

M A T T B O Z E A T

A full-page photograph of Matt Bozeat, a bald man with a beard, wearing a camouflage t-shirt and boxing gloves. He is looking off-camera with a determined expression. The background is a blurred boxing ring. On his t-shirt, there are patches: a pink circular patch with 'SICILY' and a white patch with 'MTK GLOBAL'. On his left sleeve, there is a patch that says 'MEDITON'.

FIGHTING BACK

THE TYSON FURY STORY

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MATT BOZEAT



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CHAPTER 1

Born to Fight

IT WAS the sort of name you don't forget, the sort of name that demands an exclamation mark.

Tyson Fury was coming to box in Hinckley, just a few miles up the road from my flat in Leicester.

Whoever he was.

'I went in the corner with a boxer called Phill Fury when he boxed on a club show in Birmingham, he liked what I did and started boxing for us,' remembered Nick Griffin, head coach at Heart of England Amateur Boxing Club.

'He made the trip down from Preston and every now and then he would bring his cousin with him and he had a few training session with us.

'When he was ready to box, I got him matched on our show.'

That was in May 2005 in a function suite at Hinckley United Football Club's ground, the Marston's Stadium.

'I remember waiting to see the doctor before I had my medical and this huge shadow appeared behind me,' recalled Kieran Pitman, who also boxed on the show.

'I turned round and was looking at someone's chest. I thought, "I hope I'm not fighting him."'

He wasn't.

Jamie Waddell was fighting Fury.

'I wasn't really keen on taking the fight,' admitted Ray Revell, Waddell's coach at Wellingborough Amateur Boxing Club. But I was struggling to get Jamie matched and he was always fearless.'

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Pitman was in no rush to swap places with him.

'Everyone in the changing room was talking about Tyson, saying, "Have you seen the size of him?"' he remembered.

'It was a big changing room and he was dominating it. He was a monster. Everyone was talking about him before he even put his kit on.'

Fury also left an impression on Kyle Haywood, another future professional who fought that night.

'He was wearing odd boots, one was red, the other blue,' said Haywood, 'and his shorts didn't fit him either.'

'He looked a real character.'

'Everything about him was unorthodox. He was a big unit and you just thought, "Who is this guy?"'

'I asked someone and they said: "That's Tyson Fury." I thought they were joking. It sounded like a made-up name, a stage name or something. I mean, who ever heard of anyone called Tyson Fury?'

Yet there he was, all 6ft 9ins of him.

'Some fighters you remember,' said Ash Lane, beaten on points by Haywood that night.

'I remember Tyson Fury!

'It wasn't just his size, he had a real swagger about him as well. Nobody knew who he was, but watching him in the changing room, you could tell he thought he was the kiddy.'

Fury eased himself into the ring and, spotting my notebook on the ringside table in front of me, raised his eyebrows in a friendly gesture.

'If nobody talked about boxing or wrote about it, Tyson would find something else to do with his time,' his late uncle Hughie once told me.

Elsewhere in the room, Pitman was making mental notes.

'The lad [Waddell] was tough,' he said, 'but Tyson boxed his head off, gave him a boxing lesson. Tyson wasn't a massive puncher, but he jabbed, moved and made him miss. I remember thinking, "That's how to use your range. He will do all right, he's not bad."'

Revell wasn't a fan.

'He was talking to Jamie all the way through the fight,' he said, 'trying to wind him up.'

'He was saying, "You can't beat me, you can't even get near me."'

'I shouted at the referee about it – and I got a telling off!'

'I remember Jamie saying to me after the first round, "I can't get close to him and when I do, he holds."'

‘Tyson did box well, he was skilful. But I didn’t like him. I thought he was arrogant and a spoiler.’

Fury handed Waddell a standing count in the last round, but couldn’t force the stoppage – and chaos followed the announcement of his unanimous points win.

‘I heard they were betting on Tyson getting a stoppage in the crowd,’ said Haywood, ‘and when the fight went the distance, a big row broke out.’

‘Someone got in the ring and tried to give a speech I think and then it went crazy for a few minutes,’ remembered Sam ‘Bullet’ Bowen, who went on to win the British super featherweight title as a professional.

