

Joe Gans, The Old Master
Was He The Greatest of Them All?

By: Monte D. Cox



“The greatest fighter of all time was Joe Gans” –Abe Attell in 1949.

“There was never anybody like Gans and there probably never will be.” -Harry Lenny, boxer and trainer.

“Gans is the cleverest fighter, big or little that ever put on the gloves.” – Bob Fitzsimmons

“Joe Gans was the best fighter I ever saw” –Tad Dorgan, sportswriter.

“As a counterer he was second to none”- Billy Duffy, veteran boxing observer in 1926.

“There never was a fighter who could block with such skill and precision as Gans.” –Ben Benjamin, sportswriter.

“The amazing and wonderful and immortal Joe Gans! What a fighter!” -Jim Coffroth, boxing promoter in 1943.

“A marvel of speed and science.” – Sep 4, 1906 SF Chronicle.

Many boxing fans consider Sugar Ray Robinson to be the greatest fighter of all time, but is this really so? There are a number of good candidates for such a claim. Besides Robinson, there is Bob Fitzsimmons, Terry McGovern and George Dixon all named as the greatest fighter of the 19th century by various authors in the National Police Gazette (See for example Feb. 16, 1901 and Dec 24, 1904 NPG). All time greats like Sam Langford, Benny Leonard, Harry Greb, Henry Armstrong and Willie Pep all have their supporters, as do heavyweights like Jack Johnson, Jack Dempsey, Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali. There are also some more recent choices such as Eder Jofre or Roberto Duran. Few of them, however, can match the combined skills, toughness, and athleticism of Joe Gans, the man the world called "The Old Master."

Today, it seems, Joe Gans is the forgotten champion among the greatest fighters of all time. Recent books such as Boxing by Bertram Job (2003) and Champions of the Ring-The Great Fighters by Peter Brooke-Ball (2001) fail to mention Joe Gans at all when discussing the greatest fighters of history. This is a tragedy considering that virtually everyone who saw him believed Joe Gans to be the greatest fighter of all time even decades after his death. With the passing of time the "old timers" are more and more forgotten, due to the fact that those who actually saw them have long since passed as well as the lack of fight films and the poor quality of the film speed of the films as they exist today. Despite this historians recognize that Joe Gans was an all time great. Nat Fleischer, founder of Ring Magazine, rated Gans as the # 1 lightweight of all time in his 1958 ratings. Even some younger generation observers such as Max Kellerman, who sometimes is given to overestimate the ability of modern fighters, rightly noted (espn.com) that, "Up until the emergence of Ray Robinson, whenever the topic of the greatest fighter ever was discussed, the three names that were perhaps most often bandied about were Benny Leonard, Sam Langford and Joe Gans."

Ray Robinson is appreciated not only for his fine skills and accomplishments but because historians and film collectors can enjoy his fights on the many available films of his distinguished career. The lack of good quality films, however, does not mean that Joe Gans was not Robinson's equal or superior.

How good was Joe Gans compared to modern ring legends? Does he possess any of the attributes of men like Joe Louis, Ray Robinson and Muhammad Ali? What tools make a great fighter? What are the assets essential for true greatness? Does Gans deserved to be recognized among the greatest fighters of all time? Was he the greatest of them all? In this article we will attempt to answer these questions.

What kind of a fighter was Joe Gans?

Joe Gans, lightweight champion of the world between the years 1902-1908, was a polished boxer-puncher, a great fighter who combined the iron man toughness of the old timers with the skill and athleticism of a modern boxing stylist. Gans earned his nickname of "The Old Master" because he was fundamentally flawless. He rarely made a mistake in the ring. He never wasted a punch, and his trip-hammer blows traveled only a few inches. He attacked vital points with pinpoint accuracy and threw every punch perfectly, in combinations and with bewildering speed. He was a master at counter punching, of the now lost art of feinting, and at the neglected art of body punching. Defensively he kept his elbows in and his chin down, his hands held high ready to block and counter. His balance and footwork were beyond compare. The old timers said of him, *This was Joe Gans* Aug. 1960 *Boxing Illustrated*, "He was an artist, a master, a brilliant tactician who could outthink and outmaneuver just about anybody. But it is impossible to describe his true genius without having seen him." Gans was truly a complete fighter and possessed all 10 attributes that I have identified as qualifying for greatness in any era.

10 Attributes of Greatness

1. Punching Power, Accuracy and Effectiveness

Power is the great equalizer. The ability to end the fight with a single blow or with a display of rapid fireworks that finishes an opponent cannot be over-valued. Punching effectiveness is how properly a fighter throws his punches, his punching accuracy and clean hitting ability. Joe Gans would receive a perfect score in this category.

The writer of *This was Joe Gans*, said, "Pound for pound he was one of the hardest punchers of all time -as hard a hitter probably, as the great Bob Fitzsimmons, who was Joe's boyhood idol."



There are two films available from collectors that show Gans near his peak, the first Battling Nelson fight at Goldfield and a title defense against Kid Herman. In the Kid Herman film Gans power is evident as he cuts off the ring when the challenger tries to escape the ropes. Gans lands a crushing straight right hand that looks just like a Joe Louis right cross on film. It is a perfectly short, straight punch that lands with similar pound for pound impact as Louis' deadly right.

