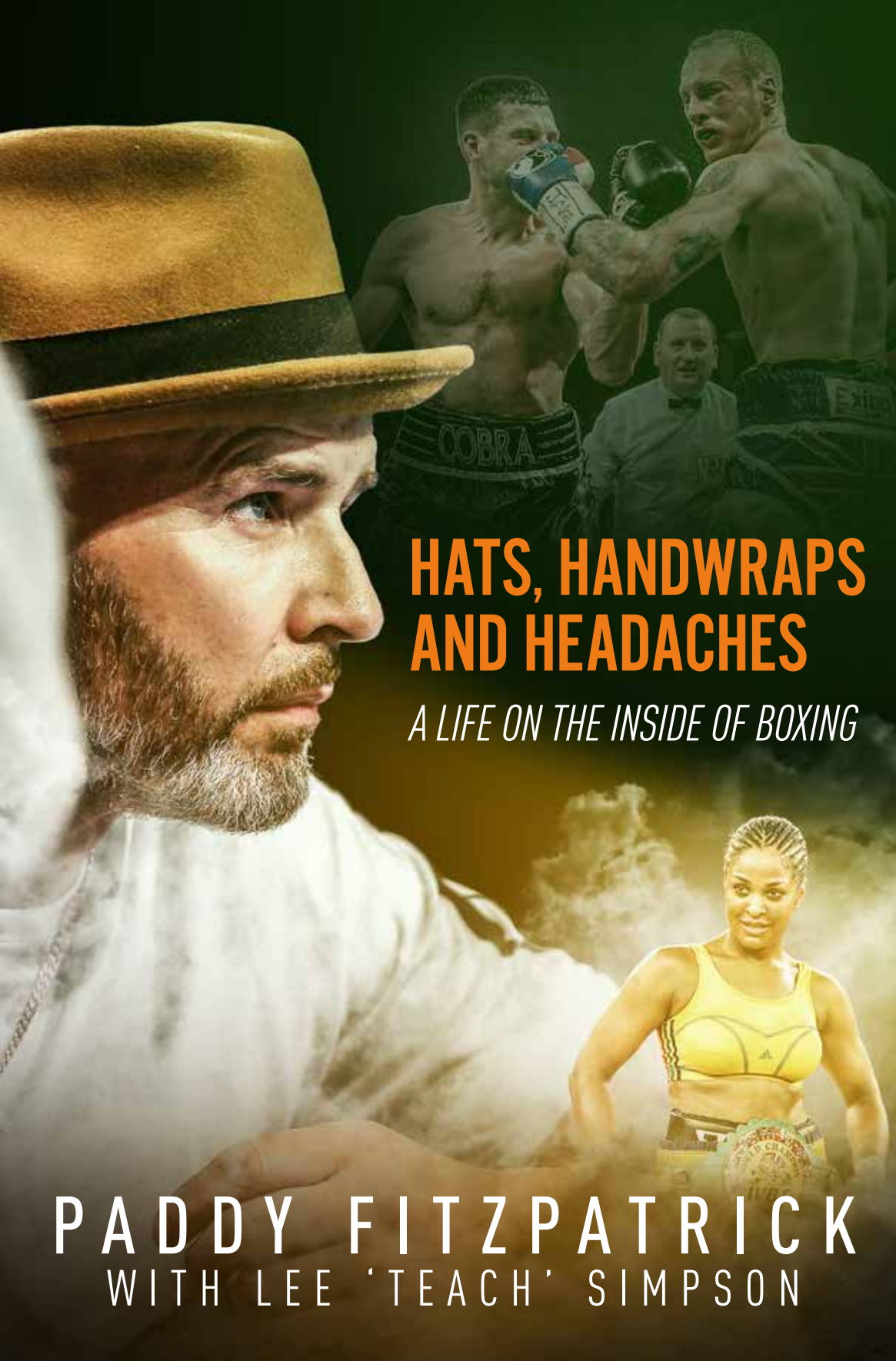

HATS, HANDWRAPS AND HEADACHES

A LIFE ON THE INSIDE OF BOXING

PADDY FITZPATRICK
WITH LEE 'TEACH' SIMPSON

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Introduction

Becoming 'Teach' and writing this book

Fitzpatrick's Boxing Gym – March 2017.

The first punch that connects with my face lands on my jaw, exactly between where the mandible connects with the skull bone.

It hurts – *a lot*.

A bloke called Casper did it. *Casper* – like the *friendly* ghost. Later, I learn that what hit me with such force was a right cross – and it was my own fault. I deserved it. One of the best things about boxing, as I quickly found out, was that each painful experience was the fighter's *own* fault. This was one of the simple beauties of boxing. Because if I was making the mistake and getting hit, I could also learn from the mistake and make an adjustment to prevent getting hit in the first place. Casper had warned me not to let my left hand drop, regardless of how tired I was becoming, and to punctuate his fistic point – he hit me.

