



JOURNEYMEN

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE BOXING BUSINESS

A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON THE NOBLE ART

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Contents

Introduction	9
Two Sides of the Same Sport	15
Writers write, fighters fight....	21
Hearts of gold, bodies of steel.	33
‘Boxing saved my life.’	41
The sins of the father, visited on the son	66
The Enigma	83
‘I love getting hit’	96
On the Road with Mr Reliable	122
The One Man Riot.	141
‘Undefeated in the home corner’	169
I could have been a contender	184
‘These boys can’t beat me!’	203
Putting up with all the bullshit	220
The Final Bell	235
The Smiths, remembered	251

Introduction

A different sort of boxing book

IN the same way that history is usually about kings, generals and events of great importance, boxing stories tend to focus on world title nights, champions and the characters around them, those perceived to be winners and those who live in the shadows of their glory.

But what if there were a history of foot-soldiers or anonymous infantrymen? Their struggles, spirit and humour? Of the guys who worked like donkeys, defended the rear and took bullets without receiving a second look? Is it possible that seeing battles through their eyes would make us view the whole war differently?

The stories here come from the wrong end of the fight game, where mad blokes with day jobs get clobbered by young whipper-snappers for a few weeks' worth of wages. Where rings are assembled on top of basketball courts or nightclub dancefloors and TV cameras are a rarity. If this was a *Rocky* film, it would be about Spider Rico.

For that reason these pages will not serve up the fantasy that many fans are used to – multi-million purses, rafts of quotes from Don King and whore-and-coke splattered after-parties on the Las Vegas strip. For large numbers of young men drawn towards the alpha-male glamour of the fight game, this pastiche of over-indulgences qualifies as 'living the dream', but if we're being honest, there are more than enough books like that already. I have a couple of shelves full of them at home, penned by some of boxing's

great scribes and as much as I have enjoyed them all, they tend to fuse in my memory. If you've read any before, you'll know what I mean; deprived background – fighting as an escape route – sudden wealth/pressure of the spotlight – demons that can't be slayed – ultimate redemption in some form.

Tried and trusted. Not here, though.

The other major difference is me. By the time this book is published I will have been a boxing journalist for about two and a half years, mostly on the internet, on various sites, with a few bits in print. Unlike the guys who received awards for the books on my bedside cabinet, I can't claim to have particularly impressive credentials – neither decades of ringside experience nor a phonebook full of contacts – or at least I didn't before I started work on this. I do come from a boxing family and have been watching boxing for as long as I can remember, but before the last couple of years I wouldn't have considered myself any sort of insider. I was just a fan, like millions of others.

This perhaps puts me in a strong position, though. Unlike some of the best-known pundits, I have nothing to lose. I don't have a lifetime's worth of carefully maintained fight-game relationships or even a salary that will have to be sacrificed if I write things that certain people don't like. I have no vested interest in telling the story one way or the other and if this means doors closing in my face and the end of my stint as a boxing writer then so be it. I'll just go back to what I was before and watch on the TV or buy tickets.

If nothing else, this book will be honest.

As much as it tells the stories of ten men who fight to supplement their income in the small-hall scene in the UK, painting a picture of the workings of the sport at that level, to some extent it will chart my journey from naive fan to where I am now, having attended these kind of shows for the last couple of years. In that time I've gained a new perspective on a sport I've followed all my life. Imagine being besotted with an actress you've seen in movies, then meeting her in a nightclub and finding she has bruises and needle tracks on her arms. That's my relationship with boxing.

INTRODUCTION

It still fascinates and attracts me, I still want to be around it, but parts of it make me uneasy.

Boxing holds an ambivalent place in the world today. The spectacle of two men (or women, lately) attempting to concuss each other with their fists is at odds with modern morality. Polite society has turned its back on it.

Foolish calls for a ban have been with us since the 1960s. They are less vociferous now but have had a creeping effect. It is no longer a sport taught in schools. It is rarely on free-to-air TV any more, Mick Hennessy's recent deal with Channel Five being the only exception, and is only superficially covered by the newspapers. As a result, world champions are not the household names they once were and the casual sports fan, replete with football trivia and everything else from rugby to golf, mostly has no idea who British or European titlists might be.

This means that within the boom industry of live sport, through which Premier League players have become a new class of aristocracy, boxing has been reduced to a sideshow. Small-hall boxing is barely even that. Paying £45 to watch a bunch of guys you've never heard of beat each other up at the York Hall is simply not on the radar of mainstream entertainment for most people. Attending such shows therefore has an illicit, retrogressive, almost guilty feeling, like going to a titty bar.

