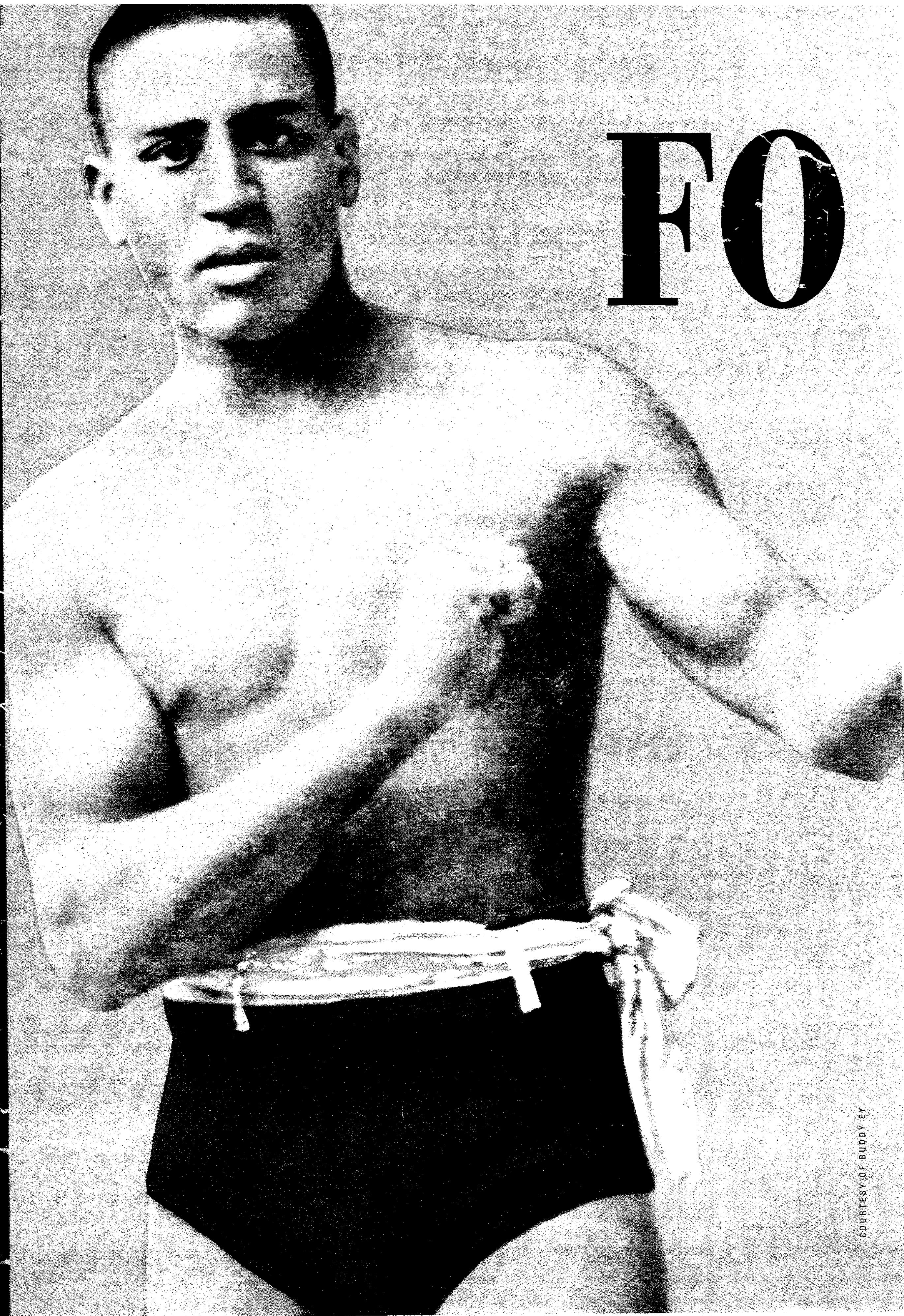
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COURTESY OF BUDDY EY

The RGOTTEN

BOXING CHAMPION JOE GANS WAS ONE OF THE MOST CELEBRATED ATHLETES OF HIS TIME

SO WHY DO SO FEW PEOPLE REMEMBER HIS NAME?

