



The Longest Fight: In the Ring with Joe Gans, Boxing's First African American Champion

William Gildea

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Many people came to Goldfield, Nevada, America's last gold-rush town, to seek their fortune. However, on a searing summer day in September 1906, they came not to strike it rich but to watch what would become the longest boxing match of the twentieth century—between Joe Gans, the first African American boxing champion, and "Battling" Nelson, a vicious and dirty brawler. It was a match billed as the battle of the races.

In *The Longest Fight*, the longtime *Washington Post* sports correspondent William Gildea tells the story of this epic match, which would stretch to forty-two rounds and last two hours and forty-eight minutes. A new rail line brought spectators from around the country, dozens of reporters came to file blow-by-blow accounts, and an entrepreneurial crew's film of the fight, shown in theaters shortly afterward, endures to this day.

The Longest Fight also recounts something much greater—the longer battle that Gans fought against prejudice as the premier black athlete of his time. It is a portrait of life in black America at the turn of the twentieth century, of what it was like to be the first black athlete to successfully cross the nation's gaping racial divide. Gans was smart, witty, trim, and handsome—with one-punch knockout power and groundbreaking defensive skills—and his courage despite discrimination prefigured the strife faced by many of America's finest athletes, including Jesse Owens, Jackie Robinson, and Muhammad Ali.

Inside the ring and out, Gans took the first steps for the African American athletes who would follow, and yet his role in history was largely forgotten until now. *The Longest Fight* is a reminder of the damage caused by the bigotry that long outlived Gans, and the strength, courage, and will of those who fought to rise above.

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