The Chicago Record Herald Jan 2, 1907, described the knockout of Herman, "The finishing blow was administered in the matchless manner which places Joe Gans in a class by himself. Joe started the final round by feinting to rattle Herman. The Chicagoan walked fearlessly into the black man's trap. Gans forced his opponent into a corner and feinted with his left. Herman swung wildly with his left, which gave Gans the opening he was looking for. Like lightning the champion whipped a crashing left straight as a die onto Herman's jugular. Before Herman could collect himself the champion's powerful right had crossed in a sledgehammer swing to the point of the jaw, and Herman measured his length on the floor of the arena. As Gans delivered that crushing right swing he turned his back and walked away. He didn't have to look to find out what damage the blow had inflicted. He knew instinctively the minute the blow reached home that his championship laurels were safe from the reach of Herman. It was the same telling swing that had won him thousands upon thousands of dollars in the prize ring and the one that never failed when landed with that deadly accuracy."

Gans was a devastating puncher who threw economically sound punches. As Detloff (2000 p. 142) wrote, "Check out Gans knockout total, and you can see that he had the punch to compete with bigger, stronger fighters. He could hit with surprising power for one who made a Hall of Fame career out of studying and perfecting the finer nuances of the game."

The awesome power that Gans possessed was never more evident than in his third fight with left hook artist Dal Hawkins. Gans scored with a smashing right hand to the jaw in the third round that put Hawkins out on the floor. According to the Sep. 22, 1900 National Police Gazette Hawkins "did not recover for several minutes after being carried to his corner."

Gans not only had one punch knockout power, but he also worked the body consistently as demonstrated in his bout with Willie Fitzgerald. The Jan. 13, 1904 San Francisco Chronicle reported, "The lightweight champion shows his superiority from start to finish. He knocked Fitzgerald down in the first, fourth, sixth, and eighth rounds. He kept up a constant hammering of the Brooklyn boys ribs."

Gans was also a great combination puncher. Some modern fight fans are under the impression that men of the post 1900 to pre WW 1 era did not punch in combination. This is simply not true. Combination punching was well in vogue by this time. Consider that Joe Louis was regarded as one of the greatest combination punchers of boxing history. Louis trainer was Jack Blackburn, a contemporary of Gans who faced "The Old Master" three times. It was Blackburn who taught Louis correct straight hitting, how to put his whole body behind his punches and combination punching. Blackburn's knowledge of the game came from his own experience of over 150 professional fights dating to the period in question.

Note the following description of Gans knockout of highly regarded welterweight Mike "Twin" Sullivan. The Jan. 20, 1906 San Francisco Chronicle reported, "He caught Sullivan partly turned away. A dusky right arm swung over with electric quickness. A sodden glove connected with the back of Sullivan's left ear. The Twin spun almost around from the force of the blow, and when he tried to steady himself he found that a straw colored tiger in the person of Joe Gans was upon him. Rights and lefts went with terrible swiftness to his opponents jaw. In went Gans right to the stomach, over circled his left to the jaw. And then Mike "Twin" Sullivan much the bigger and heavier man...fell backward to the canvas." According to the Feb. 3, 1906 National Police Gazette Sullivan had to be lifted up and carried back to his corner after the ten count.

"Rights and lefts" landing with "terrible swiftness" demonstrates combination punching. Further, the knockdown, a right to the body and left hook to the jaw in combination is given in detail. Clearly Gans did work powerful combinations. Evidence that Joe Gans punched in combination is also given in the films. The Gans-Nelson 1 film shows 3, 4 and 5 punch combinations. Many times on film he looks like a lightweight Joe Louis and Ray Robinson with perfectly executed combinations. The Sep. 4, 1906 Chronicle reported that in the sixth round Gans "simply rained blows upon his opponent's head and body" and only Nelson's renowned ability to absorb punishment kept him from being knocked out. The Old Master was a great puncher, vastly experienced, and knew how to put them together to finish an opponent. In this he was much like Joe Louis, taking apart his opponent's then sending them to dreamland with precision hammer blows.

Gans would stalk his opponents, moving in and out at times, but working ever closer, setting his opponents up with jabs and feints making them believe there were openings where none existed. As a properly baited opponent would move in towards him Gans would explode with short, jolting punches that landed solid and clean. The blows would land with double impact as the fighter moved into his deadly and accurate counters. Gans used to say, (Aug. 1960 BI), "the two most important words in my business are timing and distance." Timing and distance were the keys to Gans incredible skill. He understood that the shorter a punch travelled the harder it would be to block or duck. He also knew that shorter punches carried more dynamic impact.

In Kelly Nicholson's upcoming book *Hitters- Two Fisted Heroes of Boxing's Golden Age* Harry Lenny is quoted as saying he has never seen another fighter as good as Joe Gans. Among other credentials, Lenny sparred over 500 rounds with the legendary fighter and worked Joe Louis corner the night he won the heavyweight crown from Jim Braddock.

"There never was anybody like Gans," Lenny said. "There probably never will be. Joe never wasted a punch ... He had the spots picked out, mentally marked in big red circles on his opponent's body; the temple, the point of the chin, the bridge of the nose, the liver, the spleen, the solar plexus. He'd pick out one or two of these points and maneuver his opponent until he left a clear opening. It was a thing of beauty to watch Joe in the ring."

2. Speed

While great speed alone is not enough to make one a great fighter, it is an attribute possessed by many of the greatest including Ray Robinson, Muhammad Ali, and Joe Louis. Superior hand speed means having the ability to land your punches before your opponent, the ability to "beat your opponent to the punch." When it comes to boxing truisms like "getting there first with the most" few, if any, were superior to Joe Gans.