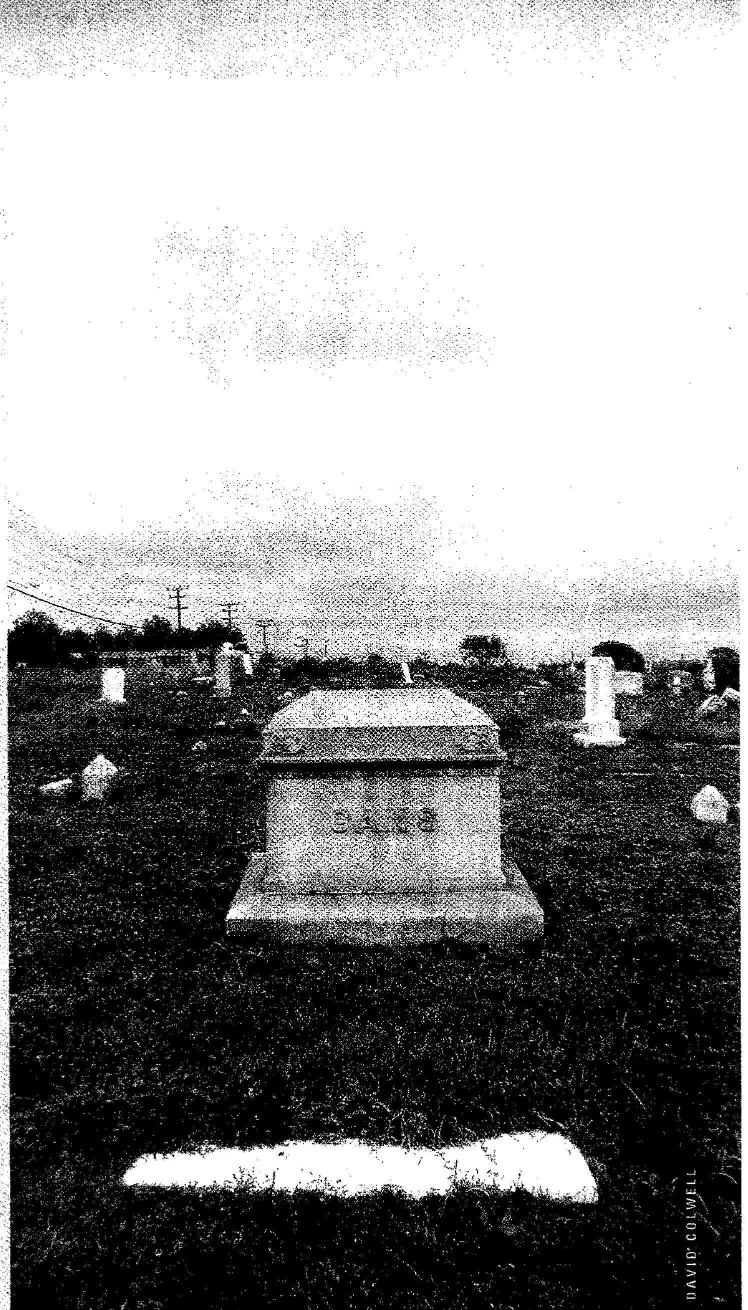
BY ELIZABETH A. EVITTS

THE GRAVE SITS JUST INSIDE THE ENTRANCE TO MT. AUBURN CEMETERY

IT IS MARKED BY A MODEST WHITE MARBLE TOMBSTONE AND ETCHED SIMPLY WITH THE DEAD MAN'S LAST NAME

MOST DAYS IT GOES UNNOTICED JUST ANOTHER MARKER IN THIS VAST URBAN CHURCHYARD

WHERE UNKEMPT GRASS AND FALLEN LEAVES OFTEN OBSCURE THE WEATHERED STONES.