‘Tyson’s opponent was trying to push his way through to the changing room and I thought, “He’s massive, I had better get out of his way!”’

Order was restored after a few minutes, but the official in charge, Bill Evans, decided to cancel the rest of the show.

‘I was warming up my lads in the changing room,’ remembered Griffin, ‘and then I had to tell them they weren’t boxing after all.’

Waddell boxed only twice more, but he did toy with the idea of making a comeback more than a decade later.

‘Jamie came back to the gym for a few weeks,’ said Revell, ‘but he didn’t stick at it.’

‘I gave him his amateur card because of the name he’s got on it. He seemed very matter of fact about it. I said, “Not many people can say they boxed a future world champion and you’ve got the proof.”’

‘Jamie didn’t seem very bothered. I think he was still upset that he lost.’

SO, who was Tyson Fury?

He was a member of the travelling community that was estimated to number around 60,000 across the United Kingdom and Ireland.

They lived in tight-knit communities on caravan sites, working mainly in gardening and construction and maintaining devout religious beliefs.

To Travellers, family pride and honour are everything and traditionally their passions were hunting and fighting.

‘Every travelling man, born from his mother, wants a fight, simple,’ said Fury.

‘If you’re not a fighter, you’re no good, you’re useless.’

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'A Traveller's highest ranking, here's how it goes: a fighting man is number one, if you're not a good fighting man, you have to be a good man who can earn a living. So it comes to money.

'Then it comes to horses, I think. I've never been involved with horses because I can't stand them.'

Most Traveller boys box as amateurs and at schoolboy, junior and youth level. They tend to dominate but few go on to have successful professional boxing careers.

'If you go to any schoolboy championship or ABA finals in the last ten years, 80 per cent of the boxers will be Traveller kids in finals and boxing each other,' said Isaac Lowe, who has gone on to have a good professional career, winning the Commonwealth featherweight title.

'Sadly, they get to the age of 16 or 17 and go to work or worry about different sides of life.

'They get the urge to go to work. Traveller kids fend for themselves. We go to work as soon as we can. We then get money and we're introduced to the nightclub life.'

Travellers also tend to marry young and the roles of man and wife are clearly defined, as Fury explained once.

'People have got to understand that our lifestyle is totally, totally different,' he said.

'We may be the same colour, and we may speak the same language, but deep inside we are nothing alike. We are aliens. In our culture, it is all about the men. The men can do everything, and women just clean and cook and have children and look after that man.'

Women in the travelling community, Fury explained once, had to be 'pure and respectful'.

He said, 'There are these girls who want to open their legs for every Tom, Dick and Harry. But they are looked upon as rubbish in our community. We don't do stuff like that. If I had a sister who did that, I'd hang her. She would bring disgrace to the family. It is a very, very bad thing to do, that. Women have to be pure and respectful.'

Tyson's parents were Amber Burton and John Fury.

Tyson's mother grew up in Newry, Northern Ireland, and was a Romany gypsy.

The Furys explained to me that Romany gypsies have their roots in India and Afghanistan and were always fighters, making their own

weapons and battling Genghis Khan before fleeing and settling in Yugoslavia, Ireland and elsewhere. Amber wanted to call her second son Luke Fury but on the insistence of John, he was named after the youngest, and in his opinion greatest, world heavyweight champion of them all.

Mike Tyson proved himself to be, at the very least, the best heavyweight of his generation on 27 June 1988, when in a fight billed as *Once and For All* he took just 91 seconds to punch Michael Spinks into semi-consciousness.

Spinks, a former world light-heavyweight champion who was unbeaten in 31 fights, had a claim to the heavyweight championship having twice controversially outpointed Larry Holmes for the IBF belt and then vacated to take a lucrative match with Gerry Cooney.

Faced with Tyson, Spinks froze and was dropped twice.

Seven weeks after Tyson's defining night, on 12 August 1988, Tyson Luke Fury was born seven weeks premature in Manchester. At birth, he weighed only one pound and his heart stopped beating three times while he was in an incubator.

'Tyson was an unexpected pregnancy, given we had lost several children between him and his eldest brother,' remembered John.

'We were just hoping we could bring life and keep it in the world.

'He had came [sic] into the world, had breathing difficulties – no one was optimistic.

