



A LIFE BEHIND THE LENS

RICHARD PELHAM

Thirty Years of Award-Winning Photography of Sport's Most Iconic Moments



We sit on the edge of the world

The paying spectators are behind us, television is behind us. We are pitchside, ringside, in the front row. Sports photographers are the first to feel the impact of a punch after the boxer who is on the wrong end of it, the first to hear the ball hit the net. It can be gruesome. It can be beautiful.

Other journalists call us snappers. "We'll send a snapper along," every sports editor will say to one of his or her writers before sending them off to cover an event or interview an athlete. As if capturing the instant a fight is won and lost, or finding the character in a face is as easy as taking a holiday snap with a mobile phone.



We don't mind. It's a badge of honour, part of the slang of our wonderful industry, and you should hear what we call writers. 'Blunts' is just one of the printable words my old hero Monte Fresco used.

But the word contains a truth. For all the preparation and groundwork, it all comes down to that split second when you push the button. Snap. If you're too late or too early, you've missed it and you haven't got the picture.

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Photo by Dave Shopland

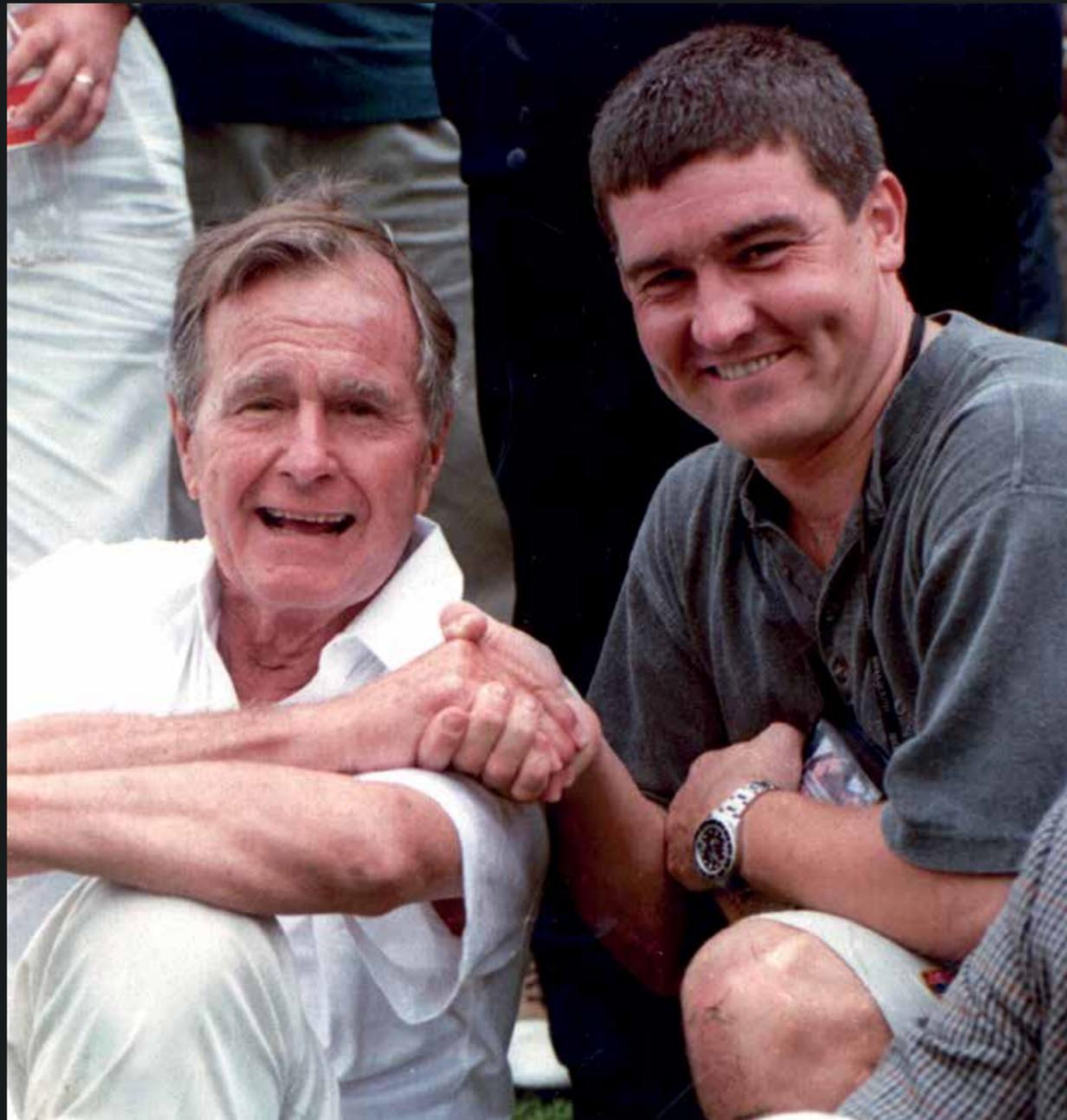
I began as a 16-year-old at Universal Pictorial Press. I finished school on a Friday and started work in Fleet Street on the Monday morning. The alternative was catering and I'm not a bad cook. But once my mum and dad had bought me my first camera, a Practica, and I won the Thurrock Camera Club junior photographer of the year award, I had an idea which way I was going.