In spite of this, at the peak of the pyramid, where welterweight champ Floyd Mayweather Junior – the world's highest-paid sportsman – can be found, pay-per-view records continue to be broken and a handful of fighters receive sums unimaginable for the big stars of previous decades. Boxing clearly isn't dying, as some say, it is just carving an ever deeper, more isolated niche for itself. The wealth it generates is increasingly held in fewer and fewer pairs of hands.

At its core, for competitors, the modern, less-celebrated version of the noble art retains truths from its golden past. It remains a physical pursuit which demands unique inner strength. You can call it bravery, recklessness or even desperation – fighters all have

their own motivations for doing what they do and not all of them are noble, but I am aware of no other sport where you can watch an athlete bleed himself dry in a career-long chase for glory that so rarely has a happy ending. Not many ex-tennis pros end up punchy and broke. In the words of Bud Schulberg, ‘Fighters don’t grow old, they just die slowly in front of your eyes.’

Like a ghost hovering behind every bout is the knowledge that competitors have been killed in that squared circle, while the spectre of *Dementia Pugilistica* with its Parkinson’s-like symptoms lurks with equal menace. Muhammad Ali, the sport’s most famous practitioner, embodies, in retirement, the affliction that will affect 20 per cent of those who fight professionally.

Yet the moral balance lies in the way it nurtures so much too. It channels and focuses those who need it desperately, gives an awkward boy self-belief, shows a weak man where his strengths lie and generally introduces an individual to himself. Many a wayward youth has been saved from a life behind bars or an early grave by morning runs, dieting and gym-time. They find solace in it, a form of spirituality. It demands devotion.

Boxing gives, then boxing takes away.

This is the yin-yang that all fight fans must balance. Do its pros outweigh its cons? Most of us are simply too far gone to care. The adrenaline and sweat are powerfully addictive and the nuances enough to keep you learning forever. We are hooked.

I started scribbling boxing articles in 2011. Through this work I attended shows that previously I would not have paid to go to, small-hall nights where the top of the card would be an area title or something similar. What’s more, I would sit at the press table, at inner ringside, often right up against the ring apron, where you can see the fighters’ eyes and hear what they say. I no longer felt like a spectator. I was involved.

My baptism came in my second ringside event when I was spattered with blood, which I believe came from the Irish heavyweight Declan Timlin – a rite of passage. And it was during these early shows, hunched over my notepad and pen, that my

curiosity about fighters who lose habitually was aroused. They seemed to me the anti-heroes of the game, eschewing the usual trappings of success, even victory itself. I was intrigued, but lacked insight.

Then one summer evening in 2013, I watched from close quarters as Nuneaton's Kristian Laight, who at the time had completed 172 bouts, of which he had won just seven, lost every round at York Hall against Dean 'Bad News' Burrell. As I watched him walk back to the dressing room, head held high, something clicked into place.

This book will attempt to tell the story of Kristian Laight and others like him – the much maligned and misunderstood category of professional boxers known as Journeymen.

In doing so, boxing records and statistics will frequently be mentioned. For those who are unfamiliar with the shorthand, wins are always first, losses second and draws (if any) third. Thus a fighter with a record of 25-4-1 has 25 wins, four defeats and a draw.

All statistics are correct to 1 August 2014.

Two Sides of the Same Sport

**Bethnal Green, London,
Friday 1 June 2012**

THE York Hall is going absolutely volcanic. Its halcyon days may have been back in the 1950s but on this 21st century evening it is transformed again into the bellicose, sweaty bear-pit that made it world famous. Clouds of evaporated testosterone and beer swirl under the lights.

‘There’s only one Buglioni!’ the fans crammed into the upper tier scream in chorus. There are more than 500 of them up there, wearing matching blue t-shirts, with ‘Team Buglioni’ across the back and ‘Pride’ emblazoned across the chest. They have paid £40 each for a seat but none of them are sitting. ‘One Buglioni! Walking along, singing a song, walking in a Frankie wonderland!’

The opening notes of their hero’s theme music blast from the PA. His arrival is imminent. In deference to his Neapolitan heritage, the north London idol has chosen ‘Seven Nation Army’ by the White Stripes for his ring-walks. The countrymen of his grandfather sing it in football stadia before the Italian national

team play their home games. He emerges from the dressing room, robeless, shadow-boxing vigorously, clenching then unclenching his jaw and the rabble roar like Spartans. He swings hooks at the air with both hands and begins a slow walk to the ring, matchmaker/cornerman Dean Powell behind him, trainer Mark Tibbs in front, a mini procession of London boxing nobility. Arms around each other's shoulders, the mob jump up and down, fists raised to the rafters, singing along to the riff. 'Boh, bo, bo, bo, boh, boh, boh, boh!' 'boh!'