'I could put him in the palm of my hand and looking at him I thought, "This is a strange encounter with life." I had this tremendous feeling.

'I sat with him day and night, kept playing with him, working his little legs and arms, talking to him. There was something special about him. I thought, "You're a special human being."

Tyson survived, but his early years were tough.

'He used to imagine the curtains on fire or lions chewing his feet,' remembered John.

'He'd have a high temperature and we'd have to ice him down or often take him to hospital.'

Tyson believed he was born to fight.

'If two fighting families come together, they are going to breed fighters,' he explained.

Both his parents came from fighting families.

Amber's uncle was Uriah 'Big Just' Burton and he was 'The King of the Gypsies', the title awarded to the best man in the bare-knuckle

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fighting that is a tradition among Travellers. When Burton relinquished his crown, his nephew, Bartley Gorman, took it on and for two decades he reigned, often ironing out opponents with his 'bull hammer' punch, a right hand delivered with tremendous force between the eyes.

Gorman wrote in his autobiography, *King of the Gypsies*, 'Travelling men fight. Not all of them and all the time, but many of them and often.

'They would rather settle a row with knuckles than resort to the courts or call the police. Their contests may be held at fairs like Appleby in Cumbria, Musselburgh in Scotland or Ballinasloe in Ireland; at race meetings like Doncaster or Epsom; in a field or at an encampment; on the spur of the moment in a pub or club, at a wedding or a funeral.

'The fighters may have trained for months or be drunk as lords. Sometimes there are rules: no biting, no butting, no gouging, no kicking, no hitting a man when he is down.

'Often there are not. When a fight is "all in", anything goes.'

John Fury described Gorman as 'one of the hardest men who has ever lived' – and he was a hard man himself.

'I WAS born in Ireland, my father's side are Roscommon people, but I came over to Leiston [Suffolk] when I was a week old and we travelled all over,' John Fury told *Boxing Monthly* in 2009.

'Growing up, I used to wake up every morning and think, "I'm John Fury, me. I'm taking no backward steps, no shit."

'Our family might be the only ones at a school of pits lads' [miners] sons and I'd have at least three fights every day.

'I was always big for my age and was fighting grown men from the age of about 12. As I got older, men would challenge me in the pubs and I'd say, "I can beat you, but I'm drunk." So we'd meet the next morning at six o'clock, shirts off.

'Most times, money never changed hands, just pride. If a copper caught two willing lads having a fight, nine times out of ten, it was scratched out.

'I never got more than a few stitches, a black eye, a couple of teeth missing. It was enjoyable fun.

'Then, in the late 1980s, no one would give me a job [Fury worked on the roads] and I didn't have a pot to piss in. I weren't an educated man and Travellers classed you as a bit of an idiot without pride if you

took social security. I didn't want to commit crime, so I had to use what tools I had and fight my way out.

'I soon learned you could earn a good few quid on the knuckle jobs [bareknuckle boxing], winner take all.

'It was no rules – head butts, elbows, teeth, gouging the eyes. In a proper bareknuckle fight, you should be able to keep winging until one falls.

'Within the travelling community, you win a few, get a reputation, and, if you're "The Man", you will get opposition. Everywhere you went, someone wanted to fight you: Scots, Irish, Welsh, Romany.

'It'd happen anywhere: a Travellers' site, a barn, usually outside. The big tournaments were held in secret. They didn't want the police involved because it can be very brutal. Sometimes, they can fight for an hour at a time without any referee.'

Tommy Miller, a boxing manager from Halifax with one of the biggest stables of fighters in the country, watched Fury fight and convinced him to try professional boxing. Fury didn't take the sport as seriously as he might. He took fights at short notice and wasn't a regular at the gym. Brendan Ingle was in his corner once and told his son Dominic, 'Look at this man with the crazy mop of black hair. He doesn't bother training, he just fights.'

Nonetheless, Fury fought his way into contention for the British heavyweight title. He was paired with the North East's Manny Burgo in an eliminator, but as Fury remembered it, Burgo pulled out three days before the fight, to be replaced by Henry Akinwande, an entirely different proposition.