I made cups of tea, I worked in a darkroom, I took portraits of politicians and long-lens pictures of Royals, whatever it took. Sue, my future wife, loaned me the money for some decent equipment before a cheeky letter to the picture editor of *The Sun* got me my big break.

Since then I have photographed world title fights, World Cups and world superstars. I have photographed some athletes as they break

records and others as they break down in tears.

I have won many industry awards but I have also experienced moments that mean just as much as any trophy. I was at David Beckham's final training session before his last game at LA Galaxy. He looked up and pinged the ball to me. I moved the camera aside and nodded it back into his path, to the applause of the other Galaxy players.



The industry has changed so much from the days of darkrooms. When I started, a sports desk was happy to get six pictures from an evening match. Now with digital technology we can email them 50 before half-time. But one thing has always remained the same. In the end, you have to capture that moment.

I hope you enjoy the photographs in this book and the stories of my life behind the lens.

AWARDS

Society of Editors Sports Photographer of the Year (2018, 2019)

Sports Journalists' Association sports photographer of the year (2017); football photographer of the year (2017); sports picture of the year (2017); football picture of the year (2016).

What The Papers Say Photographer of the Year; Picture of the Year,

Barclays Premier League picture of the year.

And let's not forget, Thurrock Camera Club Junior Photographer of the Year.

