

STEVEN BELL



DYNAMITE & DAVEY

**THE EXPLOSIVE LIVES OF
THE BRITISH BULLDOGS**

Foreword by Ross Hart

Afterword by Bronwyne Billington

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PART 1

THE DYNAMITE KID

‘I’ve often been asked what made Dynamite so special. Well, first, he was a phenomenal athlete, remarkably adaptable to virtually any style or format – be it British, North American, or Japanese. What really set him apart was his timing: he seemed to have this innate ability to know precisely when to do things. Beyond that, like all the truly great workers, he was capable of making damn near anyone he worked with look good – in many cases, better than they ever dreamed of looking – myself included.’

Bruce Hart

DOCTOR DEATH

‘The Dynamite Kid was the one, a great wrestler. He was an introvert, but the minute he got in the ring he changed.’

Max Crabtree

Warrington, England. 1971

Ted Betley walked out of his front door; the low morning sun peeking above the houses opposite forced him to squint. He was having the house heavily renovated; it was effectively a building site. Ted’s weathered face cracked into wrinkles as he smiled at what made him realise it was Saturday morning. It was the fact that Billy Billington, the builder in charge of the work, was walking towards him accompanied by his 13-year-old son, Thomas – who would’ve been at school on any other of the six days per week that Billy came to work.

Ted watched on as Billy pointed between the dumper truck parked up nearby, the large pile of rubble and the skip on the roadside. Thomas glanced between the objects and then looked back to his dad, who threw him the keys to the truck before proceeding towards his client.

‘Energetic young lad you’ve got there, Bill,’ teased Ted, watching Thomas sprinting away and then jumping into the driver’s seat.

‘Aye, he’s training to be a boxer – just hope he gets better at it than I ever ’ave! All I ever got out of it is a few quid every couple o’month and a thick head every time for the trouble.’

‘He looks a handy lad, like,’ said Ted, looking on as Tom leapt down from the driver’s seat to the floor, then threw the straggling bricks that had escaped his dumper bucket into the skip. ‘Does he wrestle?’

'No,' replied Billy dismissively, 'just boxing for now.'

'I can't recommend wrestling highly enough for an active lad like him, you know. It's a profession for 'em, not a hobby. They can wrestle as many nights of the week as they want, 'cos they so rarely get hurt, you see. Them that get on the telly earn decent money and travel all over.'

'Well, that's sorta thing I want for him, ya know. Not like me; all them years down t'pit didn't get me anywhere. Now I'm mixing cement for the rest of my days and getting my head punched in every now and again to be able to afford the odd treat.'

Billy and his wife Edna had three children to support; their eldest Julie was a year older than Thomas, with Carol five years younger.

With the pile of bricks gone and the dumper parked back where he had found it, skinny little Thomas strolled back over to his dad, patting the dust from his hands on to his faded blue jeans.

'Hello son,' Ted introduced himself to fair-haired Thomas. 'I was just asking your old man here – have you ever fancied trying wrestling?'

'Nah. Fake, innit. I wanna fight for real.'

Ted laughed in an all-knowing sort of way, before flicking his head towards the open front door. 'Come on in. I'll put kettle on.'

After putting tea and biscuits on the table, Ted left the kitchen and went up the stairs. He returned with an ancient-looking wooden box. He put the box on the table alongside the tray of refreshments and sat down before sweeping a thick layer of dust from the top of it. Thomas looked on curiously as his host lifted off the lid.

Ted began to show young Thomas a series of photographs and old wrestling programmes. On each photograph, there was a large wrestler wearing a black mask, and on each programme appeared the name 'Dr Death'.

'That's me,' Ted said, proudly tapping a particular photograph, in which he was also wearing a floor-length black cloak and the huge crowd surrounding him appeared to be yelling and gesticulating in his direction.

'That's you?' gasped Thomas, passing the pictures to his dad.

'Aye. I spent 20 years wrestling after the war. Then opened the gym when I retired. Got some good young lads down there that I train. You're more than welcome to come and give it a go.'

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‘They don’t seem to like you very much?’ Tom scoffed, taking back hold of the photo.

‘That lad,’ he said, ‘is ’cos I was good.’