'Experience', he says, talking to me at the side of the ring as his next sparring partner gets his gear on, 'is the best way to learn. You won't forget so easily. One of the best things about boxing is that you learn to make adjustments. If you don't, you get hit. It's good motivation, and it helps the fighter not to forget. If you make a mistake in boxing, you're punished. And the punishment is pain.'

I didn't forget his lesson. The ache in my jaw lasted for several days afterwards.

I have barely recovered from the physical and emotional onslaught that is squaring up to a fighter a lot more skilful than I am when I hear Casper shout, 'Hey Teach, don't get too comfortable. You're up again next.'

I take a deep breath. Casper is *way* better at boxing than I am. Even if he is pulling his punches for me, it doesn't feel like it. And getting hit in the face is getting hit in the face. No one *likes* it.

The question is: *why am I doing this?* I'm in my 40s. I'm married. I have a very demanding job. Shouldn't I just take it easy?

But I love coming to this gym.

And that's partly the point of this book really. There are plenty of boxing gyms in Swindon. But this gym, Fitzpatrick's, is something *special.* At least it's special to me and to the wide variety of characters here. My name is Lee Simpson. But no one knows this at the boxing gym. 'Teach' is what they call me – on account of the fact that in my day job, I am a teacher.

Paddy Fitzpatrick, the Irish coach who owns and runs the gym, thinks up a nickname for everyone. My nickname

is not original. But I am pathetically pleased with it. It feels like acceptance.

The nicknames vary from person to person. There's 'The Duke', who has won the Irish national cruiserweight title and the Commonwealth cruiserweight title; there's 'Sniper', 'Sky-High' (a very tall lad), and 'Heavy' too who, as you have probably worked out, is carrying a bit of weight around the stomach. And there's a guy called 'Danger', who just keeps on smiling, no matter how many times someone hits him in the face.

After I complete conditioning circuits and hit the heavy bags for a few rounds, I hear my name.

'Hey Teach!' shouts Paddy, 'You're up on the speed ball now, dude – get your gloves off!'

The speed ball.

This is an apparatus I have been looking forward to using since I started coming to the gym. It's that small, teardrop-shaped ball that hangs from the roof in front of a board. The skilled user will bounce it from the board with a consistently fast rattle, like an automatic machine gun. From the beginning, this is one of the things I have wanted to be able to do well since taking boxing up. The elegant *duh-duh-duh, duh-duh-duh, duh-duh-duh* at such effortless high speed.

Unfortunately, the dream image I have of myself stroking the leather of the speed ball is a long way from the reality.

When I get to the speed ball, Paddy is waiting for me. Unsurprisingly, he is striking the ball with such rapidity that it appears as a blur.

Suddenly, he stops and puts his arm around my shoulder. 'OK Teach, I'm gonna show you how to do this *exactly*. You watch me do it right, imitate what I do and then work towards speed. The key is rhythm. Get the rhythm right and then you can build up the speed.'

He looks me in the eye. 'Understand me?'

Not quite, I think. But the thing is, I want to understand, which is why, several years since I started coming to the boxing gym as a novice boxer in my 40th year, I am still coming here. And I am by no means the first man to do this.

Perhaps most famous is the story of F.X. Toole, the pen name of Jerry Boyd, a writer spoken of now in the same breath as greats like Raymond Carver and Ernest Hemingway and best known for being the writer of the original story *Million Dollar Baby*, which was made into the film by Clint Eastwood.

In his late forties, Toole walked into the Broadway Gym in South Central Los Angeles, meeting a weathered and gnarled old trainer called Dub Huntley. Huntley thought that Toole was lost, until Toole asked Huntley to train him. It was a shock to Dub, but he took on the ageing Toole thinking that the old guy would drop off pretty quickly if he trained him hard.

But Toole didn't drop off and he kept coming back, week after week, training and sparring in the gym with men a lot younger and a lot fitter than he was.

F.X. Toole has become a bit of a hero to me. In interviews, he explains how age and poor eyesight at 48

years old caused him to take more shots than he needed to, lacking both hand speed and a young man's reactions. While sparring, Toole had teeth cracked, his nose broken and developed a jaw problem that forced him to quit the physical act of boxing.

And yet, he had fallen in love. In fact, the connection that F.X. Toole made with boxing, and Dub Huntley in particular, saved his life according to his daughter Erin. As Erin tells it, divorce and the subsequent loss of his children took the life out of her father. Boxing, and the sense of family and community that he found in the Broadway Gym, brought some of it back.

In amongst the hopes and dreams of the boxers, Toole re-found his heart – because fighters *have* to have a whole lot of heart. And to Toole, this felt like home. 'God has blessed me with the Sweet Science,' is what Toole used to say when asked about boxing. And when, in his early 70s, Toole finally realised his ambition of becoming a writer, he dedicated his first book of short stories called *Rope Burns* to 'God and ... Dub Huntley'.

When I first contacted Paddy about learning to box, I had fully expected him to put me off the idea. But he didn't. He encouraged me. And I couldn't detect a single patronising note in the tone he used with me from the first time I met him.