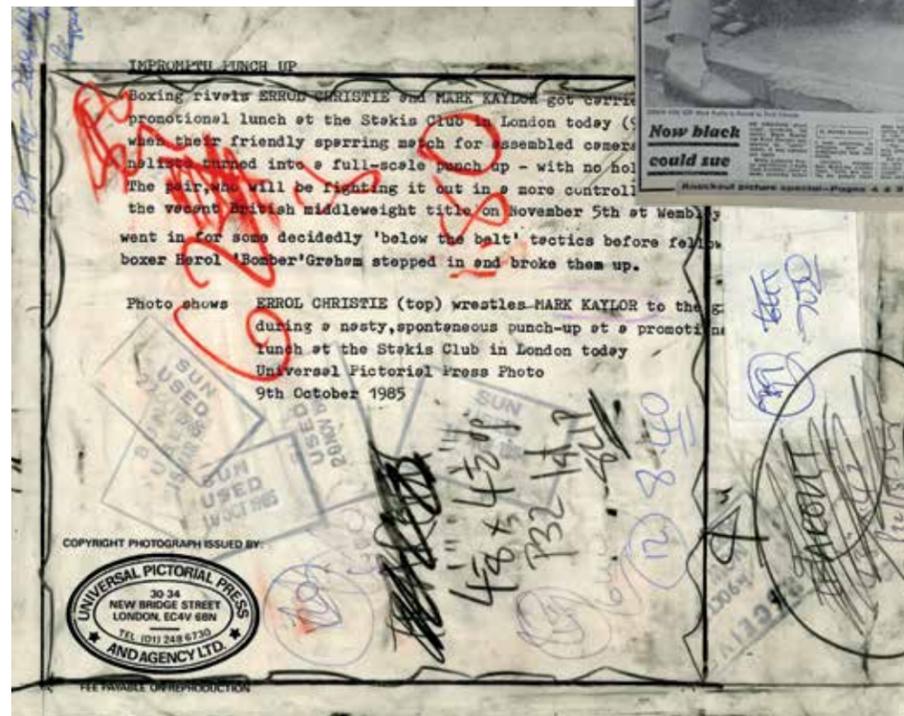
1990

Kicking off

The black-and-white front-page photograph of two boxers fighting in the street – as opposed to the ring – was the picture that made me. I took it on October 9 1985 at the Stakis Casino in London where Mickey Duff and Mike Barrett used to do all their promotional work. Outside there is an area with a fountain. The pre-fight press conferences could get a little heated and the boxers would be taken out there. In this case Mark Kaylor and Errol Christie literally did 'take it outside'. I got the picture and nobody else did partly because a lot of the press were in Birmingham doing a promotional day for another fight.

I was working for a portrait agency, Universal Pictorial, and I was tasked with getting a set of portraits, in colour and black and white, of the two boxers separately, for the archives. I asked Christie first and there was no problem. The first thing I had to do was to get colour transparencies because they made the money. I started, using a Hasselblad camera, of unbelievable quality, a square format, but very hard to change the film.

I started doing Christie, and Kaylor came up behind me, pushed me to one side and said: "Let's give him what he wants." And he stuck one on Christie. They were fighting and the golden rule was to get black-and-whites. I managed to get a metal sheath inside the Hasselblad, change the back and put the black and white one on while they were still fighting, and rip out the sheath, slicing my finger open in the process, and start shooting.

