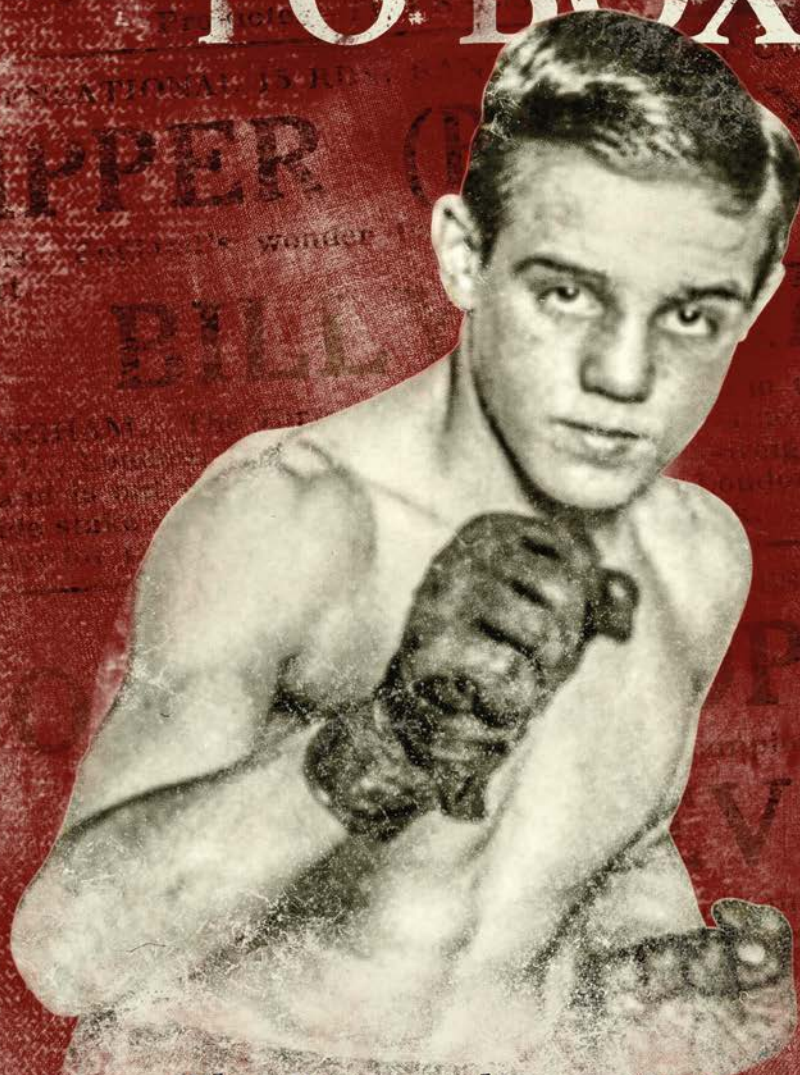


ALEX DALEY

BORN TO BOX



The Extraordinary Story of
Nipper Pat Daly

A L E X D A L E Y

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Foreword

by Nipper Pat Daly's youngest son
(the author's father)

I SUPPOSE if my father had been a famous footballer or cricketer, I would have wanted to be one too. But what he excelled at was boxing, so naturally I took a keen interest in the noble art. From an infant, I was aware that my dad had been a famous boxer, and so, without realising, it was always there, always with me.

From the age of about seven I would accompany him, along with my older brother John, to the different gyms he ran over the years in various parts of London. We would usually travel by the old red London buses and arrive at the gym before 10am. John and I would don black boxing trunks – which in my case always seemed three sizes too large – while plain white vests and black plimsolls were the finishing touch to our accoutrement. Dad, like Professor Newton before him, always wore cream trousers, a cream sweatshirt and black boxing boots while teaching.

Under my dad, the gym regime was always no nonsense and 100 per cent commitment, so my natural propensity to 'mess about' was kept well in check. Perhaps because of the order imposed by dad – it reminded me too much of school – I was an irregular attendee. But to dad's credit, I was never forced or nagged into going.

Dad's method of training his pupils would in modern parlance be called proactive, which means he would spar with each and every one, the severity of the session depending on the size and ability of the pupil. At the end of the round, he would point out any faults he had noticed. At the core of his teaching were the tenets of correct footwork

and an accurate straight left – from these flowed every other punch and move.