DAVID COLWELL

Every once in a while, an unlikely pilgrimage occurs. Lightweight Hall of Famer Benny Leonard once laid a wreath of fresh flowers against the tombstone. Heavyweight Mike Tyson also paid his respects. They came to pay homage to the man who helped pioneer the art and business of modern boxing. They came to see the grave of Joe Gans.

Dubbed the Old Master, Baltimore's Joe Gans rose from oyster shucker to lightweight world champion, and in 1902, became the first native-born African American to win a world title.

Celebrated sports writer Grantland Rice spoke for many boxing enthusiasts when he later wrote that "the greatest fighter I ever saw . . . was Joe Gans of Baltimore."

Gans earned $300,000 during his meteoric career, a staggering sum for a black man of that era. He invested his winnings wisely and opened a popular hotel and jazz bar in Baltimore. The city became synonymous with his success. In 1908, the *Baltimore Sun* wrote, "go to some city far away from here and casually mention where you are from. 'Baltimore? Baltimore?' they will say in a ruminative way. 'That's where Joe Gans lives, isn't it?'"

But ask someone in Baltimore today if they know the name Joe Gans, and the most common response is, "Who?" His untimely death from tuberculosis in 1910 sparked national mourning, but a mere 50 years later his famed hotel in East Baltimore—and almost all of the precious memorabilia contained within—was demolished. Except for diehard boxing buffs, the name of a black fighter in a lighter weight class faded away with the memories of those who saw him in action.

JOE GANS WAS BORN IN BALTIMORE ON NOVEMBER 25, 1874. His father was said to be a man named Joseph Butts, but at the age of four he was adopted by Maria Gant and given her last

name. At the start of his boxing career, an announcer called him "Gans" and the misnomer stuck.

Accounts vary on how Gans was first discovered by a white restaurateur named Al Herford. Most say it happened when Gans, age 11, was spotted in the street near the Broadway Market beating a much older boy senseless. Herford knew he'd stumbled onto something exceptional—a humble looking kid with natural fighting instincts and a surprisingly powerful punch in both hands.

Herford ran a boxing gym in the 1700 block of Fleet Street and offered to take Gans under his wing and pay for his boxing instruction. Gans was reportedly touched and surprised by his interest, but the brash Herford is rumored to have retorted, "That's my funeral, not yours. I'm satisfied to take the chance."

Gans was first thrown into the ring during a so-called "battle royal" at the Monumental Theater on Fallsway and Baltimore streets. Brutal battles royal were common entertainment in late 19th-century America. These bare-knuckled brawls pitted several black fighters against each other in a veritable free-for-all. Rowdy crowds of mostly white spectators howled and drank and tossed coins at the mat for the winner. The victor was the last man standing. For Gans, who weighed about 135 pounds most of his life, it was not unlike being thrown to the lions. The teenage boy faced men twice his size. He toppled them all.

Gans got his break in 1891, and at age 17, began his professional career. Professional boxing at the time was almost as brutal a sport as the unsanctioned battles royal. Boxing was still new to the United States. The Queensberry Rules—which called for gloved fists and a minimum of fouling—had only recently been adopted to help regulate the sport. But vicious attacks were still the norm. Biting and groin-punching were commonplace and were often ignored by the referee. Rounds were limited to three minutes, but contests could go 30, 40, sometimes 50 rounds, lasting a bloody 100 minutes or more before one fighter finally crumbled to the mat. Fights were sometimes called by a boxer's corner for fear their man might die.

David Terry, Director of Collections and Exhibitions for the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture, researched Gans for inclusion in its permanent exhibition. "At the time in which he was beginning his career, boxing was largely driven by gambling and the types of people participating—rough, hardscrabble men, the warrior types," says Terry.

Against this bitter backdrop, Gans quickly made a name for himself as an adaptable and smart fighter who moved with grace and poise. Hank Kaplan, one of the foremost contemporary boxing authorities and a World Boxing Hall of Fame inductee, says his style helped make Gans "an immortal" among lightweights.