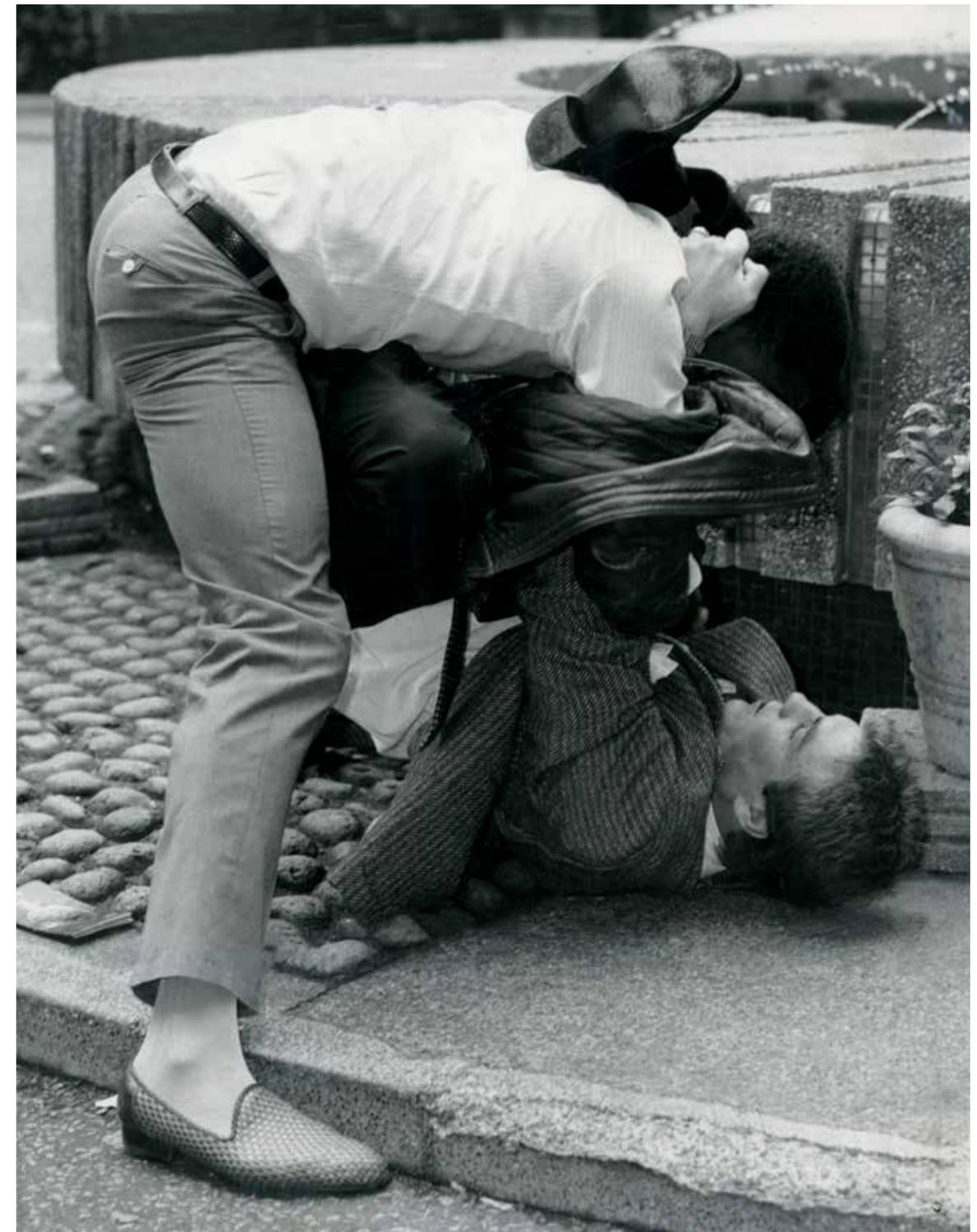


The door staff broke up the fight and afterwards I called the office and said I had this amazing picture and they replied: "Don't forget to go to the book signing at two o'clock." But I knew this was huge. So I went back to the office and they processed the film. The picture was used on television, because in those days TV companies would use stills, and the next morning the agency had all the papers with the



photo. I said: "Is that mine?" They replied: "Well, who else's could it be?"

I got a ticket for the actual fight, the first professional fight I shot, at Wembley arena. It was called The Big Bang because it was on November 5th – a typical Mickey Duff promotion. Kaylor won the fight. I recently found a video of it and I was in it, at ringside.



