a 20-round decision over Nelson on Dec. 20, 1904. When they fought a rematch on Sept. 9, 1905, Nelson knocked Britt out in the 18th round to win this “title.”

Gans was still considered champion in 1906 before the Nelson fight. The National Police Gazette reported on July 14, 1906 with the following headline, "Joe Gans Title is Safe, champion outpoints Blackburn and proves superiority." All the press accounts demonstrate that Gans was champion going into the Battling Nelson bout at Goldfield.

Please note the following major newspaper accounts verifying it was Joe Gans defending his title against Nelson on Sept 3, 1906 and not as the "official" record books would indicate that it was Nelson defending against Gans.

When Gans and Nelson met for the championship in Goldfield, Nevada both men were claiming to be champion. The Philadelphia Evening Bulletin on the day of the fight said, "The battle for lightweight supremacy between the two claimants for the title has arrived." While the press recognized there was a dispute over the title, they also made it clear whom they thought the champion was. The same paper, the Evening Bulletin, displayed a large picture of Gans that read "Joe Gans who will defend his title to the world's lightweight championship against Battling Nelson, at Goldfield, Nevada, this afternoon." **There are no reports in any paper saying it is Nelson who is defending his title.**

- The Boston Globe on Sept. 2, 1906, recognized who the true champion was: "tomorrow night there will either be a new world's lightweight champion or else the fighter who has held that crown for several years will have shown his right to retain it. That will be the result of the finish battle in which champion Joe Gans of Baltimore, and Battling Nelson of Hedgewich, are to engage."
- The National Police Gazette, Sep 1, 1906, referred to Gans as champion saying, "the Negro champion will have his hands full trying to make it (weight) at an altitude of 5,684 feet" and said of Nelson "If he succeeded in getting to the latter's body with his dangerous hooks it would be a sad farewell to the Negro's title."
- The St. Louis Post Dispatch on Sept 3, 1906, reported "The lightweight champion said he was not a bit apprehensive about Nelson's butting and boring (in) tactics" clearly referring to Gans as the champion.
- The San Francisco Chronicle was silent on the issue, simply referring to the fight as "the lightweight championship of the world," but it quoted the fights referee George Siler in its Sept. 3 edition as saying "I figure that Gans must win early in the fight and if he doesn't score a victory in ten rounds, Bat will become lightweight champion of the world."
- The Chicago Record-Herald, which often had the best boxing coverage among Chicago papers at this time, reported on Sept. 4 "Joe Gans, the Negro fighter from Baltimore, kept his hold on the lightweight title by winning this afternoon after forty-two rounds of the most grueling fighting ever seen."
- The New York Times of Sept. 4 reported "A foul blow in the forty-second round of the fastest and most desperate prizefight that has been contested in years cost "Battling" Nelson his chance for the lightweight championship of the world."
- The Washington Post reported on Sept. 4, 1906 "Joseph Gans, of Baltimore, the well known pugilist, is still lightweight champion of the world."

It is clear from the newspaper record that Gans was considered the champion at the time of the first Gans-Nelson fight. It was the "champion Gans" "who held the crown for several years" and "kept" his title, and "is still lightweight champion" while Nelson lost "his chance" to "become champion." In all instances it is abundantly manifest that it was Gans defending his title against Nelson.

Conclusion:

There are two ways of viewing the record of fighters whose time came before there were "official champions" as recognized by boxing commissions. The first is the linear reign and the second is the newspaper account.

In the first instance, Joe Gans clearly defeated the recognized champion Frank Erne for the linear title. Joe Gans never lost his title in the ring, where ultimately championships must be won or lost. Since there were no official sanctioning bodies in those days the linear title should hold the greatest weight in establishing the proper lineage.

The British Boxing Control Yearbook gives "31.10.04 Joe Gans (USA.) W DIS 5 Jimmy Britt (USA), San Francisco. Following the verdict, Britt, who had been disqualified for twice hitting Gans when he was down, claimed the title, stating that the referee's decision had been unwarranted as the champion was already badly beaten. With Gans not willing to make the weight in a return, Britt, already holder of the 'white' title, went forward to meet Battling Nelson for what was generally considered to be a match worthy of the vacant crown."

The problem with this is the fact that title was never vacant. There is no record of Gans abdicating his throne. He clearly never gave up his title when he fought Walcott; and it was the white fighter Britt who claimed that he should be champion because Gans could no longer make the lightweight limit. Gans never said he gave up his title because he could no longer make the weight, an oft-repeated falsehood. There simply is no record of such a comment. The

Britt-Nelson fight was nothing more than a racist “title claimant” matter and not a true championship bout. It was not taken in a serious manner at the time by most influential newspapers.

The second method of establishing who should be considered as champion in the record books is the newspaper account. Who did the press and public view as the champion? Clearly the press continued to recognize Gans as the champion after the Britt affair. One cannot produce a single reference at the time of the first Nelson fight, that it was Nelson defending the title against Gans. Each and every newspaper account said it was Gans defending his title. In both instances, the linear reign and the newspaper accounts establish that Joe Gans was the recognized champion.

One historian, Gilbert Odd, a Hall of Fame Inductee, has it right listing Gans championship years from 1902-1908 in his encyclopedia (Odd 45). Since Gans never lost his title and was still recognized as champion by the press and public at the time of the first Gans-Nelson fight (this is an undisputable fact), the only just way to view his record is to consider him the lightweight champion of the world from 1902-08, and not from 1902-04 and again from 1906-08.

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