"He was a very skilled artisan of the ring," Kaplan said recently from his home in Miami, Florida, where he maintains the world's largest private boxing archive. "He was a master left-hand artist. The left jab, the left hook . . . those are punches which were

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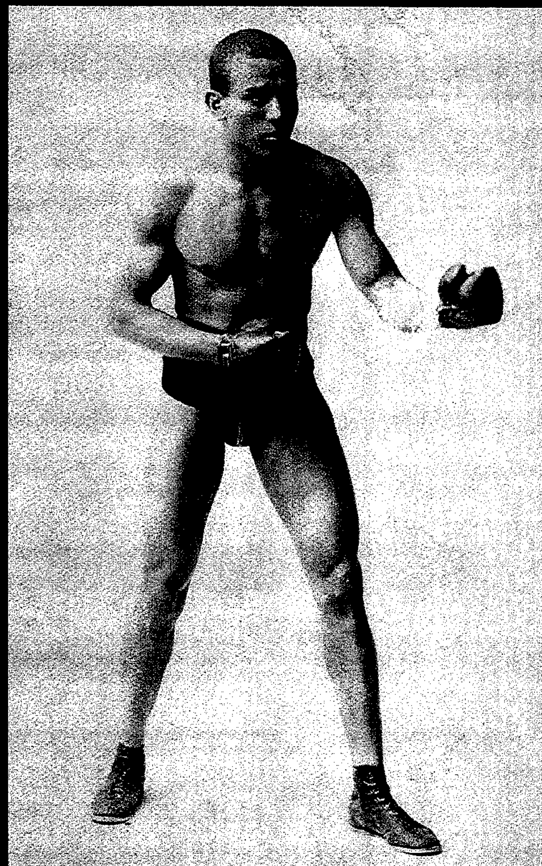
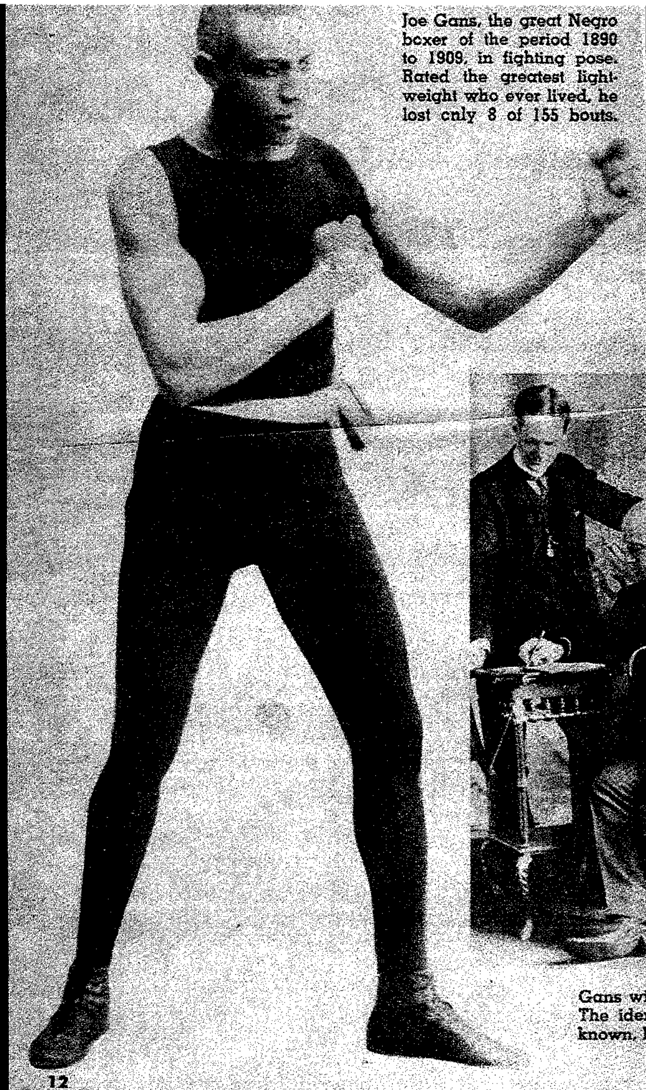


THE RING MAGAZINE

DAPPER JOE: In the ring, Joe Gans used an economy of movement that was as elegant as it was brutally effective. Outside the ring, he was something of a dandy, favoring expensive suits and cars.



developed by fighters of his time. He was a pioneer and that's one of the reasons that he is so great."