1990

Princesses and protests

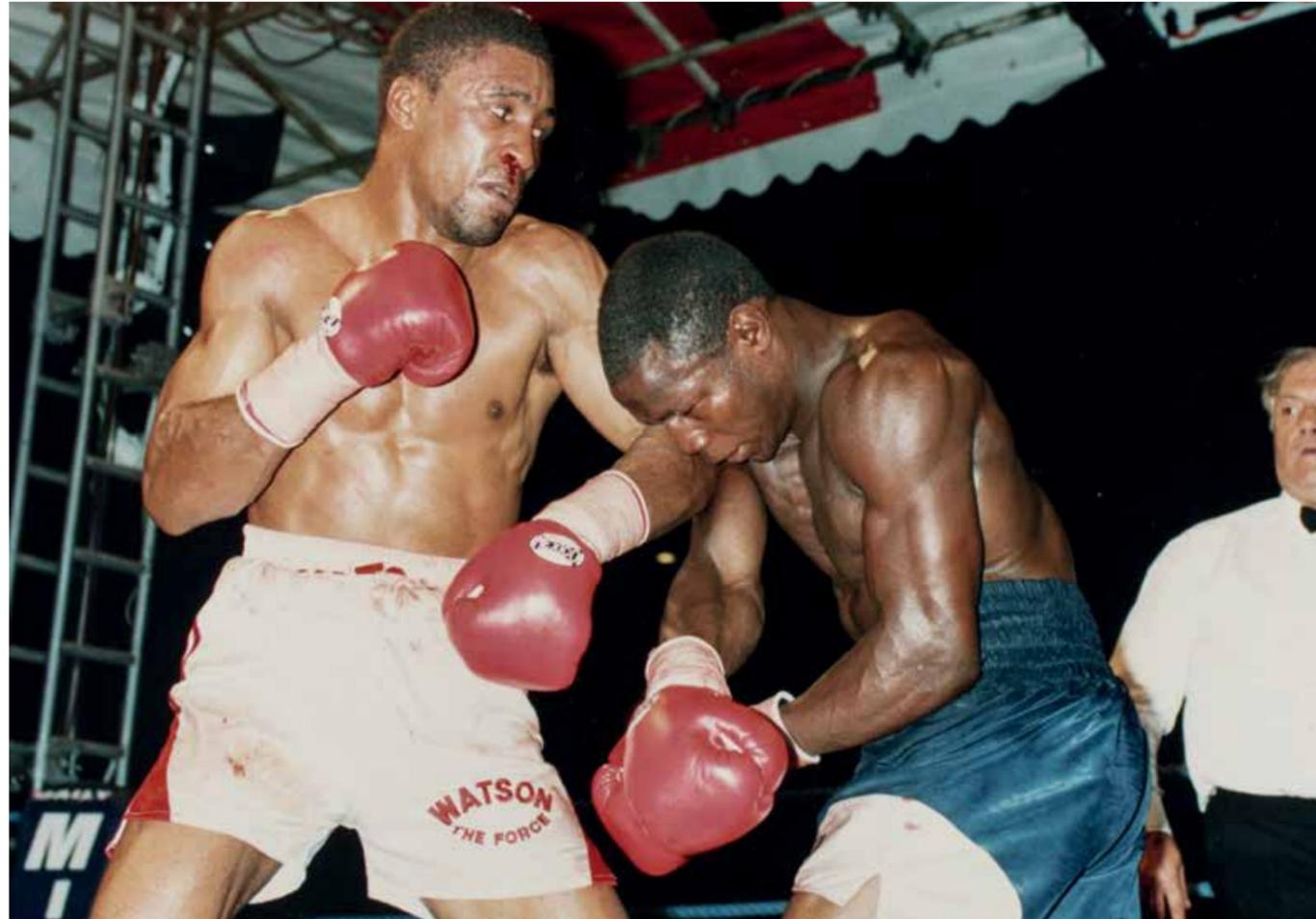
In the early days I had to do news shifts, and I was sent to cover the Poll Tax riots in Hackney. I thought it was going to be nothing at all, but far from it, as the photograph shows. But it was useful experience because quite often a sports story can turn into a news event. For example, the Michael Watson-Chris Eubank fight, or a royal story. When members of the royal family turn up at Wimbledon, for example, the protocol is that you are not supposed to have your lenses on the royal box. But of course you could still look at them. Princess Diana was there once. She and Fergie used to pass sweets to one another. She loved tennis. She was watching one of the Brits and she kept almost fist-pumping.



