



TRIS DIXON

A Champion's
Incredible
Search for
His Identity

WARRIOR

MATTHEW SAAD MUHAMMAD

Foreword by
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CHAPTER 1

NO GOING BACK

NOW IN the orphanage, routine became the young boy's friend and, as the days turned into weeks, he learned to adapt.

The hope that someone would come to collect him gave way to the resignation that no one ever would.

No one in Philadelphia had even reported him missing.

He had come under the care of the Catholic Social Services at 222 North 17th Street and was being looked after by nuns in the orphanage.

When they asked the boy what he was called, he could scarcely say, 'Maaa, Maaa, Maaa,' so one of the first things they had to do was give him a name.

Partly because Matthew was the name of one of the nun's favourite saints, legend has it, and partly because Matthew is what the nuns thought the boy was attempting to say, they chose to call him Matthew.

And because he had been found on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, they decided his surname would be Franklin.

Matthew later recalled seeing 'a whole room of kids' when he first arrived. The lessons started with simple things, like using manners and being courteous to each other.

'None of us knew where our parents were,' he said. 'They trained us to be good kids.'

He slowly added to his vocabulary and built up some of his fragmented confidence, but that was well-hidden by a stammer that

he may have had before but that certainly had not been aided by his traumatic upheaval.

Sometimes he'd allow himself to think of home. He wondered if his parents had been embarrassed of him because he couldn't talk properly or if they had found him too difficult to deal with because he struggled to communicate.

Whatever he thought, it always came back to him. He thought it was all his fault. He tried to understand, saying he thought 'they struggled' because he had been so slow to pick up talking.

But he no longer felt it had been just a terrible accident. He realised that he'd been ditched, cast out never to return.

Now, he was part of a new community. He was in a dormitory of 15 boys. He had to go to mass, to church, to lessons. Everything was based around him becoming a good child. And he was.

New kids would arrive and old ones would leave. Some seemed to have been in the orphanage forever. He made friends, only for them to be taken away.

He did as he was told. He wasn't any trouble. His social skills improved. He was not a quick learner, but he was learning.

The idea of the orphanage was never to have children for the entirety of their childhoods. The idea was to raise the children until they could be added to households as foster children. After almost two years, the nuns thought it was time Matthew lived with a family.

They matched him with one in South Philadelphia.

John 'Pops' and Bertha Santos were an older couple, Portuguese immigrants who had adopted several children.

They lived in a small terraced house at 1314 Catherine Street. Neighbours wondered how so many people could live together in such a small house, but they made it work.

One of Matthew's earliest memories was going to City Hall with John and Bertha as they went through the required paperwork for his adoption.

The nuns had used their best guess and came up with 16 June 1954 as his birth date.

And life with the Santos family was good.

'I probably couldn't love this family more had I been born into it,' Matthew said.

He had brothers of all ages. John and Bertha had four of their own children and six foster kids. They were not South Philadelphia's wealthiest family, but they found a way.

'They always made a meal,' said Matthew. 'At times, it was hard. Some days we didn't eat lots but then when we did, we had so much. We were always taken care of and they would always freeze the food, so there was always a meal. We didn't live in the ghetto, but it was an area I guess you'd call lower class.'

The Santos family were Christians, so they celebrated Christmas. Matthew went to Bible school and his overwhelming recollection was that 'it was a nice, comfortable atmosphere with them.'

The family would always celebrate Matthew's birthday, and through those formative years he paid little mind to the trauma of his past. He would not think about his family.

'I got into the mind that they gave up on me so they don't care about me,' Matthew explained. 'I couldn't feel bad for them.'

Besides, Matthew grew in confidence. Although his speech still faltered at times, he formed close bonds with several of the other boys, including Joe Johnson.

Matthew tried sports in school, too. 'I played football, I loved the roughness, the contact and I think the roughness and toughness helped prepare me for getting hit.'

When Matthew turned 10 or 11 years old, though, his routine was regularly interrupted.

John Santos had told Matthew the fastest way to walk to school, not knowing it would take Matthew through tough neighbourhoods and active gang grounds.

Street kids, focusing on Matthew's inability to talk the way they talked, picked on him, and he was subjected to beating after beating.

'Where you from, kid?' the biggest of the crew would yell.

Matthew would look at the ground and try to walk on but his route would be blocked.

‘Where you from?’ he was asked again, this time with a shove to his chest.