I once saw him spar a round with a pro who visited a gym dad ran in Peckham, south London. At the end of the round, the pro – who admittedly was of limited ability – was flustered and demoralised because of dad’s use of a constant, rapid straight left that found its mark unerringly. Dad, if I remember rightly, was then about 50.

The teaching of boxing as applied in the gymnasium was almost a religion to my father. Although he showed little interest in the boxing scene of the day, it was always his dream to bring one of his pupils to championship level. But he never found the equivalent Newton–Daly partnership in any of the gyms he ran. No matter how good the teacher – and he was a great communicator of the art – the intrinsic ingredients of a champion have to come from the boxer himself: ring intelligence, natural stamina and sheer guts, the last two of which you could never teach. In all his teaching life, to his regret, he never found a synthesis of all three attributes in one boxer.

My son – whose production of this biography is a testament to his dedication and love of his subject – has produced what I consider a worthy tribute to an extraordinary boxer and extraordinary man. I hope you like it.

Terry Daley

Introduction

I'VE read and written a lot about boxing history, but there's one story that stands out from the rest. It's the story that first got me absorbed in the sport's past: the story of my grandfather, Nipper Pat Daly.

It's about a boy who entered a man's world at an age when most kids would cry if they were smacked. By his mid-teens, he was handing out boxing lessons to grown men in 15-round fights, trouncing elite pros with whom, by any logic, he had no business sharing a ring.

The fight game had never seen such a prodigy. Ranked in the world's top ten by America's fistic bible *The Ring* at age 16, he was viewed as the future of British boxing. But as the distinguished boxing writer O. F. Snelling observed, 'He went up like a rocket, burst into sparks well before he had reached his peak, and sank into darkness.'

His story was, I think – to some extent – swept under the carpet. It showed the ugly side of the noble art, and was perhaps deemed best forgotten by those who earned their living writing about boxing.

There was no support mechanism when Nipper Pat was forced to quit the ring in the depressed 1930s, at the age of 17. He had to start afresh knowing his world-title dream was gone for good, his unique talent squandered by others' greed. Coming to terms with that, and the exploitation he'd suffered, must have been unimaginably hard. It was, perhaps, his greatest achievement.

To my regret, I never really knew my grandfather. He died just before my eighth birthday. I have some hazy memories of him – a large figure with a deep, nasal voice and a presence that filled a room – but I never got to ask him about his boxing career, which I had little interest in until my 20s.

After years of research, I had my first stab at telling Nipper Pat's story in a biography published in 2011. Penned with great enthusiasm but limited writing experience, it had its flaws. Some of the info shared with me by well-meaning relatives was, I later discovered, inaccurate; and although I didn't know it then I had much to learn about writing.

In the late 1970s, my grandfather wrote his own fighting memoir, with the unfulfilled ambition of getting an author to turn his words into a book. At the time of my first book, I had some of these eloquently written recollections, but frustratingly lots were missing.

Five years after that book's publication, a cousin contacted me out of the blue with scans of many more pages from Nipper Pat's memoirs, which shed new light on his experiences. With these previously unpublished first-hand accounts, and the help of some new interviewees, I have told his story afresh, from a new angle. The result is this book you hold in your hands.

Thankfully, with boxing's modern rules and regs, Nipper Pat Daly's tragic story will never be repeated. It is, however, a story every boxing fan should know.

Alex Daley

Prologue

The Old Man in the Pub

IT is the late 1970s. The Railway Tavern in Tulse Hill, south London, is the location. Flared trousers, thick sideburns, bright polyester, platform shoes and films about intergalactic warfare are all the rage. Male singers don't croon any more; they play electric instruments, wear make-up or sing in high-pitched tones. Others shout their lyrics, swear, style their hair in weird ways, sport piercings and tattoos and denounce the status quo.

The older generation, who witnessed two world wars, cannot understand any of this, and the two groups do not see eye to eye. Not that different generations ever did, but this time the gulf feels extra-wide. Some things never change, though, and the pub is still a place where people who are poles apart find common ground.

One man has been coming to the Railway Tavern for a while on his own. He is in his 60s and a little different from the other older patrons. At 5ft 10½in, he is muscularly built, but when he walks his gait is a little unsteady. When he speaks – which isn't often – he is articulate, polite and never swears. His voice has a deep, nasal tone and his speech is slightly slurred. He has seen facets of life that most others haven't.