* * *

Born and raised in the village of Golborne, young tearaway Thomas Billington hated school. He was one of the smallest in his age group, but this didn’t stop him playing pranks and getting into fights and he could regularly be found in the headmaster’s office with a cane being whipped across his wrist. At home, his dad was also quite a strict disciplinarian. Billy’s father, also called Thomas, had too been a strict, fighting man; a bare-knuckle boxer, he had bribed Billy with a crisp ten-pound note to continue the ‘Thomas Billington’ family name if the baby was a boy. Thomas junior was born into a family of tough, fighting men. He excelled in sports, playing both rugby league and football for Wigan Town and had natural athleticism, coordination and agility. In his physical education classes at school, he loved to show himself off as an extraordinary acrobat, laughing and joking whilst accomplishing highly complex routines in gymnastics.

He had emerged a teenager with a cocky and streetwise attitude and was keen to take up a combat sport as a hobby. The invitation from Ted Betley, even if it was into ‘fake’ wrestling, was great timing.

When he first arrived at the gym with his dad, Tom (as he was most commonly known) thought they had walked into an abandoned army barracks rather than the wrestling establishment he had expected. He heard crashing and groaning and looked in to see two boys, both older and bigger than him, practising their moves on one another in the ring. Ted greeted them and got Tom kitted up as best he could, but his tiny, skinny frame barely filled any of the apparel on offer.

As was his way with all newcomers to his gym, Ted wanted to test Tom’s fortitude and willingness to fight. He told Tom to get in the ring and replace the younger lad in there – leaving Tom with the biggest, oldest boy. With no tuition at all, Ted told them to wrestle – ‘no punching or kicking’. Within minutes, Ted knew he may have a special talent on his hands as Tom never took a backward step and matched his bigger, stronger, more experienced opponent with tenacity, aggression and a low centre of gravity.

‘Make sure you bring him back tomorrow,’ Ted told Billy, who then continued to take Tom to the gym every single day after school, and Saturdays too, for the next three years. In this acrobatic form of fighting, Tom had found a discipline within which all his natural skills and passions combined perfectly.

The gritty style taught by the master coupled with the aggression and determination of the apprentice was an ideal formula. The pair bonded and Ted became a second father figure to Tom, and soon his advice went beyond the world of wrestling.

‘Tommy,’ Ted began one day, ‘no matter what you have to face in life, no matter how scared you are, don’t ever take a step back. Always take a step forward. It doesn’t matter how good you are, or how many people you beat, there’ll always be somebody who will beat you.’ Tom listened intently to the advice.

Hoping to add even more intensity and realism to Tom’s wrestling, Ted took him to Billy Riley’s infamous gym in Wigan. Riley had trained world-renowned shooters-turned-workers like Billy Robinson and Karl Gotch. Despite appearing to be little more than a shed from the outside, it was a legendary place in the world of shoot wrestling. It earned the name the ‘Snake Pit’ amongst the Japanese wrestling royalty, after Gotch in particular had spent much of his career there, becoming known as *Kamisama* – ‘God of Wrestling’ – and being a trainer and promoter there into the 1980s.

Here, Tom entered the ring opposite grown men who were entering the sport with the aim of legitimately hurting people, and who looked down upon the ‘fake’ profession. They threw him around and put holds on him until he screamed – even when he did, they didn’t let go.

Ted’s teachings were bringing a flock of talented and competitive youngsters to the fore at his gym. Steve Wright, from Warrington, was five years older than Tom and already a major part of the Joint Promotions circuit and a regular on TV. He would stretch and hurt Tom, who would struggle back in vain and never back down.

‘Whatever they do to you, Tommy, don’t give up; never submit,’ Ted would enforce.

Ted then began taking Tom to Billy Chambers’ gym as he used every bit of the local artistry available to progress his protégé. Chambers was yet another old-time shooter and would stretch Tom to strengthen

him; to test him. By going back twice every week for more, Tom passed the test. He was growing in reputation and stature.

He was introduced to his first live audience as ‘Tommy Billington’, as he made his pro wrestling debut in Warrington on 11 March 1975 against a Ted Betley stablemate in Bernie Wright – the younger brother of Steve. Tom’s first bouts were non-advertised extra matches at the beginning or end of the billed shows of local promoter Jack Atherton. Soon, the punters were staying in their seats to watch the exciting bonus bout with this unknown acrobatic daredevil.

When asked about his young prodigy, Ted would say, ‘Oh, he’s dynamite, this kid,’ and so when asked what name to bill Tom as when he was finally added to the main card, the ‘Dynamite Kid’ was born.