Gans great speed is evident in the available films. Both the Nelson and Herman films show his cat-like reflexes and blazing speed of hand. The newspaper accounts also support the idea that, like Ray Robinson and Ray Leonard after him, his hand speed was far superior to any man of his weight.

John L. Sullivan, St. Louis Post Dispatch, Sep. 2 1906, echoed this fact saying; "Gans is easily the fastest and cleverest man of his weight in the world."

The San Francisco Chronicle, Sep. 28, 1904 wrote about his modern like speed and skills, "Those who have watched Gans go through his work every day are amazed at his wonderful agility, his speed and his clean hitting ability."

During his Goldfield bout with Battling Nelson, the Chronicle reported that Gans was "So fast that two-thirds of the time Nelson did not know where his opponent was, and when he raised his head to look Joe pounced on it with both gloves, rocking it backward and forward and from one side to the other. Gans work was marvelous."

The San Francisco Chronicle, Sept 4, 1906, simply described Gans as "a marvel of speed and science."

3. The ability to fight at a fast pace

It is a modern myth that the fighters of Gans time merely measured up to each other and threw few punches. This may have been true prior to the gloved era but certainly was not true of Gans and his contemporaries. I have seen posts on boxing boards where fans claim that fighters of this era were "all crude" and attempts are made to categorize all of the fighters from this era into one style. This is simply not the case. All 4 basic styles can be seen during this period, there were slick boxers like "dancing master" Philadelphia Jack O'Brien, boxer-punchers like Sam Langford, swarming pressure fighters like Bat Nelson, and raw sluggers like Stanley Ketchel and not just the latter type. Further there were many fighters who threw punches in bunches. Fighters such as Terry McGovern, Joe Thomas, George McFadden and others often threw punches non-stop until their opponents wilted. The Ad Wolgast-Joe Rivers film of 1913 displays boxing at a frantic pace. Both films and the newspaper records reveal that Joe Gans fought at a fast pace and was as workmanlike as any modern fighter.

Note the following description of Gans 20 round fight against welterweight champion Joe Walcott, the Oct 1, 1904 San Francisco Chronicle called it "a grand battle as fast and furious as any ever held in a San Francisco ring". The Chronicle reported "The fight was on at last. There was never a doubt that it was going to be a fight of the fiercest sort. No preliminary fiddling, no sparring for an opening, just clash and at it, with the grudge of years of impetus. Those first few rounds were of the whirlwind order. The blows were shot in so fast and the going was so rapid that to follow it was like trying to segregate separate places from the succession of them in a biograph."

Veterans Nat Fleischer and Charley Rose rated Joe Walcott the # 1 welterweight of all time and yet he was clearly beaten by Joe Gans despite the "draw" verdict. According to eyewitness accounts this fight could be described as a fast paced Ali-Frazier like battle with Gans jab dominating the first rounds before the stout Walcott came on with strong body punches in the early middle rounds. In the 10th Gans was "fast on his feet out-jabbing Walcott and not letting him get set" (Fleischer 1938, 166). The next rounds were repeats with Gans out boxing the tough Walcott. The 13th through 16th saw toe- to- toe action that was evenly fought with both fighters trying for a knockout. The last four rounds saw Gans in complete control of the tempo of the bout as he violently snapped Walcott's head back with jabs and straight right hands "in such a manner as it took the house by storm" (Fleischer 1938, 167). According to the Oct. 1, 1904 Boston Globe "The decision was not well received by many of the spectators who seemed of the opinion that Gans should have been favored." The National Police Gazette, Oct 15, 1904, also reported "Many spectators thought that Gans should have had the decision, and there were many shouts of disapproval." Young Corbett, the former featherweight champion, described the Walcott fight as an eyewitness two years later (Boston Globe Sep. 1, 1906), "Walcott, the way he was a couple of years ago (before his gun accident), could have whipped any of the present crop of heavyweights. Yet out in Frisco, I saw Gans fight Walcott to a standstill. Walcott was given a draw, but it was a fierce decision. Gans mastered him and out punched him all the way."

Although Joe Gans was capable of fighting to the finish approximately 85% of his fights were 15 rounds or less and he scored over 70 knockouts that were 10 rounds or less. If one reads the accounts it becomes crystal clear that Joe Gans was not only capable of fighting at a fast pace, but he always opened up quickly and dominated his opposition in the early rounds. With his remarkable endurance there can be no questioning his ability to fight at a hard, fast 15 rounds as he certainly did 20 such rounds in a quickly paced fight against Walcott.

Gans was a flurry of activity, especially in the early rounds of a fight. A good example is his famous fight against Battling Nelson. The San Francisco Chronicle reported the following in the Sept 4, 1906 edition, "In the first round Gans put rights and lefts, swings and hooks, short arm jolts and uppercuts to Nelson's head and body, and the wonder was that Nelson could keep his feet...under such a rain of blows."

"Just imagine that man cutting loose in the crowd," murmured a Goldfield constable, standing with open mouth and saucer eyes close to the ringside, and his thoughts were those of many others."