When it comes to drinking, this man is no boozier – two pints of bitter are all he ever has. But he is keen to throw darts and will willingly recruit an opponent of any age, race, colour or creed.

Most darts players stand side on from the board, one foot behind the other, and carefully line up their dart with its target. Instead, he stands square on and throws the darts like bombs from the side of his head, without seeming to line them up at all. Somehow, though, he still does pretty well.

Plenty of lads in their teens and early 20s use the pub and they show the man a healthy respect. They know him as Pat, an ex-boxer.

Forty years later, one of those lads, Mick Doyle, speaks to me about the man and about those times. He tells me, ‘Pat would always drink a pint of bitter from a traditional window glass and didn’t seem to get into much conversation with anyone. You would often walk into the pub and find him quite happily throwing darts on his own. He would smile when he saw you because he knew he had an opponent. So it would be, “Nearest the bull, Pat?”, and off we’d go for a couple of hours.

‘I recall my father one day, in his County Kildare accent, warning me, “Don’t ever get smart with that man!” Apparently, a couple of rather silly guys *had* done and in my dad’s words it was, “Right, outside,” where Pat proceeded to paste one of them up against a wall, and the other ran off down the road. Needless to say, there was never any chance of me getting lippy.

‘In the hot summer of 1976, when I was an apprentice carpenter, I was working with an old bricklayer called George Turk, who belonged to a family of first-class bricklayers from Peckham. We started talking boxing and I was harping on about Muhammad Ali. George looked at me and said, “The most fantastic boxer I have ever seen in my life was a guy called Nipper Pat Daly.” When I said I had been throwing darts with him the night before, he couldn’t believe it.

‘There were probably 30 or 40 of us around my age that used to get together in that pub back then, and I dare say one or two of them fancied themselves a bit. We didn’t know we were standing next to one of the all-time legends because he would never have mentioned it. I know now, though!’

* * * * *

By the 1970s, many of the men Pat had fought were dead, and those who survived were barely recognisable. When he encountered them – usually at ex-boxers’ meetings – most were thin and frail or fat and slow, their skin sagged and wrinkled, their movements stiff and laboured, their tired eyes faded. They were older than he was, of course, but many had aged beyond their years, a result of hundreds of ring battles waged during their youth.

But when Pat thought of his boxing days, the faces he glimpsed weren’t tired and wrinkled, but young and vibrant. He only had to shut his eyes and there they were – Pattenden, Kirby, Biquet, Corbett,

Cuthbert, Watson and many more, still in their prime. Images of long-gone fight arenas in 40 or more towns and city districts – the stages for the dramas of his fighting life – likewise flashed through his mind.

The passage of 50 years had not dulled the memories. The sounds of the crowds, that charge of adrenaline, the smell of sweat, the sensation of leather impacting skin were all so clear; the triumphs and thrills, the pain and tragedy, the torment of making weight and the rush of joy after each hard victory; a big, worn-out old gym and a man they called ‘the Professor’. Unforgettable events, places and people. It was all stranger than fiction, but it had happened.

He only had to close his eyes and he was back there.



The National Sporting Club (1897) by Phil May. The club was started by middle-class men for middle-class men.

The Champion and the Child

FORTY-THREE King Street in London's Covent Garden – a tall, imposing building with two large pillars and steps out front. Today, it's part of an international women's shoe chain but a green plaque at the entrance hints at a glorious past:

This building was once known as the
 NATIONAL SPORTING CLUB
 March 1891 – October 1929
 Which under its President
 Hugh Cecil Lowther
 The Fifth Earl of Lonsdale
 And co-founders
 Arthur 'Peggy' Bettinson
 & John Fleming
 Became the home of
 Modern glove
 Boxing

The National Sporting Club (NSC) ruled British boxing from this Covent Garden HQ. It wrote the rules of the sport and furnished British champions with great gold belts, but all the while maintained a monopoly.

The NSC chose the challengers, terms and dates for all British title fights, and it staged them in private for its members and their guests at 43 King Street. The closest the man on the street got to a championship fight was to read about it in the papers. Stockbrokers,

owners of high-class shops, merchants, manufacturers and even members of the landed gentry were on the membership list. Women were barred completely.

On a typical club night, dinner-suited, bow-tied gents bet large sums as cigar smoke swirled round the fight hall and into the lungs of the boxers. To help members concentrate, the crowd observed an eerie silence during rounds. Polite applause – no catcalls or whistles – was only allowed in the one-minute intervals. All you could hear during fights were the gasps and grunts of the boxers and the dull thud of leather against skin or glove. The atmosphere had more in common with a snooker or tennis match than a typical prize fight.