Akinwande was a gangly Londoner who, at 6ft 7ins, towered over Fury by four inches and would go on to win the WBO heavyweight championship.

Fury said Akinwande 'ripped me head off with a double left hook' in the third round and 'after that, it was back to Plan B – the knuckle.

'You needed at least ten grand to make an entry, so I sold my lorry and my van,' he said. 'My 5k [£5,000] caravan. Gambled the lot. I probably had about 20 knuckle fights with a stake involved.

'There's a lot of physical contact, so I'd pay five of the biggest, strongest lads I could find to wrestle me. I'd also chop trees in the forest, run in army boots with a van tyre around my waist and hit a big bag bare-fisted.

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'As a young fighting lad, I was just raw and powerful. I didn't have a particularly heavy punch, but I had plenty of spirit, could outgame them. But, after I turned pro and learned how to box properly, it was a completely different ball game. They'd come in square on, trying to take it all. Against a trained boxer, you just can't do that.

'The reason I never lost weren't because of how great I was, it was the fellas I fought were fucking useless. Game, strong lads, but no skill or ability, could give it, but they couldn't take the pain.

'It was like taking candy off a baby.

'The fights I had outside were usually over within seconds. I weren't an especially big puncher but once I got going, I'd not stop swinging until they were out cold. I'd not come up for air. I just wanted to kill.

'I had a completely different level of fitness, so I'd be able to apply pressure until they couldn't breathe. I'd hit them with fists, elbows, head, teeth and feet until they dropped and give best [surrendered].

'If they didn't, I'd kick their face off, it was up to them. Afterwards, shake hands and on to the next one. In my twenties, I was a really formidable force.

'In 1992, I fought the so-called champion at the time, an Irishman whose name I can't even remember, over in Ireland. With stakes and everything, I came up over a hundred grand.

'As a young kid, Tyson and his brothers would watch me set upon people who tried to rip me off or take liberties. They've seen me use the baseball bat and, trust me, the more damage I inflicted, the more they liked it. So Tyson's got that [affinity with] violence himself.'

Tyson has always said he only fought outside the boxing ring once.

'My brother set me up to fight my next-door neighbour,' he remembered.

'I was nine years old and he was 11. They just wanted to know who would win, so we had a fight. My trousers kept falling down and every time I moved to pull them up, he punched me in the face.'

Fury described that fight as 'a draw'.

John remembered other occasions when Tyson used his fists outside the ring.

He said, 'Though he has this shy, cheerful side, trust me, he's had his share of scuffles down the town and at weddings. When he clicks into fighting mode, trust me, he's an evil, nasty bastard who wants to hurt you badly.'

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‘He’d have made a great knuckle fighter. What idle chance would an outside man stand against him? None. But Tyson’s never known the gypsy life. I didn’t want my kids brought up in the tough environment that I was raised. Since three years old, he was bred on a farm. Unlike myself, I always ensured Tyson had the money to train proper.’

‘I WAS brought up in Wilmslow, a little village in Cheshire,’ said Tyson.

‘When my dad was 18, he bought a piece of land, nothing on it, a piece of green grass.

‘Then, with his boxing money, he bought a bungalow and every fight he had, that money was for some roof tiles or some bricks, so it got built over a period of three years.

‘Then we moved in.

‘Later, he sold it and bought a small holding in a little village called Styal in Wilmslow.

‘So, all the caravan stuff. The only time I have ever lived in a caravan was when the whole lane, Moss Lane, got flooded because of the little stream that ran behind it. So then we lived in a caravan for about a year until it was all fully refurbished.’

Fury described Styal as ‘lots of wildlife, no crime’.

‘I had a great childhood. We just went out on our quad bikes.’

Even though he didn’t live the traditional Traveller’s life, he still lived by their code, reading the Bible daily and working.

Tyson was taken out of the village school when he was 11, a former governor remembering, ‘The scariest thing about them [the Furys] was their huge dog.’

John explained, ‘They learn different things when they are not at school – more streetwise. He helped me build the house.’

Teachers at Tyson’s primary school had been impressed by his English and arithmetic, and those skills proved useful to his father.

‘My reading wasn’t so good,’ said John. ‘I’d get letters and ask him, “What does that mean?” He’d tell me. He’d add up the money.’