‘I’m from No Street,’ Matthew shakily replied, not wanting to let on where he lived.

‘Oh yeah? You’re from No Street?’

Bang. Matthew would be punched in the face and then the others would beat him, too, leaving him bloodied on the ground.

‘Sometimes they’d use body punches and they’d try to break me up,’ Matthew recalled years later. ‘There might have been 14 of them, maybe 25 on bad days.’

He remembered many beatings.

‘They would beat me up every time they caught me and at that time a lot of gang war was going on,’ he said. ‘I was a kid, only about 11 or 12. Come on.’

Occasionally he would see them first and be able to outrun them, but that didn’t happen as often as he hoped it would. If anything, having to work for their prey antagonised them. But Matthew knew no other route to school apart the one his step-parents had shown him.

Stephen Chandler was a part of it all as a kid growing up in South Philadelphia.

‘People had gangs because it was about survival back then and only the strong survived,’ Chandler said. ‘A lot of the time you had to be from a gang because another gang would come to your neighbourhood and then when they would hear you’re not from a gang ...’

The stakes were high. Clinton Barnes was from those same rough Philadelphia streets with Matthew.

‘It could be serious,’ said Barnes. ‘Mostly it was fist fights but there were stabbings and shootings that could happen and we would carry knives or guns, whether you could fight or not. Mostly it was the high schools that brought all these different neighbourhoods together.’

Often rows would erupt over girls and blood would be spilt.

Philadelphia music legend Teddy Pendergrass, coming through the city at the same time and familiar with the gang culture, once said going to serve in Vietnam was a more attractive option

for young men in Philly than growing up on the wrong side of the tracks.

Boxing great Bernard Hopkins was born in Philadelphia in 1965, and his mother knew the city was catching fire with gang wars, so they moved into a suburb to escape.

‘In the sixties, it was terrible,’ Hopkins later said.

The Santos family felt powerless to put a stop to the bullying.

‘I know what was happening to me was upsetting to them,’ Matthew said. ‘They were upset for me. Trouble wouldn’t stay away from me. I got tired of trying to be good. Being good only got me beaten up by every bad kid in the neighbourhood.’

Things needed to change.

‘I wanted to protect myself,’ he explained. ‘That was the whole thing. I wanted to learn how to box and keep these guys from beating me up all the time. That’s all. I remember, when I first got in a gang I was scared. But once I got on the road toward being a really bad kid, I lost my fear.’

Matthew’s view on what he might be able to do changed, too, when he first saw a Muhammad Ali fight, in the late 1960s, having watched Ali with his step-dad and his brothers.

‘And I was looking at this man who was saying he was the best in the world and he was “The Greatest”, and with that he was getting better and better and bigger and bigger,’ said Matthew. ‘I started looking up to Muhammad Ali because he could move and dance, he was a colourful fighter and he could punch and not get hit and I wanted to be like him. And I loved Philadelphia’s Joe Frazier, his power and his heart – I loved his heart – and he was one of the best fighters back then.’

There was another early Ali memory, too, and it stuck with Matthew. In a Philly gym one day, the great heavyweight – who lived nearby in Cherry Hill – was sparring a local tough guy known simply as ‘Cheese’. ‘Cheese’ took the liberty of punching Ali in the mouth but Muhammad lit him up in response. Matthew was amazed. ‘I saw that and I said, “Oh man. I want to be like that guy.”’

Matthew knew a Philly boxer called Alfonso Evans, a super-featherweight nicknamed ‘Bubby’, and he told Matthew about Nick Belfiore’s Juniper Boxing Gym in South Philadelphia. With the blessing of his step-parents, Matthew set about sharpening his own physical tools.

Outside the gym was a sign that read, ‘No Women Allowed’ and each day young Matthew would climb the steep, narrow staircase in the mid-terrace gym not far from his home and he’d tread the old wooden floorboards, learning to skip, move left and right and throw punches.

‘These are kids obviously with troubled backgrounds, most of them, and it was a clean, safe place and it was close to where they were living, so they were more or less driven there by street life,’ said veteran Philly boxing writer Nigel Collins. ‘It was a place you could go where you were given respect, treated as men, so I think that was the attraction. Nick was pretty good on the basics, always yelling at guys, “Jab and move around. Jab and move around.”’