For a while the NSC reigned supreme, but its grip on boxing could not last. In the early 1920s, promoters with deep pockets arrived and tempted Britain's champions into defending their titles at larger venues, outside the club's jurisdiction. Finally, the great unwashed could see their heroes in championship bouts, and the NSC could not stop it.

Reluctantly, in the late 1920s, the ailing club hired its famous hall to outside parties, who opened it to the masses. Friday, 18 May 1928 was such a night. The NSC was let to an Old Compton Street business-owner called Angelo Molinari.

On his programme, Molinari pitted five Italian fighters against five Brits in an Anglo-Italian-themed show. The proceeds would go to the Italian Hospital in Queen Square, Bloomsbury, which treated the poor of London's Italian community – the 'Little Italy' of Clerkenwell – and anyone else who could not afford healthcare.²

On this rare occasion, men in flat caps, shabby suits and work boots could enter the club's sacred inner sanctum.

* * * * *

Friday fight night, 18 May 1928, and it's England vs Italy at the Covent Garden NSC. A thin, pale, handsome young man in a smart suit – brown hair parted neatly to the side – walks through the entrance at 8pm. Well-wishers greet him warmly. He beams a friendly smile and utters a quick 'hello'.

This is Nipper Pat Daly – Britain's most promising young boxer – a fresh-faced lad with an unassuming air, who has captured the imagination of the fight-loving public. Seasoned scribes have called

² Britain's National Health Service (NHS) did not arrive until 1948.

him a wonder boxer. Comparisons are being made with yesterday's greats. And some already see him as a future world champion.

With Daly is a slim, stern man in his mid-60s. He stands upright and proud, moving with the fluidity of someone far younger. His skin is leathery and tanned and his thick, dark hair stands stubbornly on end. Above his top lip is a thick, sprouting moustache that belongs to an earlier age. This is 'Professor' Andrew Newton, ABA lightweight champion of 1888 and '90. He discovered Daly at his Marylebone gym six years ago and now manages and trains him.

Tonight's fight is the toughest test yet for Britain's wonder boxer. Over ten three-minute rounds, he will face the reigning flyweight champion of Italy, a tough, powerfully built man in his 20s called Giovanni Sili. The two weighed in separately that afternoon and have not met face to face. But Daly knows this much: the man can punch and has mixed in world-class company.

In a recent UK visit, the Italian drew over 15 rounds with world flyweight title challenger Frankie Ash and in his previous fight, Sili boxed the top-rated Frenchman Emile Pladner, who would be world flyweight champion within a year. Five months later, Sili's heavy punching would have tragic consequences. Enzo Cecchi, challenging for Sili's national crown in Florence, died following a knockout defeat. Strength, top-level experience and weight of punch are definitely with the Italian, but Daly is undaunted.

If every contest goes the distance, the pair are due on at half-past midnight, so they have time to kill.

Daly, Newton and their party settle into a small dressing room on the NSC's first floor, next door to Sili. Among the Daly team is Leo Phillips, another Newton pupil, who several years from now will be a top welterweight. At this moment, though, he is 14 years old. The Professor said he could come to the NSC if he brought his violin. His job tonight is not to box but to play songs, mostly chosen by the Professor.

Cracking a smile, the Professor picks the famous Italian ballad 'O sole mio', knowing Sili can hear this, and orders Phillips to play it over and over. 'Play it again, Leo. We'll show 'im we're not afraid of 'im!'

Meanwhile, in the club's main hall, two great nations wage war.

A heavyweight called Salvatore Ruggirello draws first blood for Italy in a match that ends bizarrely. His opponent, Jack Stanley of Deptford, slips on a patch of water in the ninth and is counted out after dislocating a kneecap.

Next, Primo Ubaldo makes it two-nil to Italy – his opponent, Erith’s Jim Shaw, quitting with a badly cut eye. After this, Bristol lightweight George Rose salvages some English pride when he outpoints Milan’s Saverio Turiello. But England then fall irretrievably behind when Dino Tempesti beats Mile End bantamweight Lew Pinkus in a barnstorming battle.

It’s disappointing for English fans, but no one dares to leave their seat just yet. The fight most have come to see is up next.