The young Tyson also developed an obsession with boxing.

‘The boxing used to fascinate me,’ said Tyson. ‘Other kids watched cartoons, but me and me brothers only watched boxing DVDs.’

They sparred as well.

‘There was only one pair of gloves in the house,’ he remembered. ‘I don’t know why – they were my dad’s old gloves from when he used to

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train – and they were all stinky and sweaty. So we used to put one glove on each and have tea towels wrapped around our other hand. We used to spar full on in the kitchen, plates going everywhere.

‘We used to have this rug in the kitchen. It wasn’t very big and whoever went off the mat first was out. We’d trade punches. Even before I had an amateur fight, me and my dad would spar in the garden.’

John said, ‘I was on the grass one Sunday, it was a lovely sunny afternoon, and him and [younger brother] Shane asked me to spar with them.

‘Tyson hit me with a left hook and I felt a searing pain in my side.

‘I thought, “What, from a 14-year-old lad?” I thought to myself, “I’ll have a sit down.” But when I moved to get off the wall, I couldn’t move. I had three cracked ribs.

‘He was a big 14, around 6ft 5ins, 16 stone. He was a fat kid. He was not tall and lean. He loved McDonald’s and burgers. A friend of mine said that although he had layers of fat on him, he had never seen anyone move like him and that he could be a champion.’

Nonetheless, Tyson said his father ‘didn’t want us involved’ in boxing. Tyson ignored him.

‘I REMEMBER the local hooligan telling me there was a gym a couple of miles away and I didn’t believe him,’ said Tyson. ‘I thought I would have heard about it.’

The gym was the home of Ringway Amateur Boxing Club and at the gym was a giant, unbeaten amateur heavyweight known as ‘Big Lewis’. ‘I was made to spar him and he punched the shit out of me,’ remembered Fury. ‘My nose was bloodied and my face a right mess.’

Tyson would get his revenge.

His uncle, Hughie, was training a professional heavyweight, Dave Ingleby, a big, tough novice from Morecambe, and Tyson said, ‘Every Saturday, I would go over there for sparring. I was naturally fit and I remember thinking, “I can do this.”

‘I went back to see “Big Lewis”. He had been the kingpin at the gym for a long time, but I had got better and he hadn’t. He never went back to the gym after we sparred again.’

FOLLOWING his amateur debut in Hinckley, Fury kept winning and picked up a nickname – not that anyone called Tyson Fury needs one.

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He was known as 'The Facebreaker' after breaking an opponent's jaw and eye socket, and such performances aroused suspicion.

'When I was 16, the ABA [Amateur Boxing Association] suspended the junior super heavyweight division for that year only because they reckoned I looked about 25!' said Fury.

'At 17, I had nowhere to go except the senior novices, fighting fully fledged men. I got roughed up in there, but showed good grit and determination and ultimately proved too skilful.'

The novices was a championship for fighters with fewer than 20 bouts and Fury reached the final after a bizarre incident during the semi-finals in Nottingham.

He was gloved up and ready to box, only to be handed a bye after both fighters in the preceding semi-final were disqualified following a filthy tussle.

Fury won the final and suffered his first defeat at the World Junior Championships in Morocco in 2006, a 36-31 points reverse to Sardor Abdullayev from Uzbekistan.

Fury's confidence wasn't dented. He had a T-shirt printed that read, 'Tyson Fury 2008 Beijing Olympic champion.'

To get to China, he would have to beat David Price, the towering Liverpoolian who was by some distance Britain's leading super heavyweight. Price was a seasoned international who earlier that year had won Commonwealth Games gold in India.

By comparison, Fury was a teenage novice.

Had the match between Price and Fury been mooted for an amateur club show, it surely would not have been allowed to take place.

It would have been considered a mismatch. Fury would surely have had no chance.

Tyson himself never thought there was an opponent he couldn't beat and at 18 he entered the ABA Championships, putting himself on course for a fight with Price.

There was huge interest when they met in the North West final in November 2006 and hundreds of Travellers were locked out.

'I was 18 years old and had 12 amateur fights,' said Fury. 'He was Commonwealth Games gold medallist.'

The 22-8 decision went Price's way, but Fury had his moments.