4. Defense

Abe Attell criticized modern fighters for not learning how to parry an opponent's jab in an article in the Jan. 1949 Ring Magazine, "The way fighter's train today is all wrong. They wear headgear in the gym. You never see one of them throw off a left jab in training. They just duck their head and know it wont hurt them, but then they get into the ring with the same habit. That is why you see so many cut eyes these days. And you seldom see clever fighters anymore." It is this very ability of parrying an opponents lead jab that Gans, by all accounts was unequaled. Against Kid McPartland, (Fleischer 1938, p 142), "Gans blocked his rivals leads so well it was astounding. Gans presented a beautiful defense" . Against Elbows McFadden, (Fleischer 1938, p 145), "He danced and ducked, countered and jabbed and simply bewildered his opponent. He was cool, calculating, shifty and blocked most of his opponents blows."

Gans had a remarkable ability to stop his opponent's punches and he is considered, by many, as perhaps the best fighter ever at blocking and evading blows. Ben Benjamin wrote, Sept 7, 1907 San Fransisco Chronicle, that he "blocked blows in his incomparable style" and commented, "It is as a blocker that Gans is at his best. There never was a fighter who could block with such skill and precision as Gans. He is a perfect marvel at stopping, using either hand with equal facility. He rarely wastes a blow, his judgment on distance being almost perfect." The BI article *This was Joe Gans* describes his uncanny ability to block punches with the following, "Gans was born with a sixth sense. They tell the story of how one of his opponents, after Joe had "carried" him for six rounds, asked The Old Master, "how do you do it?" And Joe just grinned and said, "I really dunno. I tried to figure it out, but I can't put it into words. I guess I just see what you're thinking and when the thought gets down around the elbow I just reach out and stop it."

Gans defensive skills were well featured in his bout with welterweight title claimant Mike "Twin" Sullivan. The San Francisco Chronicle, Mar 18, 1906 reported, "Gans superior cleverness at blocking saved him from any punishment and his quick counters invariably landed with great force."

The great Jack Blackburn, considered the # 3 all time lightweight by Charley Rose, was "utterly unable to penetrate the champions defense" according to the National Police Gazette July 14, 1906 edition which headlined, "Champion outpoints Blackburn and proves superiority."

In Gans second bout with Jimmy Britt, Harry B. Smith, writer for the SF Chronicle, penned in the Sep. 10, 1907 edition, "Absolutely outclassed and almost wholly lacking in his ability to hit Joe Gans, Jimmy Britt quit at the end of the fifth round of his fight at Recreation Park yesterday afternoon."

"Gans a Wonderful Blocker" was the paragraph header describing the "Old Master" in his fight with Britt. The San Francisco Chronicle described Gans defensive ability with the following commentary:

"With the champion it was always a case of blocking the lefts and waiting for a chance to send in the right that would bring about the close. Time and again he would poke Britt in the face and then would cross a swift blow with the right. The right jolts were punishing Britt and they were tiring him."

"Not more than a half dozen times, at the most, during the 15 minutes of fighting did Britt land clean cut blows."

"Britt fought desperately at times, when he was cornered by the ever advancing Gans, but he swung his blows wildly, and to a boxer as experienced as Gans, blocking them or ducking them was an easy matter."

Smith said of Britt's body punching that "most of them were blocked, and blocked at that, by the elbow." Ben Benjamin wrote, "Britt swings for Gans body...but the colored man blocks with consummate skill." Whether blocking left lead jabs or body punches it is clear that Joe Gans was the supreme master at blocking and avoiding punches. Further testimony of his defensive skill is his ability at countering, veteran boxing observer Billy Duffy stated, *The Ring*, Oct. 1926, that as a counter-puncher "he was second to none."

5. Excellent Footwork

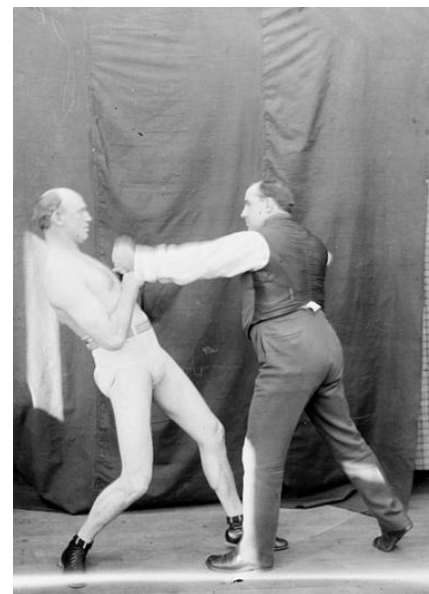
Pernell Whittaker is considered by some recent analysts to have been so quick and elusive that he was nearly unhittable in his prime, his opponents often having trouble finding him. How does Gans compare with a "modern" fighter like Whittaker?



Gans elusive qualities and defense were on display in his fight against "Spike" Sullivan, which was characteristic of many of his battles. The Mar 3, 1900 *National Police Gazette* reported, "Sullivan was willing enough but he did not land a dozen effective blows in the entire contest", demonstrating that Gans was just as difficult to hit with a clean punch as was Whittaker. Joe also did it in such a way that he didn't waste energy but he stood right in front of his opponent making him miss with clever blocking and body shifting.