Frank 'Wise Guy' Buglioni is one of a new breed of professional pugilists. From Winchmore Hill, in the London borough of Enfield, an extremely affluent suburban area boasting family properties worth in excess of £5m, the ghetto-fighter stereotype could not be further from his reality. While generations of boxers have arrived in the public eye via the school of hard knocks, Frank emerged as a star pupil from an outstanding, over-subscribed secondary then took up a place at Westminster University to read Building Surveying. He found that once there, however, something set him apart from his fellow students.

A gifted athlete who excelled at most sports, he had ventured into a boxing club as a 14-year-old boy and fallen, like legions of lost souls before him, madly in love with it. Intoxicated, the lure of the ring proved too much. Frank quit life as an undergraduate to fight full-time.

His phalanx of fans hold smartphones and tablets aloft as Tibbs parts the ropes for him. Frank stands momentarily still by the ring apron, giving them all a good shot, spawning tomorrow's blog entries and YouTube videos. His career will be lived out in the age of the internet where every move is broadcast a thousand times. He touches gloves to the outstretched fists of a couple of die-hards in the front row and then he's in there, that 20-foot square, roped and raised platform where he has chosen to seek his fortune.

If not for the incessant demands of the boxing lifestyle, which if attended to properly are all-consuming, the kid could have been a model. He has a boy-next-door face, a toothpaste-advert smile

and the clean physique of a classical statue. Girls go nuts for him, boys wish they were him. To complete the package, he is also a genuinely nice individual, with a word and time for everyone.

This appealing combination of attributes has made him one of British boxing's hottest young properties. Off the back of a successful amateur career, which saw him pick up 60 wins from 70 fights without quite scaling the peaks of Olympic or international glory, he signed to Frank Warren promotions, one of the UK's biggest outfits, at the age of 22. They have invested in him and expect a return. Buglioni carries this with him, on those broad shoulders, every time he climbs through the ropes. He is required to win, to be the shining star they all want him to be and he knows it.

This night, his fifth professional contest, is no different. He must live up to the hype. As the massed ranks of the Buglioni Bloc continue to sing his name he plants his feet on the canvas, looks up and salutes them, gladiator-style, with both fists. The hall quivers at the volume of their response.

While the young star limbers loosely and bounces around the ring, weaving between officials, anticipating the action, testing the ropes, someone waits for him. Across the way, from the other corner, Frank makes fleeting eye-contact with his opponent.

His adversary is egg-bald, staring, motionless with an expression that manages to be both malevolent and light-hearted. He has a rugged, rather than chiselled build and a pale, Nordic complexion. He wears the slightest of smiles. Put a horned helmet on his head and you could imagine him raiding Saxon villages, brandishing a battle-axe. He looks like a loon.

Jody Meikle grew up on the Riddings estate in Scunthorpe, north Lincolnshire. There are no million-pound houses there. By day he is a roofer and before the fight had been at work until 1pm, allowed to knock off early by an understanding boss. He travelled down the M1 in his manager Carl Greaves's car, eating lunch on the way, with his girlfriend tagging along for a night out in London. By 6pm, when he reached the venue, the morning's graft and four-hour journey had drained his enthusiasm.

On arrival he lay down wearily in the dressing room, closing his eyes, contemplating sleep. For a while he wished he could be somewhere else but the noise of the crowd revived him. When he heard Buglioni's crew take up their throaty chants, adrenaline kicked in. He sat bolt upright, grabbed Greaves by the shoulders and shouted, 'Come on!'

Back in his home town, Jody's reputation is unshakeable. The 'One Man Riot' will have it with anyone. End of. Even the bouncers are scared of him. He has fought regularly since childhood, just not usually with gloves and rules. He has had three spells in prison. If Buglioni dared take him on in the street, Meikle would eat him up and spit him out inside a minute. But this is different, Marquess of Queensberry, the sport of gentlemen, with a referee and an arena full of spectators.

The north London legion hiss and shout insults as the MC, a former child actor from *Grange Hill*, reads Meikle's name. Jody's girl, sitting at ringside, is reduced to tears by the hostility in the air. A lesser man, fighting hundreds of miles from home with barely a friend in the house might feel intimidated, but not the Riot. He nods eagerly, spreads his arms, embraces the boos and grins broadly, manically, like a Halloween pumpkin. He is absolutely loving it.