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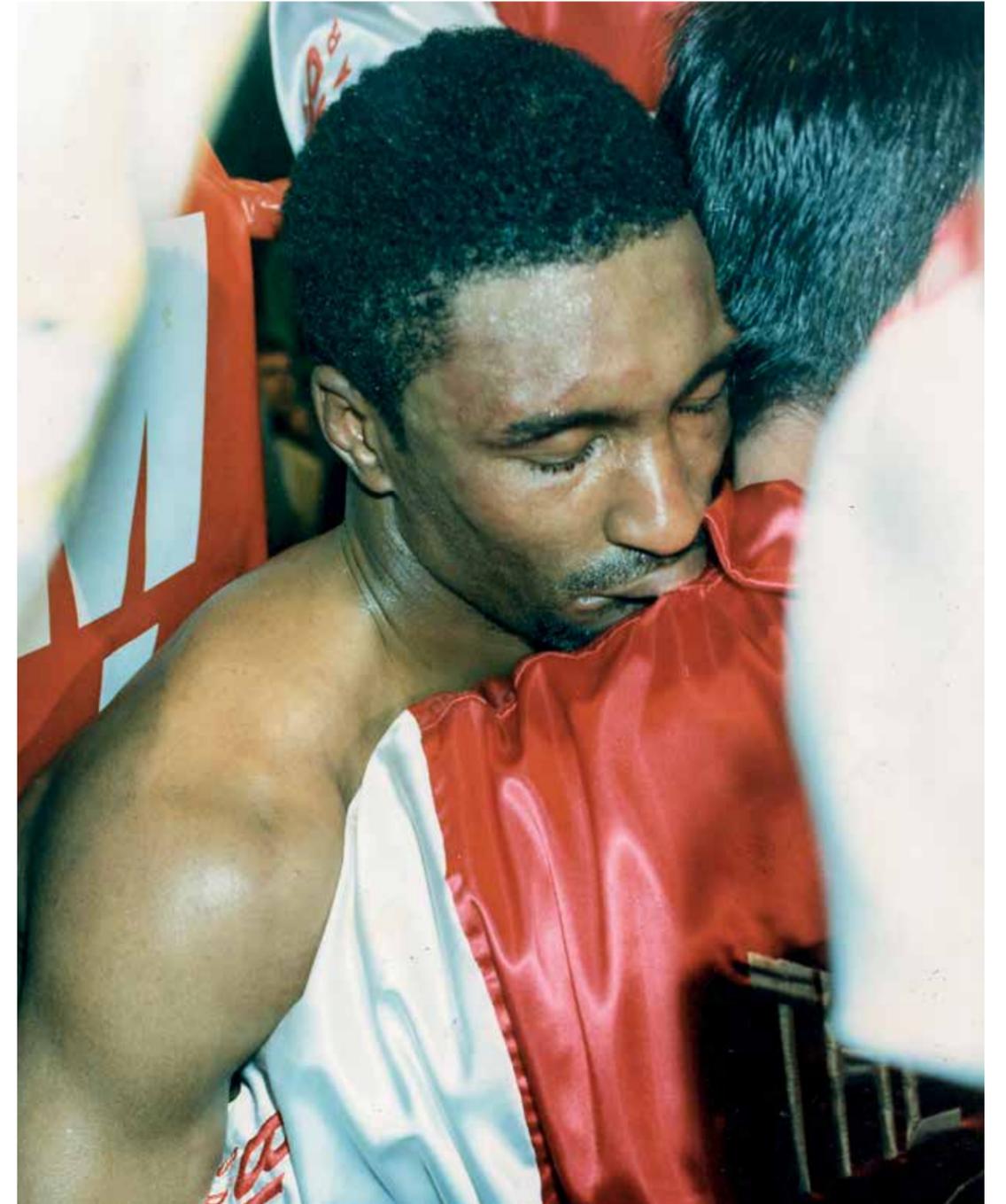
1991 Tragedy in the ring



Michael Watson and Chris Eubank fought twice. The first was at Earl's Court, the second was at White Hart Lane in 1991. Watson was winning by miles and suddenly Eubank hit him with an

amazing uppercut. They took Watson to his corner and sent him out again for the 11th round but the referee stopped it. I was near his corner and I knew something wasn't right because they got a medical team to him. I just leaned across, held my camera out away from

my body and just clicked. I didn't know what I was taking. I popped off one frame before a hand pushed me out of the ring. It went back to the darkroom and there was this very powerful image. It went on page one on Monday.