Gans had great footwork; he was evasive up close in the stance of the old masters, or mobile like a modern boxer depending on circumstances or the length of the bout. Some may be curious about the stance of some of the old-timers (picture left). This stance was what heavyweight champion Jack Johnson called, "the key to real scientific boxing" (*Ring*, April 1941, 16) He noted that the purpose of that

stance is that by simply moving the right rear foot, one can move, shift, and pivot in such away as to avoid a blow and always be in perfect position to counter with the full force of one's body behind the blow. Muhammad Ali was known for his ability to lean away from punches and counter with quick jabs or right hands leads, but he usually did it while moving away from his opponent and was somewhat off balance, which is why he was not known as a terrific hitter, he also usually did it with his hands down which is quite dangerous. The stance of the old timers allowed them to evade and lean away from punches with their hands up and remain in punching position while moving as little as possible (see pic of Bob Fitzsimmons to the right). On film Gans moves aggressively forward like Joe Louis. Jack Blackburn taught Louis this exact footwork. If one studies the films of Joe Louis one can see Louis feet often in this position, although he did not lean away from punches but shuffled



forward conserving his energy. Gans fought in a similar fashion to Joe Louis, using the defensive stance to stay in the pocket blocking punches and countering. The "Old Master" would block, counter, shuffle forward and explode with quick combinations and shocking punches. Gans however was not a plodding fighter like the "Brown Bomber", as he could circle his opponents with mobility, as he deemed necessary.

Today there are those who are skeptical of the stance and footwork skills of the old timers but historian Tracy Callis offers the following, "Consider Muhammad Ali. How many fighters FOUGHT like he did? How many COULD fight like he did? How many were trained to fight EXACTLY like he did? The answer is not many (if any). His combination of physical skills enabled him to move (often with hands down) to avoid an opponent's blows. In particular, his boxing savvy, anticipation, exceptionally quick head movement, capability to lean out of his opponent's reach, etc., enabled him to do it. Others did not possess all those skills. Perhaps, some did - to a degree - but not to the extent that he did. The same thing applies to Gans, Fitz, Corbett, etc. They stood and moved like they did because they could and they were effective at doing it (whatever their technique). They trained at it, perfected it, utilized it, and were well-nigh unbeatable with it."

Gan's footwork was described as "beautiful side-stepping, and legwork" by Nat Fleischer in *Black Dynamite*. Against Barbados Joe Walcott, The Oct 1, 1904 San Francisco Chronicle reported, "Gans beautiful footwork became evident. He was in and away or inside as it suited him best, with will-o-the-wisp elusiveness," clearly describing an elusive and mobile quality to his footwork. Such a description can also be seen in a report from the early rounds of his first fight against Battling Nelson, from the Sep 4, 1906 Chronicle, "Dancing lightly in and away Gans hit Nelson when and where he pleased, and when the Battler swung, his gloves missed their hoped for destination by feet rather than inches."

Gans could dance and out-manuever his opponents and leave them floundering as he did at times against Battling Nelson or he could move in and out as he did against Walcott, or move quickly to cut the ring on a retreating foe as he did against Kid Herman. In the film against Nelson it is apparent that Gans was the absolute master of ring center, try as he might with rushes, body punches, bulling forward and constant pressure Nelson simply could not get Gans back to the ropes. Gans was every bit as unhittable as a prime Whittaker; he was quick on his feet, and better in his classic defense. Joe Louis said of Ray Robinson (Louis p 260), "He could do it all, punch, move, nothing he couldn't do." The same could be said of Joe Gans.

6. Ring Generalship

Joe Gans was a great ring general who controlled the tempo of a bout from ring center. Whether leading with his jab or setting up counter punches he commanded the pace of any boxing match. The Boston Globe, Sep. 2, 1906 described Gans as "one of the most wonderful fighters from a scientific view that the world has ever known. There is not a trick or point that he does not know, and he has a terrific punch with either hand."

Referee James W. Morrison said, Sep. 3, 1906 SF Chronicle, "Gans is careful, cool, exceptionally clever, is an excellent ring general, possessing superb footwork, and has the required punch in both hands."

The Old Master possessed an outstanding lead jab. The Sep. 2, 1906 Boston Globe noted, "Gans has a beautiful left (jab) and can do great execution with it." Against Elbows McFadden, Aug. 19, 1899 NPG, Gans was "punching his man almost to a standstill with left jabs."

Ben Benjamin wrote, Sep 9, 1907 SF Chronicle, "He rarely wastes a blow, his judgment on distance being almost perfect."

Speaking of his fight against Spike Sullivan, the National Police Gazette reported, "Gans out-punched him, showed superior ring generalship, was faster, more skillful, and showed better staying qualities than his antagonist."

7. Endurance

Besides certain tenaciousness, Gans had great stamina, fighting “the derby route” of 20 rounds or more 20 times. He also participated in the longest championship fight with gloves under Marquis of Queensbury rules, 42 rounds, when he beat the granite-chinned Battling Nelson at Goldfield, in 1906. How many modern champions have been on the verge of collapse in 12 or 15 round fights? Think they could go 20 rounds at the same pace? Fighting twice as many rounds? Think they could go 40 rounds still throwing punches? Could they do it under the intense heat of a sweltering desert sun? Or would they collapse from heat exhaustion? Joe Gans had the endurance to go any distance and under any conditions.

Gans was a proven 20 round fighter who could fight to the finish and he had the endurance and stamina to fight 40 plus rounds and maintain his effectiveness, whereas fighters like Ray Robinson, Benny Leonard and Muhammad Ali never fought beyond 15. Gans defeated fighters above his natural weight whereas the only time Robinson moved up beyond his normal weight he collapsed in the heat against Joey Maxim and never again moved beyond the middleweight limit. In his bout with Nelson at Goldfield, Gans fought under just as intolerable conditions beneath a hot Nevada sun and went more than twice as many rounds as Robinson had without collapsing. Furthermore, Gans was severely drained from making the weight under the unfair conditions imposed upon him by Nelson and his manager (more about this later). Notwithstanding Ben Benjamin, SF Chronicle Sep 4, 1906, said of the fight “Never in the history of boxing have lightweights put up such a performance as at Goldfield.” Kid (Joe) Eagan added, “Battling Nelson took an awful beating in one of the greatest fights I have ever seen.” The AP reported that it was a “deliberate foul to prevent a knockout” and “Neslon strikes Gans in groin when defeat seemed certain.”