Dynamite quickly became a firm fan favourite, with his never-say-die attitude enabling him to claim victories against the established *heels*. He had grown to the 5ft 8in tall at which he would stay and had to work hard and aggressively to truly convince the audience that a lad of his emaciated-looking frame could even compete, let alone win. A professional career surely beckoned, and the family really needed Tom to support himself following the arrival of his new baby brother, Mark.

Tom recorded his first *World of Sport* TV bout on 30 June 1976 against Yorkshire veteran ‘Strongman’ Alan Dennison. It was strength versus speed and Tom’s acrobatics wowed not just the crowd, but Dennison too. Supposedly frustrated by the youngster’s consistent ability to handstand out of any predicament and land on his feet, Dennison began launching Dynamite across the ring whilst locking his hands behind his back, only for Tom to repeatedly spring off the canvas with his head and land on his feet anyway, bringing gasps of amazement from all around. The match was ended when the Dynamite Kid missed with a high-flying offensive dive and crashed into the ropes erratically and ‘injured’ himself so badly he was unable to continue. Dennison grabbed the microphone and asked that the match be declared a no-contest, telling the live audience and those watching on TV that, at just 17, the Dynamite Kid was a unique and sensational talent whose performance didn’t deserve to end with a technical defeat.

That match didn’t air until 30 October, by which time a second recorded match had been aired on *World of Sport* on the 9th, in which

Dynamite defeated Pete Meredith by two *falls* to one in the dingy town of Castleford.

By 1976, three brothers from Halifax, West Yorkshire, were effectively running Joint Promotions. They had been on the wrestling scene since before the ITV-led reboot of the mid-50s. They all had blond hair, two were average sized, but one, ironically named Shirley, was a huge man standing 6ft 7in tall and with a 64-inch chest – something that would later see him enter the *Guinness Book of World Records*. Shirley had begun weight training and body building in the late 1940s and was spotted as a potential professional wrestler due to his good looks, physique and great strength. His two athletic brothers, Max and Brian Crabtree, had gone along into the business with him and all three were soon active on the circuit.

Shirley had gained momentum and popularity by the end of the 50s and was being considered as the future face of the industry. But it just seemed like it would never quite happen for him and he became a journeyman, flitting between unsuccessful gimmicks such as the ‘Blond Adonis’, ‘Mr Universe’ and the ‘Battling Guardsman’.

Both Brian and Max’s in-ring careers were cut short by injury. Brian became a referee and eventually the Joint Promotions main compere and MC – an instantly recognisable figure in the ring with his garish, bright-coloured, sequinned suits.

Max, the sharpest of the trio, had earned himself a stellar reputation as a wrestling promoter and *booker* – and Joint Promotions had given him the northern area to run in 1975. He chose to give Shirley a *push* for the twilight of his brother’s career and booked him as the new monster heel, ‘Big Daddy Crabtree’, and soon he was tag-teaming with a man who dwarfed even him in Martin Ruane, aka ‘Giant Haystacks’. With Shirley over 25 stone and Haystacks close to the 7ft mark and 45 stone in weight, the audience were awestruck as the pair obliterated their opposition. In truth, they lacked mobility and agility, and the matches were over in seconds – but the audiences just loved to lay eyes on the gargantuan pair.

Shirley was now middle-aged but with his blond hair and clean-cut appearance, he made for a rather cuddly and friendly figure to the new family audience – especially when on the screen with Haystacks, who appeared in scruffy, ripped denim, with straggly, unkempt hair

emanating from both his head and face. His teeth were shades of brown and he angrily yelled at members of the audience, with saliva launching toward them as he did – much of it getting caught up in his beard.

Max saw the opportunity to *turn* his brother and make him a TV favourite and the face of British wrestling. Daddy and Haystacks began a decade-long rivalry – the most lucrative in the history of British professional wrestling. Daddy's singlet evolved into brighter shades and was suddenly emblazoned with a Union Jack; he would appear with a glittery top-hat upon his head, smiling from ear to ear, waving at the packed-out crowds and hugging kids in the front rows. He became a national icon of the era and launched the popularity of wrestling once again. The ITV *World of Sport* ratings rose to unprecedented levels. Max got the credit, and eventually total control of Joint Promotions.