1992

18 months following Gazza



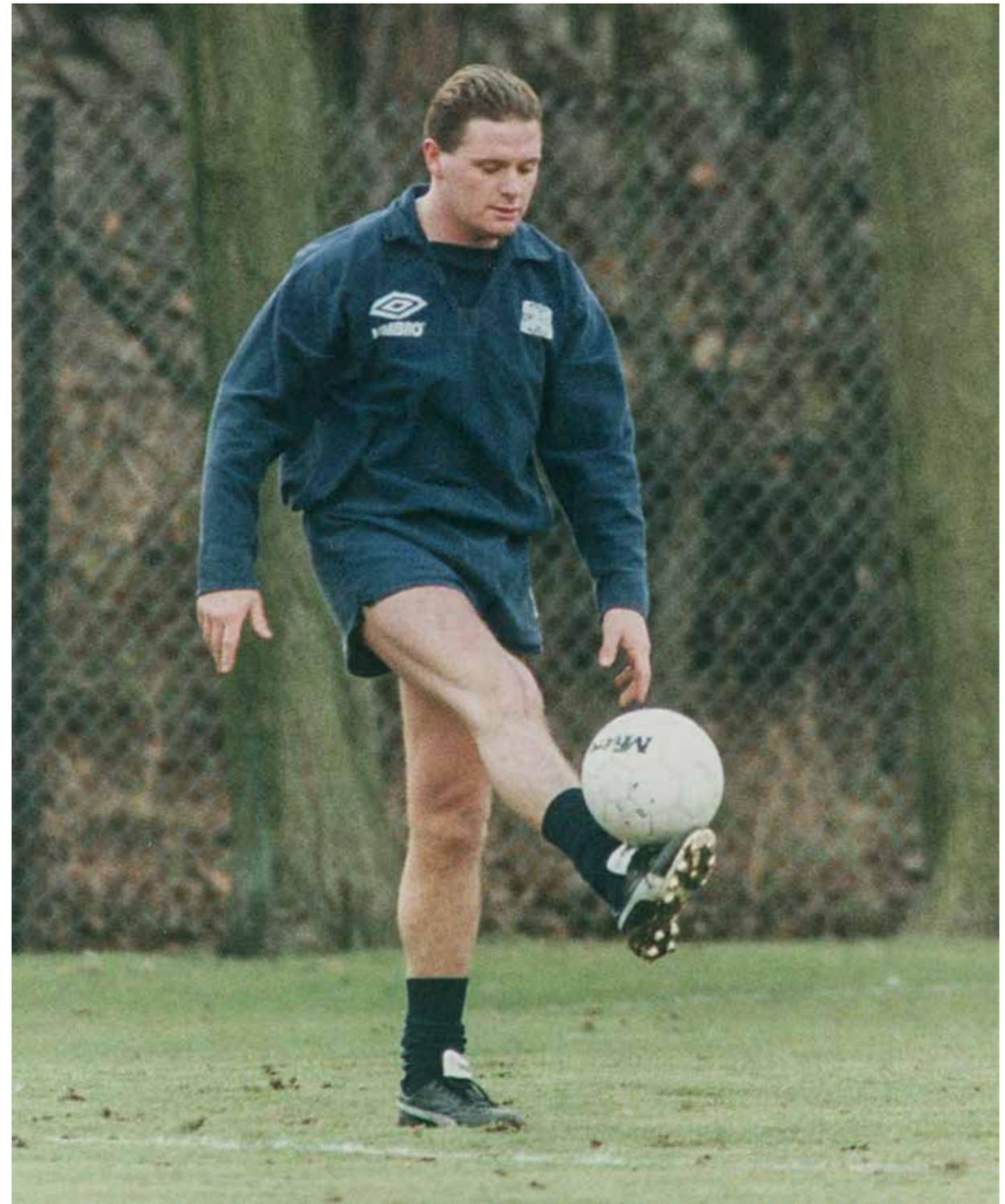
Gazza had been injured playing for Tottenham in the FA Cup final against Nottingham Forest and this was the first time he had kicked a ball since, which was a picture everyone wanted. I get on very well with Gazza and he knew I was there. Spurs trained at Mill Hill at the time and it was a big, open training ground and you could see in from all angles and even though we weren't allowed in there was a footpath alongside. A colleague from the *Mirror* was there too and just as Gazza flicked the ball

up and caught it, a player walked across and blocked his view. So only I got the image.

Then he had to play a match behind closed doors to prove his fitness to Lazio, who had agreed to buy him from Tottenham. I was with the legendary reporter Pat Sheehan and we were hiding in the bushes. It was pouring with rain and freezing cold and Lazio wanted to call the game off and so did Tottenham because it could have been dangerous for Gascoigne in such wet conditions – but Gazza didn't because he wanted to prove that he really was fit again.

Just before the end he went on a run, beating man after man, and scored. He ran through all these puddles and then decided to dive into the biggest puddle of all. Spray went everywhere.

I remember the motor drives going off in the cameras until they died because the camera was full of water. I went back to the office and said: 'I think I've got something,' and that was confirmed when the picture editor called me into Kelvin McKenzie's office. That was a front page picture – Gazza being Gazza. It was a splash story in every sense.