Like any pioneer, Gans challenged the norms, in this case, the role of a black man in a predominantly white sport. But once he traded up from amateur fights against black opponents and started fighting—and beating—white opponents professionally, Gans's world turned upside down.

BEYOND THE ROPES, RACE AND CROOKED WAGERING WERE dual adversaries to Gans's career. The black boxer was unstoppable in his early bouts, in spite of the grueling schedule Herford booked for him. Gans won his first 19 professional matches and ten were by knockout. His record, and his ability to down white opponents, spurred spectators to start their own fisticuffs.

Maryland historian Robert J. Brugger notes that white Baltimoreans simultaneously embraced and abhorred the boxer. "They were proud of Joe Gans, the native son who won the lightweight boxing title in 1902," Brugger wrote in *Maryland, A Middle Temperament*, but "at home the beatings he administered white opponents caused racial free-for-alls in Baltimore streets."

GANS WAS SO GOOD HE COULD PICK THE ROUND HE WOULD FELL HIS WHITE OPPONENT AND SIGNAL HIS FAMILY AND FRIENDS SO THEY COULD QUICKLY DUCK OUT BEFORE THE IMPENDING RIOT

legend has it that Gans was so good, he could pick the round he would fell his white opponent and surreptitiously signal his family and friends in the segregated gallery so they could quickly duck out before the impending riot.

After one particularly bruising victory over a white man, Baltimore Mayor Thomas G. Hayes heeded the outcries of the white community and passed a law saying all boxing matches had to be organized under an official boxing club. The law was meant to discourage interracial boxing matches in the city, but it had no real teeth. Herford, never one to let the law get in the way of making a buck, quickly formed the Eureka Athletic and Boxing Club and staged fights at the Germania Maennechor Hall on

FIGHTING TRIM: A lightweight his entire career, Gans struggled at times to maintain his slender physique. Some say that his constant weight fluctuations contributed to his early death.

THIS PAGE: THE *AFRO-AMERICAN NEWSPAPERS* ARCHIVES AND RESEARCH CENTER

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Lombard Street. Spectators were charged $1.00 at the door to "join" the club and Herford would announce the fight with tongue in cheek comments like, "Welcome, brother members."

Herford made a killing promoting and betting on his prizefighter, both at home and nationally, but he soon found it difficult to negotiate matches where white boxers would agree to face Gans. Herford pressured Gans to throw fights.

On December 13, 1900, Gans dueled bantamweight "Terrible Terry" McGovern in Chicago's Tattersall's Hall. The fight had been dubbed a fake weeks before the boxers even entered the ring. It was learned that Herford had made a hefty wager *against* Gans and, a few seconds into the contest, it was obvious that something was awry. Gans came out swinging with reckless fervor. The boxer who never missed flailed erratically at McGovern and the *Baltimore Sun* later reported that Gans did not deliver one effective blow. In round two, Gans took a painfully obvious dive. Public outcry over corruption resulted in the sport being banned in Chicago for years thereafter. Photographs from that McGovern pairing remained conspicuously absent from Gans's personal collection of memorabilia.

On May 12, 1902, Gans made history when he squared off with boxer Frank Erne for the lightweight title. He put Erne on the mat in a mere 100 seconds and became the first African American to win a world title. Gans would defend that title for six years. He would also eventually walk away from Herford and manage his own career.

THE RISING POPULARITY OF BOXING IN THE EARLY 1900S ALSO gave rise to the boxing promoter. CONTINUED ON PAGE 194

THE GREAT BLACK HOPE: Gans's fight against the Danish Battling Nelson, *above*, was dubbed the "Fight of the Century" and lasted a grueling 42 rounds; *below*, On May 12, 1902, Gans beat Frank Erne to become the first native-born African American to win a world title. He would successfully defend that title for six years.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 147 While Herford created a scandal, a man named Tex Rickard created a sensation. Rickard ushered in the era of million-dollar gates, large crowds, and highly publicized matches. He developed Madison Square Garden as the center of the boxing universe and organized many of the most famous match-ups of all time. The first was a title fight between Joe Gans and Oscar "Battling" Nelson in Goldfield, Nevada in 1906.