I was reassured, and relieved, because at 40 years old I had entered what I now know was a dark place for me. In truth, I had entered that dark place many years before this point in my life but as I turned 40, I had acknowledged the

fact. I recognised that this dark place was affecting me and the people I loved.

And I hoped that boxing could help.

I hadn't entirely realised until that time but I wasn't the person that I wanted to be. Regardless of how successful I looked on the outside, I wasn't dealing effectively with the stresses in my life. I was coping in a very stereotypical way for a male. Allowing the stresses to build up, pretending I was fine, and keeping a lid on the stress pot until nothing more could fit inside it.

And then there would be an explosion as the pressure cooker of my emotions looked for some kind of release.

I knew at this point that I couldn't allow this to continue. And that's when I turned to boxing.

Naively, I thought that boxing would help with anger and frustration. Hitting things must be good therapy is what I reasoned. It seemed simple.

And I was right, but only on the *simplest* level possible.

The physical act of exerting myself at a tough sport that requires the participant to develop every muscle and fibre of his body helped me massively. I was pushing myself physically more than I ever had before, and just the act of focusing on this single sport for a two-hour session until my T-shirt was so wet with sweat that I had to change it, was having an immediate impact upon my equilibrium.

The more I took part, the better I got. And the better I got at boxing, the better I felt physically – and *psychologically*.

I have become fascinated with what A.J. Liebling, the famous writer for the *New Yorker*, described as 'The Sweet

Science'. The mechanics of how to fight efficiently and effectively; the science behind how to capture the greatest amount of power in a punch and how to evade an opponent with the smallest margin of distance between you and him in order to ensure an immediate counter-attack.

I have even improved my own ability to teach effectively in my day job through observing the coaches at the gym and studying the way Paddy communicates how to learn efficiently to students others would find hard to reach.

I have also benefited from being part of the community that Paddy's gym fosters and he calls his 'boxing family'.

Most importantly, I am benefiting from the peace that boxing has brought to me as an individual, and by extension to my life and those around me.

Peace may seem a strange by-product of a combat sport that has caused me to have a painful jaw, to bleed from the nose, and to hold my ribs for weeks after a sparring session. But peace is exactly what boxing, and Paddy's coaching and friendship, has helped me to find.

I am convinced that choosing *this* gym has made the difference. I don't think this could have happened just anywhere. Boxing at this gym has helped me to find a peace that I have not known before and did not expect to find – least of all in the sweat and violence of combat sport.

Over the last few years, I have developed a friendship with Paddy and learned about his extraordinary life in boxing, which is what this book is really about. This is *his* story spanning his early fights in Limerick, training champions in

LA and being a key part in the winning of a world heavyweight championship with Lamon Brewster in Las Vegas.

As Paddy would say, I hope that this book keeps you smilin'.

This is his story and I am glad to help him tell it.

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It's Over

August 2015

This should have been the best of times.

By rights, 'Saint' George Groves and his coach Paddy Fitzpatrick should have been a team almost at the peak of their potential for success. They were fighting for one of the most valuable possessions in elite-level sport – a world title belt from one of the four major governing bodies of world boxing – in Las Vegas. A world title belt that would finally have meant they had achieved their ambition – their dream – at the third time of asking.

It was September 2015. Groves, Paddy's most high-profile fighter at the time, was boxing for the WBC super middleweight title at the MGM Grand Garden Arena on a show promoted by multiple world champion and Mr Vegas himself, Floyd Mayweather Jr.

George's opponent was 'The Ripper', Badou Jack, a tough Swedish fighter who had taken the title from Anthony Dirrell

in a 12-round contest that resulted in a majority decision in favour of Jack.

After losing two titanic world title fights against 'The Cobra' Carl Froch, George and Paddy had re-grouped as Team Groves and won the European super middleweight title and WBC silver belt with a convincing win over the skilled and durable Frenchman Christopher Rebrasse.

For years, they had been mixing with the best in the boxing community, narrowly missing out on world titles, but coming back stronger each time. Their eyes were determinedly focused on the fistic prize they knew George was so patently capable of achieving – a major world title belt.

This should have been the best of times.

George had enjoyed his most outstanding training camp to date in the time they had been together, improving upon his personal bests for cardiovascular performance and every other measure of his fitness. George's sparring had been excellent – efficient and *seriously* damaging. For the first time in their work together, he had hurt *every* sparring partner.

He was ruthless.

He was ready.

Together, George and Paddy had scaled the pinnacle of the boxing pyramid. Winning an elite-level European belt and fighting in front of 80,000 spectators at Wembley Stadium, London for a world title in what was the biggest sporting event of its kind in Britain since the 1940s.

They had achieved all of this.

And yet in his heart, four weeks before George was due to fight Badou Jack, even with the tantalising possibility of George becoming the champion of the world and so many potential opportunities opening up for them, Paddy knew that their relationship was over.

He knew that whatever the outcome of the fight, he would leave George's team.

Leave and never go back.