'I had him over in the second round,' remembered Tyson, 'but there was no count.'

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'I was trying to hurt him with big shots and he went into his shell after I connected.

'I sparred him at an England training camp after that and did better.'

Tyson also suffered a points loss to Ivan Bezverhiy of the Ukraine in a multi-nations tournament, which was reversed when they fought again in the semi-finals of the European Junior Championships in Hungary.

In the final, Fury faced Russia's Maxim Babanin.

'I must have hit him with 20 jabs in the first,' he said, 'and at the end of the round, the score was 2-2.

'My dad shouted that I should give it to him, so I did and ended up being 10-6 down!

'I was outpunching him three to one in the third and the score was 22-11.'

Price remained the target and Fury called for a box-off with him after outpointing American number one Michael Hunter in an international match.

Fury was told there would be no box-off against Price and decided to take another route.

Fury's maternal grandfather was born in Wales and he explored the possibility of representing them at the 2007 World Championships in Chicago, a qualifier for the following year's Olympics.

'They told me I didn't have enough amateur experience to go and said they wanted me to be Olympic champion in 2012,' said Fury.

'I told them to take 2012 and stick it up their arse. I just wanted to box.'

Fury was convinced that should he get to the Olympics, he would do well.

But he had to get there.

Next, he tried to qualify through the Irish amateur system. Both his parents were born in Ireland.

'I got through to the semi-finals [of the Irish championships],' said Tyson, 'and the day before I was supposed to box in Dublin, they wanted to see my documents to prove I was Irish. We didn't have the time.'

NEXT time I saw Fury, he started punching my friend in the face.

Nick Griffin had rung to say Tyson was in Hinckley looking for sparring and wondered if Paul Butlin was available.

Butlin would tell Sky Sports ahead of a *Prizefighter* tournament that he was the good-looking heavyweight hope Britain was waiting for, but

a brief spell in the domestic top ten aside, he spent most of his career fighting for money.

'I just asked what the money is,' he said, 'and as long as they didn't take the mickey, I said, "Yes."'

That attitude took him around Europe. The heavily tattooed Butlin never could turn down a fight or a tough spar. Of course he would go to Hinckley to spar Fury. Butlin was also a boxing fan and if there was a new heavyweight around, he wanted to know how good he was and how far he might go.

Butlin was soon convinced of Fury's capabilities. The plan was for Fury and Butlin to spar six rounds but after a couple, Griffin decided Butlin should take no more punishment.

'Butlin was a tough, hard pro,' remembered Griffin, 'but after a couple of rounds he was crumbling. I thought the best thing to do was to get Paul out of there.'

Butlin didn't complain about his judgement and told me on the drive home, 'He's as good as anyone out there already. You can't get near him. You can't wade into him because he will poke his left out and push you back. He's quick for a big man and goes to the body well.'

Butlin reckoned Fury compared well to the professional champions and contenders he had fought and sparred, but Fury was still an amateur at the time and his target was the Amateur Boxing Association Championships.

In the semi-finals, he met Nottingham's hard Shane McPhilbin for the third time.

'The first time we boxed,' said McPhilbin, 'I walked into the changing room, saw this huge lad standing there and said, "You must be Tyson."'

'He shook his head, pointed at someone even bigger and said, "No, that's Tyson." I thought, "Fuck, I'm in trouble here."'

McPhilbin, who never let his boxing get in the way of his social life, lost that fight on points and when they boxed again, the result was the same.

Their third meeting was for a place in the ABA final and Fury forced the stoppage, a sign of his improvement.

'Tyson is hard to get into and hit,' said McPhilbin, who grew up with a father who told him and his brothers, 'If you don't fight, you don't eat.'

'But before I boxed him the last time, I thought I knew how to get round his jab.'

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'Even when I did, I ended up taking uppercuts and hooks.

'He was a clever fighter even then. He knows what you're thinking and is a step ahead.'

The ABA final was against Damien Campbell, from the successful Repton gym in London, and he couldn't figure out Fury, either.

According to the judges at ringside, Campbell landed only one punch to Fury's 19.

Nineteen-year-old Fury was the ABA super heavyweight champion.

'Then I went on holiday and thought about turning professional,' he said.