8. Toughness/Durability

Great champions prove themselves when faced with adversity. Whereas Roy Jones was sent into dreamland by a single devastating punch in two rounds delivered by Antonio Tarver, Joe Gans had the durability to survive a similar devastating shot inflicted by the hard hitting Dal Hawkins and come back to win by knockout the very next round. Fight promoter Jim Coffroth described the scene (Ring, May 1943): “Hawkins then in the heyday of his career, was a keen, crafty wonderful fighter with the deadliest left hook that any lightweight ever carried into a prize ring. Near the end of the second round, Hawkins stepped inside Gans lead and ripped a left to Joe's chin. Down he went- as though dead. No one ever expected him to rise again. Yet some way Gans got up just in time to beat the fatal ten, and then by the most superb ring generalship I have ever witnessed, lived though the rest of the round.” As the bell rang for the third Hawkins rushed in for the kill, but was greeted by a cool, and calm fighting machine that knocked Hawkins out in spectacular fashion with a crushing right hand.

The fact Gans fought distance fights against heavier opponent's that were known as terrific punchers such as Barbados Joe Walcott and Sam Langford prove his ability to take a punch. The real Gans was knocked out only once in around 160 fights in 23 rounds to Elbows McFadden, a loss he avenged several times, and even then the circumstances were far from ideal as we shall see shortly. By the time of his losses in his 2nd and 3rd fights to Bat Nelson he was already suffering from Tuberculosis.

9. Courage/Will

Joe Gans has been widely criticized for quitting against then lightweight champion Frank Erne in their first title fight. Those who make such criticisms fail to understand the nature of his injury. After a vicious head butt, Gans suffered a terrible injury which threatened him with permanent blindness. According to researcher Arne Steinberg Gans eye was actually hanging on his face. The newspaper accounts describe the seriousness of the injury. The Chicago Times-Herald, Mar 24, reported “Baltimore man's eye dislodged from its socket by a head on collision.” The SF Chronicle, Mar 24, 1900, stated, “Gans eye was started from its socket,” this was also reported by the Boston Globe. He had no choice but to quit as one blow to his eye in that exposed position would have caused permanent loss of sight in his right eye. With such a horrendous injury Gans had no choice but to give up the fight. In the rematch two years later Gans exacted revenge winning the title with a devastating first round knockout.

Joe Gans was forced to fight at unnaturally low weights for much of his career. Even though he was champion he often had to succumb to the dictates of his white opponents. Gans had trouble making 133 pounds ringside several times. If he were fighting today he would be a natural 140-pound fighter, though since he would not have to make weight ringside, he could easily make the 135-pound limit. In the first Nelson fight at Goldfield on Sep. 3, 1906 he was forced to make 133 ringside in full gear and weigh in 3 times the day of the fight. These conditions were imposed upon him by Nelson's manager Billy Nolan and were widely condemned as unjust by the press at the time, especially since they considered Gans to be the true champion (See IBRO Journal # 82). This weakening, forced by making the weight, combined with the dehydrating Nevada sun and the grueling 42 round fight may have contributed to Gans contracting Tuberculosis and to his early death in 1910, although some sources indicate he may have acquired the disease as early as 1905.

Gans was certainly suffering from Tuberculosis by 1908. TB was one of the major causes of death during this time period. It is an infection disease that affects the lungs and causes great difficulty in breathing with symptoms such as weakness and fatigue, chilling, chest pain, and sometimes coughing blood. The Greeks called tuberculosis "consumption" because it caused a total destruction of the body. Gans was positively suffering from the ravaging affects of tuberculosis by the time he lost the title in a rematch to Battling Nelson on July 4, 1908. The San Francisco Chronicle July 5, stated "It was clear that it was a different Gans than the one who had fought at Goldfield." The paper described Gans as "weakened and dull in the eyes." Even more revealing was the report that "After the twelfth round Gans was suffering terribly. His skin turned a dull gray and he was shivering as though from ague" (fever). "It seemed as though his vitality had been stolen from him." Weakness, discoloration, shivering, fatigue and fever-like symptoms are obvious signs of tuberculosis disease. Despite this, Fleischer wrote (1938 186) the "first five rounds were Gans by a wide margin." In the second round an uppercut staggered Nelson, in the third Gans drew blood. However he was so weakened by the disease that was killing him that he began to fade. Despite being desperately sick Gans fought on before succumbing as he said "to exhaustion" in the 17th round. Amazingly had it been a 15 round fight he would have made the distance. No one should ever question his courage.

Gans fought two more times. Slowly dying, he lost a rematch to Nelson in 21 rounds. To survive such a length of rounds while severely ill is a testament to his strength, courage and toughness of character. Although his body was filled with death germs he fought a gallant performance dominating the early rounds before fatigue caused by TB set in. In his last fight Gans displayed some of his famous punching power flooring former British champion Jabez White four times (NY Times Mar 13, 1909) en route to a newspaper decision in ten rounds. When he died the following year he only weighed 84 pounds (BI Aug 1960).