Among fight posters of Philly’s big nights yellowing on the walls, Matthew studiously listened to Nick Belfiore, who was there with his brother Joe, an ex-pro fighter who had had some 60 fights through the 1940s, mostly in Philadelphia and New York with the odd outing in Atlantic City and a few further afield in Chicago and New Haven.

‘Nick was a crusty old guy, heart of gold,’ continued Collins, who was reporting on the Philly fight scene at the time. ‘I think maybe there was some money behind him, but I’m not really sure. It was a very small, immaculate gym.’

Matthew soon realised that it wasn’t easy being a fighter and that the road ahead to safety and self-defence was not going to be easy.

‘That was the secret,’ Matthew would smile years later. ‘I didn’t realise how hard it was going to be. That was a shock. You had to be mentally and physically prepared and so determined.’

But he respected the Belfiore way and set about improving as quickly as he could.

‘He was a good man and I will always admire him,’ Matthew said of Belfiore, who would wear a fedora but take it off to work with his

fighters. 'He showed me the little things in training and he was an expert – like his brother Joe. Nick was heavy-set, he would always say, "You cocksucker this, you cocksucker that ..." and he would curse. He was aggressive and he made me do things and I would just do it because he was so grouchy.'

Philadelphia promoter and historian Russell Peltz used the same adjective to describe Belfiore.

'A loveable old grouch whose bark was louder than his bite,' opined Peltz. 'Nick began training his brother Joe in the '40s and Joe fought guys like Joe Miceli but a lot of good fighters passed through his gym.'

'He was a great guy. He was too emotional to be a great trainer but he had the good fortune of having all of these talented guys come through his gym.'

Nick would threaten to crack the head of one of his boys for not listening, but in the same breath would drive him home to make sure he got an ice pack on the wound!

'Nick was miserable, but he took care of us and showed us the right way,' said Mike Everett. 'We started with him and he took us places that we wouldn't have gone without him. Nick was a loving person ...'

Stephen Chandler agreed. 'He'd bawl you out, but he never treated you wrong.'

Over the years, Jeff Chandler (no relation to Stephen), Obe English, Alfonso Evans, Kevin Curry and Tyrone Everett all took the steps up to the two rings in the gym.

Outside the Juniper, everything changed for Matthew with a punch.

Once again surrounded by bullies, the largest teenager started to get in Matthew's face.

Tired of running, Matthew planted his feet, swung his right hand and that was that.

Everyone else backed off and Matthew, fired up and invigorated, called for more challengers. Months of torment came spilling out but there were no volunteers.

Instead, an offer to join the 13th Street and South gang was extended and Matthew became one of them. Gang members called him 'Iceman'.

'He was blessed with power,' stated childhood friend Salim El-Amin. 'He could knock a man dead.'

Matthew's naivety was replaced by ambition, his fear with confidence and his trepidation with power.

He was at the top of the food chain and he enjoyed it. It was far more preferable than what had gone before.

He felt he had to become 'a bad kid'.

'Those guys were robbing and sticking places up but I was strictly a gang member, I was fighting and I would just fight to control my turf,' he explained. 'I didn't understand. "What am I controlling?"'

'13th Street was one of the most vicious gangs in the city at that time,' said Eddie Everett, who like his brothers Tyrone and Mike would become a professional prize-fighter. 'Me, Mike and Tyrone joined Cartman Street [20th and Cartman] for a minute, and that became the most vicious gang in South Philly and we got right out, because we realised we weren't gangsters, we were boxers. We're not going to stab you, we're not going to shoot you, we just fight with our hands, so we just got out of the gang right away. Matthew wasn't really a gangster. Matthew was like us. Matthew was a fighter, too. There was a difference. The gangs back in the day had respect for boxers, and if you were a fighter, you got respect all over the city from gangs.'

The Santos family didn't know how deep Matthew was in.

Tony, one of their birth sons, was also involved. Matthew had wanted to be like him, too. Like any kid at that age, Matthew wanted respect.

'It was very rough in that gang,' he recalled later. 'I was lucky I wasn't found dead somewhere. How would I describe my childhood? Dangerous.'

El-Amin continued: 'They called us the black gangstas, we weren't no gangstas, man. We were struggling, man, so we'd swim with anything that would help us get on track. In South Philly,

these Italians would be shooting at each other, up in New York and then down here in Philly there were killings ... People dealing with positions and trying to be in control of narcotics, gambling and liquor.'