The problem was, the ageing Shirley was now around the 25-stone mark and could only manage a few minutes of genuine in-ring action. Max therefore needed a fit lad to team with his obese brother in tag team matches at the top of the bill. The younger and skinnier the better, as the formula was clear: a pair of heels in one corner dominate and bully the brave kid whilst Big Daddy waits eagerly for the tag; the audience would will the game youngster to make a fightback and eventually, tag in their rotund hero, who would belly-butt both the bad guys into oblivion for the victory and the glory.

Dynamite was an ideal Kid for the job.

Regular national TV exposure followed, but Tom much preferred his singles matches, which would be against some of the smaller men in the middle of the bill. In these matches he faced some of the most respected workers around, such as Mark 'Rollerball' Rocco, Marty Jones, Jim Breaks, Johnny Saint, Tony Scarlo and the legendary Mick McManus – who was almost old enough to be his grandad. These bouts were presented as respectful, legitimate sporting contests, beginning and ending with a handshake between the competitors and displaying a series of holds and counter-holds that would create the story of a gutsy young boy acrobatically holding his own and even upsetting the established stronger stars. They were generally best-of-three-falls matches split into boxing-style rounds in the traditional British wrestling manner.

Tom was studying his veteran opponents and learning and improving all the time, determined to be the best. Having left school, he trained with Ted by day, and wrestled professionally in the evening – earning just £8 per show from Max Crabtree’s notoriously shallow pockets.

Tom’s dynamic action, high-flying agility, realistic work and authentic bravery meant that, regardless of his position on the card, the Dynamite Kid was the name on the lips of the punters as they left the venues. Whether the crowd was made up of hundreds in the countless smoky town halls and civic centres the length and breadth of the country, or several thousand in iconic arenas such as the Royal Albert Hall or Manchester’s legendary Belle Vue – the paying customer was never short-changed when this youngster was on the card.

At just 18, he was the best lightweight in the country, and was rewarded for his outstanding performances by being made the youngest ever British lightweight champion, winning the title from Bradford’s veteran heel Jim Breaks.

He later won the European welterweight title from Jean Corné, nearly lifting the roof from the De Montford Hall in Leicester. He was voted ‘Wrestler of the Year’ by the readers of *TV Stars Wrestling* magazine as he turned 19, relegating former tag team partner Big Daddy, the top star and top earner, to third place. Having been told a small guy like him could never topple the heavyweight stars, he was already proving them wrong.

‘Tommy, the world is your oyster now,’ Ted Betley would tell his star pupil, ‘if you want it, you take it.’

The first person to be inspired by young Tommy Billington was his own younger cousin, David Smith. David’s mum Joyce was the older sister of Tom’s dad Billy.

Shortly after having David, his parents Sid and Joyce emigrated to Australia with him and his older brother Terrence. They returned to Golborne when David was five, and the family grew when sisters Tracey and Joanne were born.

David was struck down by a severe eye infection during his childhood, which left his sight badly damaged. But he was a good enough and dedicated enough athlete to overcome that deficiency, enjoying and excelling at cricket, football and Olympic diving. But he hated wearing the glasses he needed to be able to get the most out of his

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education. Already shy, the self-conscious youngster lacked confidence and fell behind at school. Worried what his son's future held, Sid sought to find David a passion he could concentrate on to keep himself on a positive path throughout his formative years.

Apparently, Sid approached his brother-in-law Billy regarding connecting 13-year-old David with Ted for him to begin his own wrestling training in the wake of Tom doing so well. But Billy seemed cold and dismissive of the idea, and so Sid went directly to Ted himself. Ted was thrilled to take David, who was the same age and just as athletic as Tom when he had first stepped into his gym, but slightly taller.

With Tom on the road, Davey became Ted's new star pupil. But having left school, he had to earn his training by carrying out chores for Ted. As a by-product, this helped with his fitness, as he spent several hours each day delivering fruit and vegetables on a bicycle and climbing giant trees to prune the large branches with a hacksaw.

David's early training went very differently to Tom's, though. David's impaired eyesight meant many of his moves had to be carried out on instinct following hours and hours spent practising the perfect timing; he was also much quieter and more reserved than his cousin and less likely to challenge the more senior apprentices in the gym. Ted soon knew he had another potential star on his hands; what he didn't know was that the first wrestling-related wedge had been forced between the Smiths and the Billingtons. Tom was a unique and brilliant star that had always shone alone. It appears that both he and Billy believed he was one-of-one, not one-of-two as it would inevitably be perceived if and when David turned pro, so Tom made a conscious decision to maintain daylight between him and his cousin in the eyes of the wrestling world.