10. An Outstanding Record

Gans total record of 123-8-10 18 ND's, 88 knockouts is comparable to the other all time greats. Certainly Willie Pep's prime record of 135-1-1 and Ray Robinson's peak run of 128-1-2 are tops but Gans record is still impressive and deserves further inspection. One must consider that in Gans time it was commonplace for a black fighter to carry or even throw a fight against a white opponent in order to gain future fights. This was simply the politics of the time and should not be held against him. McCallum (230) wrote that "he frequently climbed into the ring handcuffed" forced often by promises to gamblers and opponents managers to carry his opposition. Virtually all of his draws and no decisions were battles that he actually won. Willie Ritchie, lightweight champion from 1912-1914, who knew Gans, said, "Gans had to do as he was told by the white managers. They were crooks. They framed fights, and being a Negro the poor guy had to follow orders, otherwise he'd have starved to death" (Heller, 21). As the first American-born black boxing champion Gans faced significant racial injustice and did what he had to in order to make a living. It's just the way things were in those days for a black fighter.

Gans admitted publicly to two famous fakes in his career, the Terry McGovern fight and the first Jimmy Britt fight (although Gans won the latter when Britt blatantly fouled). In the first case, against McGovern, the Dec 14, 1900 Chicago Record Herald reported that the "bout has suspicious look." The fight's referee George Siler, one of the best and most well known 3rd men of the period, wrote in Dec 14 Chicago Tribune "If Gans was trying last night then I don't know much about the game." The Tribune also reported a "sudden shift in the betting" before the fight. Such uproar occurred because of the obvious dive that Chicago's Mayor Harrison banned boxing in the city well into the next decade. Siler in his book wrote, "Joe Gans shocked the followers of the game, although his disclosures regarding the fake fight with Jimmy Britt in California and Terry McGovern in Chicago, did not surprise the close

students of boxing, as there was much discussion over them. Gans made his confession out of anger because he thought he was being made the scapegoat by men whom he thought, were shouldering all the blame upon him." Gans was simply doing as Gilbert Odd wrote, "boxing to orders."

If one dismisses his last two fights against Nelson where he was clearly suffering from Tuberculosis and his admitted fake against McGovern his record stands at 123-5-10-18 ND (88), although nearly all the draws and No Decisions on his record were fights he actually won. For example notice the newspaper accounts of the following "draws" on his record:

His draw with Danny McBride was described in detail by the Sept. 19, 1896 National Police Gazette, "By terms of the agreement, if both men were on their feet at the end of the twentieth round the contest was to be declared a draw, and so referee Mantz decided it. Notwithstanding the decision Gans clearly had the best of the work all the way through, and on points would have won the verdict without a dissenting voice. He did most of the leading, and landed hard and often on his opponent, in fact, making a chopping block out of his face."

Gans had three official "draws" with George "Elbows" McFadden, two of those were fights he should have won by a wide margin, the last was a 6 round draw. In the first draw, the July 29, 1899 New York Herald reported, "Although Joe Gans appeared to have out-pointed George McFadden after 25 rounds at the Broadway Athletic Club last night, the referee Charley White, declared the bout a draw. Many believed Gans (was) entitled to a favorable decision, and the crowd was not well pleased with the verdict." The NPG agreed saying, "Joe Gans easily defeated M'Fadden but referee said a draw." The Gazette writer stated that "in depriving Gans of a well earned victory he (the referee) displayed deficiency of judgment which cannot be accounted for." According to the newspaper accounts Gans hit McFadden "when and where he pleased" and scored knockdowns in the 9th, 22nd and 24th rounds without going down himself. Yet somehow the referee managed a draw verdict. The second so called draw against McFadden was waged over 10 rounds, the Oct. 20, 1900 NPG wrote, "Gans was the stronger of the two, and administered a good deal of punishment with stinging right and left swings. At hardly any point did McFadden show any superiority over Gans. Bat Masterson's decision was not popular, as Gans had all the best of it." The final draw bout was reported by the Sep. 8, 1900 Philadelphia Evening Bulletin, "Six rounds were fought and at the end the consensus of opinion was a draw."

As a lightweight, Gans often fought against welterweights. Gans drew with the great welterweight champion Joe Walcott, in a fight most thought he won, and he knocked out welterweight Mike "Twin" Sullivan in 2 of 3 fights, drawing the other. He faced welterweights Dave Holly and Sam Langford one day apart! After winning a newspaper decision over Holly in Philly, Gans had to travel up the eastern seaboard to Boston by train for a fight the very next day against Langford who was a natural welterweight at the time. Gans dominated the early rounds before suffering from lag in the later rounds and dropped a decision. Gans started off strongly (Fleischer 1938, 164-165. 1939, 130) opening up the first round with a triple left hook. "As Sam drew back after the third blow, Gans quick as a flash, leaped forward and landed a terrific right to the jaw, and from that point until the fifth round, Langford seemed scared stiff and did his utmost to avoid infighting."