Goldfield was a prospecting town where adventurous fortune hunters mined veins loaded with the dark, porous gold ore. Tex Rickard followed his nose for money to the Nevada city. A gold rush town was founded in part on rumors, on men swapping stories and word flowing out to the rest of the world about a place loaded with riches and opportunity. Rickard understood this and he tapped into that perception to stage an unprecedented title fight that would put Goldfield firmly on the map—and help solidify his own local investments.

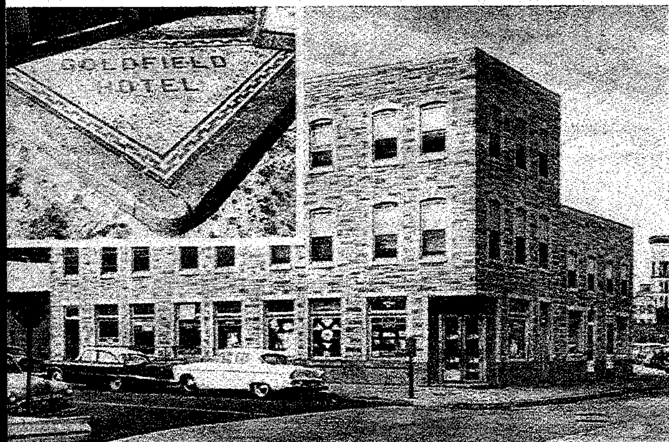
Rickard offered $30,000 in cash for a match between Joe Gans and the great Battling Nelson, a Danish boxer known for his brute force. The Dane had a reputation as a skilled, but vicious, fighter with an iron will and an unusually thick skull.

Rickard's purse was double the largest ever offered for a lightweight title fight, and the sum immediately made news in national papers. Always the showman, Rickard went to the local bank in Goldfield and pulled out the money in newly minted gold pieces, which he then stacked for everyone to see.

Nelson openly admitted his disdain for black boxers and made several outrageous demands for the Goldfield fight. First, he would take the lion's share of the purse. Second, Gans had to weigh in at 133 pounds *fully clothed* or there would be no fight.

Gans, who was now managing his own career, needed the money and accepted the terms. He struggled to get to fighting weight, and some wonder if these constant weight fluctuations contributed to his untimely death four years later.

Rickard built an outdoor ring and billed the Goldfield fight as the "Fight of the Century." Nelson and Gans met under the blazing Nevada sun on Labor Day, 1906. A large and rowdy crowd paid to watch. Newspapers from around the country had dispatched reporters, and a filmmaker documented the fight.



The footage shows Nelson as the clear aggressor while Gans uses his signature dance moves to elude the Dane. Frustrated, Nelson resorted to aggressive and blatant fouls—none of which were called by the ref. Still, images show a gentlemanly Gans helping Nelson out of the ropes or off the mat. In the 42nd round, Nelson finally fouled Gans so egregiously that the ref could no longer ignore it. He called the foul and Gans was named the victor. After claiming his $11,000 cut of the purse, Gans reportedly wired Maria Gant in Baltimore to say, "Your boy is bringing home the bacon with lots of gravy on it."

A Goldfield prospector named Anne Ellis wrote in her memoirs about the "stirring times" caused by the aftermath of the Gans-Nelson fight. "People were wild over it and made a hero of Joe Gans."

THE FIGHT HAD BEEN DUBBED A FAKE WEEKS BEFORE THE MEN EVEN ENTERED THE RING. THE BOXER WHO NEVER MISSED FLAILED ERRATICALLY.

GANS WAS MOST CERTAINLY A HERO WHEN HE RETURNED HOME to Baltimore. Within a year, he opened a hotel in East Baltimore with his winnings and, as a tribute to the town that brought him his greatest glory, he called it the Goldfield. The three-story brick building had 22 rooms with a bar on the first floor that was decorated with velvet and damask curtains, mahogany, and brass. Images of Gans's fights (except the one against McGovern) lined the interior walls.