* * * * *

Summoned from his dressing room, Pat strolls through the NSC’s ornate hallway looking curiously calm and composed. This is a walk he has made many times, a situation in which he feels completely comfortable. The only thing that would worry him before a fight was making weight, and at this stage, in mid-1928, that isn’t such a problem.

Walking into the magnificent hall, there’s a loud burst of applause. A sea of expectant faces gaze upon him.

‘G’ luck, Nipper. You can do it, son!’

‘Show him watcha made of, Pat!’

‘Don’t let the old country down!’

He smiles appreciatively.

The noise goes on as he steps on to the ring apron. Momentarily dazzled by electric chandeliers, Pat slides between the ropes and into the ring. The tobacco smoke in this former theatrical hall is stifling, but he is used to it. He crosses to the farthest corner and sits down on a stool in a relaxed posture. Dust flies as he shuffles his feet in a resin tray to help the soles of his boots grip the canvas.

Next, Sili enters the room. For an 8st fighter, his physique is impressive. Muscles protrude from his tanned chest and arms, and his stomach is ripped to perfection. It is no surprise the man is a puncher. He gets a warm welcome, particularly from the London-Italians in the crowd.

As Sili slides through the ropes, he pauses, glances at his opponent and laughs. He wonders: *Is this a joke?*

Across the ring, gloved up and ready for battle, he sees a gangly youth with an angelic face. Instead of muscle, around his shoulders, thighs and calves is angular bone draped in milky white skin. His opponent doesn’t look like a prize-fighter. He looks like he needs a good square meal. In fact, shouldn’t he be in school?

Shaking his head, Sili tells his seconds and the referee that to match the champion of Italy against this child is absurd. Not only is he insulted, but he will not go through with the fight in case he kills 'this little boy'.

'If you don't fight, you'll be letting your country down,' they tell him. 'Think of all the Italians who've come here to watch you box.'

Although far from happy, after further cajoling he relents and the fight is back on.

The boxers are called to centre ring for final instructions. Pat, who is a few inches taller than Sili, meets him with a confident stare. To this, the Italian narrows his eyes and purses his lips disdainfully. Back in his corner, he mutters churlishly to his seconds and then shoots the lad another scornful glare, as if to say, 'This won't take me long.'

The first bell chimes and Sili springs from his stool in a crouching stance, bobbing and weaving towards the Brit with menace.

Watching from the club's press benches, a reporter for the sport's trade paper, *Boxing*, scribbles furiously in his notepad for a report that will read, 'This Sili knows a thing or two and he tried them all out. Crouching almost to a sitting posture and swerving his head and body from side to side, he presented a constantly moving target and would then leap into furious action, swinging, hooking and lashing out in desperate attempts to send a winner over.'

'Pat kept cool and boxed brilliantly, refused to be tempted into experiments, made use of his excellent left at every available opportunity, used the uppercut judiciously, but wisely refrained from taking risks. The boy had sensed at once that his opponent was laying traps and he wouldn't be caught.'

To confuse the youngster, Sili tries switch-hitting (to use a modern term), changing his stance to southpaw (right foot and fist ahead), then back to orthodox (left foot and fist ahead), but it doesn't work.

Time and again, Pat backs up the Italian with piston-like lefts and beautifully timed rights. Sili does not see them coming and is repeatedly made to lead or drop his guard by Pat's clever feinting.

Entering the late rounds, his face now a bloodied mess, Sili's only hope is to win by KO. In desperation, he charges at Pat in a series of punch-slinging rushes. But each time he is halted by a jolting uppercut or ramrod left, or made to look clumsy by a neat sidestep and counter.

The final bell rings to end the fight and the crowd rise to their feet for a big round of applause. They have just seen the finest fight of the

evening. *Boxing's* correspondent is thrilled by what he has witnessed, declaring later in his report, 'Pat gave one of the best performances of his already brilliant career, and won well ... Nipper Pat put up one of the best displays of scientific boxing seen anywhere for quite a while.'

Sili sidles up to his opponent, smiling through cracked and swollen lips. 'You-a look like a baby, but you are a great boxer,' he says in broken English.

Giovanni Sili, flyweight champion of Italy, has to be led from the ring by his seconds. The blazing ring lights have faded. The crowd are now shadows. Both of his eyes are swollen shut.

Nipper Pat Daly is unmarked. He is 15 years old.