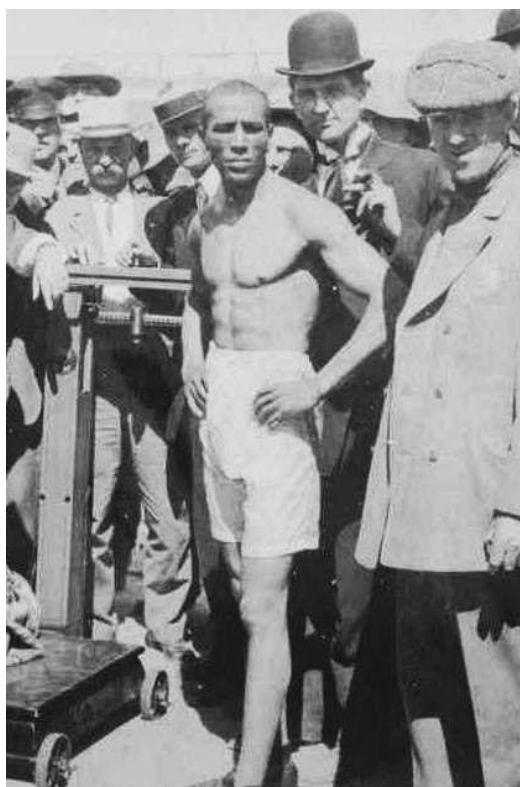
Gans only squarely legitimate losses were a decision to veteran Bobby Dobbs; after going unbeaten his first five years as a pro, this was 6 days after fighting a 15 round draw with Young Griffo; a stoppage loss in 23 rounds to George McFadden where he was literally starving and ate two dozen donuts before the fight (Steinberg)-It should be noted that Gans record against McFadden was 5-1-1 if one counts the newspaper verdicts and dubious draws in his favor-which is similar to Robinson's record against Jake Lamotta; and the loss to the hideous eye injury in the first Frank Erne fight. The decision loss to the naturally bigger Sam Langford was Gans second fight within 24 hours in cities 300 miles apart and cannot be taken seriously. Gans performance record then is 123-4 and if one includes the draws and no decisions that were in his favor his prime record would effectively be about 150-4-3. Gans performance record is comparable to Ray Robinson's record, which by the time he was closing on 150 fights was 141-6-2 as of the second Basilio fight when he won the middleweight title for the 5th time.

Joe Gans defeated one of the deepest array of challengers ever assembled; Bobby Dobbs, Dal Hawkins, Frank Erne, Elbows McFadden, Young Griffo, Kid McPartland, Dave Holly, Jack Blackburn, Rufe Turner, Battling

Nelson and Jimmy Britt. He reigned as world lightweight champion for 6 years (See IBRO Journal # 82), which is about as long as Benny Leonard or Roberto Duran's reign as lightweight king. According to the 1987 Ring Record Book Joe Gans made 14 successful lightweight title defenses, the actual number could be as high as 17. In either case he still holds the record for successful defenses in the division. Joe Gans record in terms of his performance, and the quality of his championship reign are comparable to the elite of the all time greats and his name is worthy of recognition in the category of dominance over his peers.

The Greatest of "ALL TIME"

In a head to head comparison with Ray Robinson, the most popular choice for greatest fighter of all time, Gans was equal in speed, skill and punching prowess and superior in his defense. Defensively Robinson relied primarily on his height, reach and footwork to avoid punches. When cornered he would duck, turn sideways and roll with punches but he was often hit cleanly by his opponents. Robinson was not clever when it came to eluding punches. In his '51 fight against Lamotta he was even hit by Jake's slow jabs. Gans a master at stopping an opponent's leads would never be hit by this kind of a punch. Gans classic defense with glove and elbow blocking was much tighter and allowed him to stay in the pocket using angles to slip punches and his footwork was used to slide and counter. Joe Gans defensive capability was far superior to Robinson, and his speed, power and athleticism is comparable. In terms of sheer talent Gans was every bit as good as Robinson, and technically, dare I say, better overall.



Many analysts when naming the greatest fighter of all time only consider how fighters from other eras would do today. If one is discussing a fighter for ALL TIME, then one should consider how well the candidate would do in ANY era. For example, the more modern "mobile" fighters who rely on footwork for the bulk of their defense would not be successful in long fights as they would become vulnerable as they tired and the rounds dragged on because they waste too much energy. In this respect men like Ray Robinson, Benny Leonard, Willie Pep, Muhammad Ali, Pernell Whittaker et al, could not hope to compete in Gans era. Joe Gans skills, however, would easily transfer to the modern era. Gans was a polished professional boxer, a defensive master as well as a devastating puncher. He was the complete package on offense and defense.

Joe Gans was also a greatly conditioned fighter with the endurance and durability to fight to the finish. In the Herman film he looks completely ripped with a washboard flat stomach complete with "six-pack" abs. His arms seem huge, with big, powerful and elongated muscles. Yet he was not prone to arm weariness in long fights. His strength and punching power are quite imposing. Gans was a natural athlete, finely conditioned with speed and power. His ability to fight at a fast pace combined with the ability to maintain his effectiveness in a long bout is unequalled by modern fighters.

Was Joe Gans the greatest fighter of all time? He possessed every asset to be considered the greatest. He was the best in a combination of old time toughness and modern athleticism. His superb skills, especially defensively are unmatched in a modern ring. Joe Gans was the transcendent master boxer, a greatly experienced ring general, one who had tremendous punching power with his perfectly thrown Joe Louis like punches. Gans was quick on his feet, and a master at blocking and counter-punching to vital points. Joe was an extremely intelligent fighter from a scientific point of view who could feint his opponent's out of position, but could not be feinted. If one combines the masterful absolute boxing skills of an experienced ring stylist with the great speed of a marvelous athlete, the tremendous power of a natural puncher, along with proven toughness and endurance one has a nearly unbeatable fighter. That describes Joe Gans. The greatest of them all!

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