Just as Gans was ahead of his time in the ring, the Goldfield was ahead of its time in Baltimore. A young boy played piano in the hotel lobby and his ragtime stylings caught the ear of blacks and whites alike. That young pianist was Eubie Blake and it was here that the great jazzman got his first big break. Blake would later recall his years at the Goldfield as ones of wonder. The Goldfield was dubbed a "Black and Tan Club," he said, because whites wanted to hear the "bad music" pulsing out of Blake's piano. They would come from miles away to do new dances, such as the cakewalk and to drink cocktails at the majestic bar.

Gans was as dapper as his digs. He wore fine suits and bought a car. In 1908 *The Sun* featured an article on the Goldfield under the lengthy headline: "How the Most Celebrated Human Being in Baltimore Whiles Away His Idle Hours, Surrounded by Wines and Liquors, Glittering Mirrors, Precious Stones, and African Sports."

The article went on to say that Gans's new automobile had a "penchant for running into lampposts and trying to climb telegraph poles" when throngs of fans would chase him down the street.

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SPOILS OF VICTORY: Gans's Goldfield Hotel, *left*, marked the debut of a talented young jazz pianist named Eubie Blake; *right*, Ever the showman, Gans once donned this regal-looking robe before entering the ring.

IT IS SAID THAT GANS NEVER FOUGHT AT MORE THAN 137 pounds. His vigilance to remain a lightweight coupled with a busy fight schedule made him vulnerable to the prevalent tuberculosis strain. He fought the disease during the last years of his life and his later fights show him to be markedly stark and skeletal.

Yet even as he was struggling against tuberculosis, Gans still fought with the smarts of the Old Master. In 1908, on April Fool's Day—appropriately enough—Gans got his opponent to knock himself out with his own glove.

Gans was fighting an English boxer named Spike Robson. By the third round, the Old Master appeared to be trapped in a corner and highly fatigued when out of nowhere his fist "struck out like a python" and landed on Robson's gloved right hand, whipping it back with such force it subsequently knocked Robson out. "I played his own fist like a carom shot in pool," Gans later said in the locker room. "But I had to wait a long time to get his fist in exactly the right spot to make it work."

In 1910, tuberculosis finally got the better of him. Gans tried to beat the disease in the dry Arizona climate, but when it became evident he would die, he rushed home, a doctor in tow, to wait out his final moments in his mother's house on Argyle Avenue. Maria Gant watched over her son for five days before he died on the morning of August 10 at the age of 35. Sports fans around the country mourned his death. Hundreds attended his funeral. H.L. Mencken lobbied—unsuccessfully—for a city monument to the fighter.

So where does Gans belong in the pantheon of Baltimore's—and America's—sports legends? When he became the first African American to be inducted into the State of Maryland Athletic Hall of Fame in 1973, columnist John Steadman of the *News-American* may have put it best: "Joe Gans was to boxing what Unitas and Brooks were to football and baseball."

Nearly a century has passed since Joe Gans was laid to rest in Mt. Auburn Cemetery. The modest monument there does little to represent the monumental life that Joe Gans led. It's hard to say exactly why Gans's name recognition has faded. Jack Johnson, the African-American boxer who followed on Gans's heels, has achieved a greater fame—most likely because he fought in the more popular heavyweight division. Johnson also benefited from coming of age during the heyday of the sport. By the time Tex Rickard got his hands on Johnson in 1910, the promoter knew exactly how to exploit and market a talented black boxer.

Today, the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture on President Street will provide Gans with a fitting place in our city's history. The museum, which is finalizing construction just blocks from where the Goldfield Hotel once stood, will include a tribute to the Old Master in its permanent gallery. Joe Gans, who never should have been forgotten, will now be remembered as one of Baltimore's great sports icons. ◼

Contributing writer Elizabeth A. Evitts wrote about a Canton renovation for our Fall Home & Garden feature.

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