'There was two kinds of gang down there, the white mafia and the black mafia,' El-Amin went on. 'But they did their thing and everyone did what they could to make money. Everybody had to learn how to fight and you had big guys and you had small guys.'

Blood was shed on a regular basis and the violence was extraordinary.

And Matthew and young Mike Everett were caught up in it for a while.

'You had a lot of gangs back in the day,' Mike added. 'Gangs would get together and start fighting and that's how I knew Matt, down there on 13th Street. We became close but I wouldn't mess with them guys down there.'

Matthew was regularly in scrapes and became known to the cops. They could never put anything on him but he was a marked man and there were several near misses.

'There was this one cop who was always after me,' Matthew recalled. 'But he could never catch me. One day, I was walking along and he came up behind me ...'

Perhaps thinking he'd have his hands full, the policeman pulled a gun and forced Matthew to the ground, frisking the teenager to discover a 10-inch blade.

The cop didn't need to find anything else. Matthew's luck ran out and he was sent to a juvenile facility. The justice system was trying to make examples out of kids involved in gang culture as it swept through the city and Matthew was on the receiving end, losing three teenage years to institutions.

Initially, he fought back inside and rebelled. He was moved from one place to the next for fighting and acting out. Having been in the Daniel Boone School and the Glen Mills School for Boys, Matthew sparked a riot at the Youth Study Center and was sent to Camp Hill. 'Camp Hell,' he would call it. There, he was sent to Ward E and then to Ward H, as his behaviour deteriorated and he spent time isolated

from the rest of the population. ‘Quarantine,’ he said. ‘I couldn’t get along with anybody. Some tough guy would shove me or yell at me or order me around and I’d pop him.’

He was angry. He didn’t know where he’d come from, who he was and he certainly didn’t know where he was going.

Trouble followed trouble.

‘I beat up a guard, knocked him cold,’ Matthew said. ‘That brought about nine other guards running and I was giving them pretty good action for a while ... but man, they eventually did a number on me. Afterwards, they put me upstairs in a special room and locked the door. What I remember most about that experience is that there was no light in the room, and that after it got dark you could hear the rats and the mice running around. I’d sleep with the blanket pulled over my head, hoping they couldn’t get to me.’

Realising his life was spiralling out of control rather than progressing, he decided to turn things around. He was handed a copy of the influential Muslim newspaper *Muhammad Speaks* and read it with interest, particularly because Ali was often featured inside.

‘I read certain literature but I was confused,’ he said, explaining the information he was trying to absorb. ‘There was a lot of prejudice and racial stuff between all religions, it had nothing to do with colour. They were talking against each other but I just liked Muhammad Ali because he was one of the best fighters. It wasn’t because of religion at the time.’

Matthew also took classes to become an electrician. And then there was boxing.

A man named Edgar Carlis, who taught English behind the walls, had heard about Matthew’s reputation for punching and recommended he focus on his boxing. Matthew would later credit Carlis with turning him from a troubled kid into a boxing hopeful.

There was no boxing programme inside, and only limited gym use, but Matthew would wrap his hands in his bedsheets and pound the cell walls, firing combinations to the body and head of would-be opponents. He waged war on the wall as though he was Frazier and

would dance around the small room thinking he was Ali. He tied old rags together to make a skipping rope.

His friend El-Amin joined him in Camp Hill. El-Amin was facing a minimum of ten years in prison 'after someone got shot' on the streets.

'I couldn't believe it that he was there,' El-Amin said. 'Matthew used to come to my cell and ask me about boxing, because he didn't know how to fight. He was hitting tied up pillows when he was in the cell, trying to learn how to do things.'

Another inmate who was locked up with Matthew remembered Matthew sticking his mattress up against the cell wall and punching it. 'He'd wrap towels around his hands and punch that mattress.'

'That was because I wanted to see how hard I could punch,' Matthew remembered. 'You always heard about fighters like Oscar Bonavena, Rocky Marciano, Joe Frazier ... these guys were excellent punchers, strong men and I wanted to be like them, so I worked on my power and I'd sometimes punch concrete walls, making sure I had enough padding that would protect my hands from cracking or breaking.'

Upon his release, Matthew stepped out of Camp Hill in the fresh suit given to all inmates at the end of their stay, tasting free air.

'I walked out of there and said I'm never coming back.'