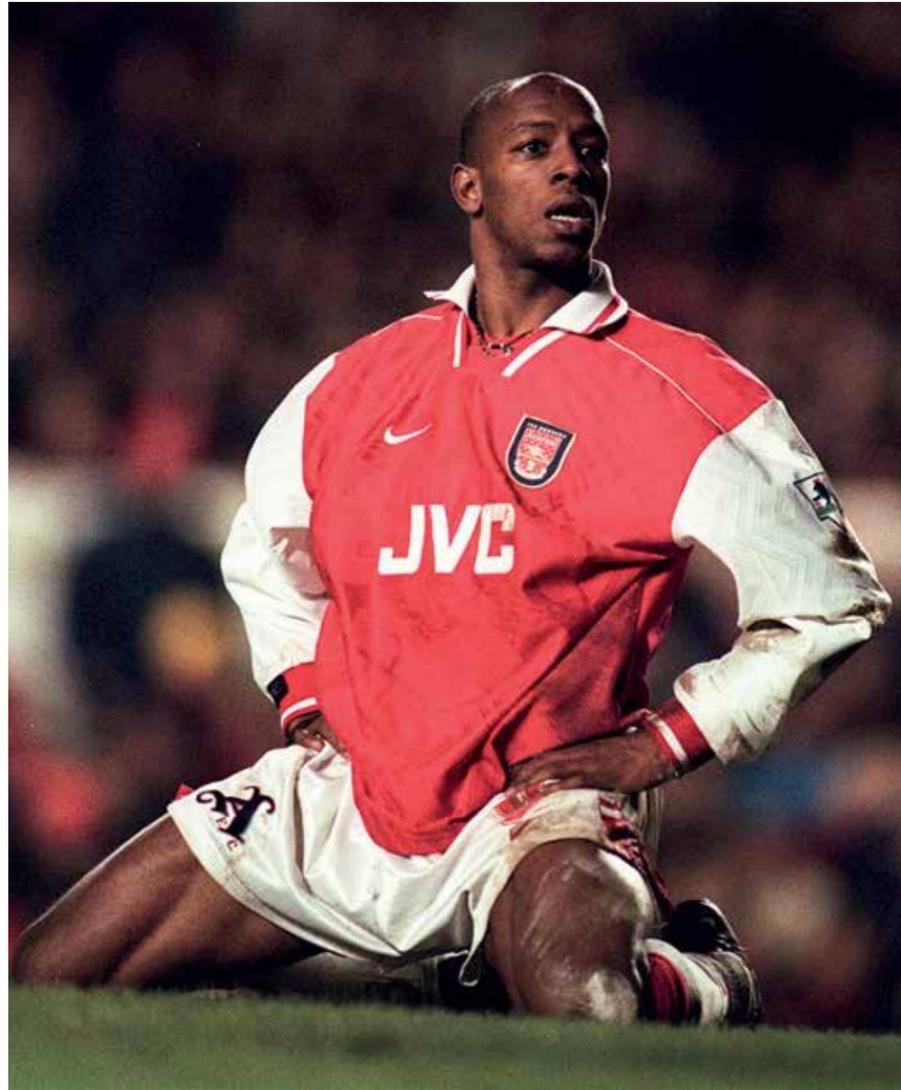




This was a front page picture – Gaza being Gaza.
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It was all building up towards Arsenal against Tottenham in the FA Cup semi-final, a North London derby and in those days you always wanted to get the best preview picture possible, so you really worked hard. I knew I could always rely on Wrighty but I was also getting on very well with Teddy Sheringham and I had the idea to do him as a Teddy Boy. He said yes, no problem, pop up to the training ground and we'll have a look at it. I used to almost live at Vin Burnham's and Angels The Costumiers, so I asked if they had a Teddy Boy suit. We dressed him up in it and he loved the outfit so much that he went to the Spurs Christmas party in it.

In those days, 'funnies' were a big part of the football coverage in *The Sun*. The inspiration was people like Monte Fresco who always seemed to be able to get players to do these amazing things or stupid stunts. When I was a kid I thought "I'd love to be doing that." And when I got into that situation I realised you had a budget and it wasn't quite that simple. But I managed.



1993

The funny side of football