The fight follows the expected pattern with Frank taking centre ring from the start and hunting his foe down. He launches assault after assault in his upright, typically European style, working in straight lines – jab, right hand, jab, jab, right hand. Defying logic, Jody sometimes lowers his guard, almost seeming to invite the punches in.

Buglioni is known as a banger. Three of his first four wins have finished in less than a round but Meikle takes and takes his shots, to the extent that sometimes his smooth white head resembles a ping-pong ball attached to a bat on a short string, being swatted back and forth. After every volley of blows bouncing off his cranium, Jody grins his mad, pumpkin grin and walks forward again. Sometimes he catches Buglioni with his own fists, the

youngster's defence is by no means impregnable, but Frank is too quick and sharp, too well trained for him to sustain any pressure.

While the Wise Guy has been training for this night since his last bout at the end of April, conditioning himself daily with the famous trainer of champions, Jimmy Tibbs, Meikle, by contrast, was only told about it ten days before. It is all his role requires. Frank works with a nutritionist, a fitness coach and uses a state of the art cryotherapy chamber to aid recovery after workouts. Free time is regulated. He 'lives the life', as boxers say. Jody fits training in around his job, running up and down Scammonden Dam by the side of the M62 and doing a couple of evenings in the gym when he can. He likes a curry and is partial to the odd drink. To ensure he made weight, he stopped boozing a few days before the bout.

The complexion of the contest changes in the third round when Meikle is caught by a scything right cross. It opens a gash over his left eye and Buglioni, who had begun to show signs of frustration, is reinvigorated. Boxers, like predators, sense weakness and target it, no matter how nice they may be when not fighting. The professional prize ring is no place for compassion.

Frank hits him with everything, going for the injury, trying to worsen it and force the stoppage, but Jody laps it all up, smiles and carries on. Every now and then, when the action lulls, or the fighters clinch, Meikle glances up at the Buglioni Bloc in the gods, grins, winks, pokes out his tongue and waves at them. Enraged, their coarse, vocal displeasure tumbles down from the balcony. The insults and jeers don't faze him. It is what he wants. 'You see! Your boy can't hurt me!' he shows, with each gesture.

John Rawling, commentating for the BoxNation digital TV channel, is incredulous, 'He's hit him with everything but the kitchen sink' he says, 'and the guy's just smiled at him.' Sidekick, Barry Jones, a former world champion at super-featherweight, agrees. 'Buglioni's fought at a decent pace, but he's just up against a super-durable guy.'

For six rounds, everyone gets their money's worth and at the final bell the fighters embrace. In a way both have won, Frank

because he has taken a points victory and Jody because he got to the end. Meikle applauds his conqueror and raises Buglioni's arm before the referee can. The announcements are made and 'Seven Nation Army' is played again. The blue-clad fans dance and shout some more. Amid the torrent of plaudits for Frank's fifth professional victory, Rawling says, 'In the unlikely event that in the future I'm on a night out in Scunthorpe with Jody Meikle, I'm on his side. What a character!'

Both men leave the arena. They speak warmly backstage then get changed into their civvies in their respective dressing rooms. Frank has promotional obligations to fulfil. He does a few media interviews before going to greet the loyal punters who bought tickets, all smiles and handshakes, a real pro, accepting the back-slaps and congratulations like a politician who has won an election. This, he knows, is the fuel for his rocket-powered drive to stardom.

Later he will sit down with his promoter and discuss which carefully planned move he will make from here. In three months or so, he will fight again, against another well-chosen opponent, someone who can stretch him a little more, nudge him closer to a title and give those ticket-buying supporters their next happy night out. He will have a week off before starting his next training camp.

Meikle has no such concerns. His cut is stitched and he collects his fee, a higher one than usual, which is more than welcome, then jumps in the car and starts the journey home. He is pleased not to have been stopped, happy with the show he put on but annoyed about the injury. He will have to cancel the bouts he had lined up for the next couple of weeks, forced to wait at least 28 days until he can do it all again, Boxing Board rules.

On the way back they have to pull over by the side of the A1, near Peterborough, so his girlfriend can be sick. The proximity of the violence was too much for her, she is shaking and tearful. Its 1.30am and the cold, night air stings Jody's cut, contracting the skin around the wound.

He gets home at 3am, checks on his seven-year-old son, who is sound asleep, and falls into bed. On Monday he is back at work.