



**MILLION
DOLLAR
CROLLA**

GOOD GUYS CAN WIN

ANTHONY CROLLA AND DOMINIC MCGUINNESS

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CHAPTER 1

Dark Nights, New Days

Kieran Farrell

It's hard to find a turning point, but I think in many ways, the Farrell fight drove me on to realise my goal of becoming a world champion.

07.12.12

I was stood in the ring. I was gutted. I remember winning the fight, having the hand raised. Then I remember a noise – his mam.

He was getting carried away on oxygen and she's breaking her heart, holding on to the stretcher. The most horrible memory that will never leave me.

THE nicest man in boxing is trying to compute what has just happened. He's sat on a wooden bench against a grubby off-white wall, clothes neatly hung up on a rack with five pegs. There's a musty, sweaty smell mixed with some sweet-scented deodorant.

Exhausted, Anthony Crolla is slowly unwrapping his swollen, aching hands. The small, makeshift away-fighter dressing room is dimly lit. Other fighters from lower down the bill who've been sharing the room have boxed, changed and gone. The only people left now are a marked-up Anthony Crolla, his trainer Joe Gallagher, stablemate Paul Smith and Richard Thomas, an inspector with the

British Boxing Board of Control. It's anything but a winning scene, an unglamorous setting in a back room of the cavernous Bowlers Exhibition Centre, tucked away in the industrial bowels of Trafford Park, Manchester.

Anthony's just dished out the blows that have led to his local rival Kieran Farrell collapsing in the ring at the end of a brutal ten-round contest. The 22-year-old from Heywood slumped near his corner shortly before Anthony's arm had been raised as the unanimous victor.

Just minutes earlier, all around the ring, lairy, beered-up lads suddenly lost the vitriol in their voices. Whether Team Crolla or Team Farrell, they watched and chanted Farrell's name as a game young fighter, a man who'd recently become a father, was stretchered out to a waiting ambulance. A moody, fractured atmosphere turned to one of universal concern.

Crolla had made his way from the ring, thanking a stream of well-wishers as he desperately tried to get to the dressing room as quickly as possible, marching along the busy route – aluminium barriers keeping most of the punters at bay – Joe on one side, Paul on the other. Despite the win, Crolla struggles to find his 'million dollar' smile. It's an awkward walk at the best of times, with narrow stairs and long corridors.

In the dressing room, he knows Kieran's hurt. He knows how hard his opponent trained and could feel the hunger in his punches. He knows Kieran would've done anything possible to walk out of the ring with his head held high, pride dented, shouting that he'd won the fight and should've been awarded the decision. All of that maybe, but certainly ready to fight another day.

Anthony feels sick. He's won the vacant English lightweight belt, but hasn't bothered to pick up the red-brown strap off a floor covered with white, yellow and black tape, bloodstained cotton wool and empty water bottles. The shiny badge on the front of the belt has the St George's cross with the words 'Champion of England' emblazoned around it. It's eerily quiet.

After what feels like an age, but in reality is only an hour, now showered and changed into a black tracksuit, Anthony lifts himself

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off the bench with an audible intake of breath before walking gingerly from the room, through a gym weights area and down the stairs to the reception of the main hall. His partner Fran is waiting for him.

A poster advertising the fight with pictures of the two combatants has started to peel from the wall next to the toilets. On an adjacent wall, there are only drawing pins on view, still clinging to tiny bits of glossy paper. An eager souvenir hunter has clearly ripped off their night's memento.

A few remaining fans mingle with security and cleaning staff. Crolla's sore right hand is shaken a few more times. He winces with every congratulatory squeeze. He forces a smile for the last remaining selfies. But it's all a bit empty.

Outside the venue, the freezing December air strikes another blow. Anthony throws his kit bag into the boot of his little red Corsa in the now near-empty car park. Fran drives the couple to their temporary digs at her parents' home in Denton, a 15-mile spin anti-clockwise on the M60, Manchester's ring motorway.

* * * * *

Prior to the Farrell fight, Anthony Crolla, who'd turned 26 just a few weeks previously, was considered by many in the game to be damaged goods. He was supposedly on the way down and there was a young lion on the way up, desperate to make his name. So, it was agreed that Farrell would fight Crolla for the vacant English lightweight belt.

Billed 'The Battle of Manchester', the build-up to the fight had, for once where Anthony's concerned, been a touch acrimonious. Comments had been posted on social media and come fight night the mood was a little ugly.

But this was a fight Crolla desperately needed to win. He'd been written off following recent defeats to Derry Mathews and Gary Sykes, his second loss to the Dewsbury man, this time in the *Prizefighter* series.

I had to win this fight. If I didn't, I had a job waiting for me on Monday morning. My mate has a security company and he'd promised me a job in the office should things not go my way. My life as a full-time pro was completely dependent on me beating Kieran. Everything could have been very different.

Farrell vs Crolla was the main event on a night when promoter Dave Coldwell was launching his new Coldwell Boxing app. All the drama from an action-packed bill could be followed online.

Joe Gallagher remembers the night as vividly as his charge. There was so much at stake for both men, the trainer far from immune from criticism and fully aware that his tactics would again be questioned if the unthinkable should happen.

Once the undercard had finished, the main event fighters were called, but Joe wasn't happy. 'I was like, "Nah, we're not coming out of here until Crolla's warm," he recalled. 'I knew they could smell blood.'

It was freezing in there. Wasn't it freezing in there that night?

'Yeah, and you were giving it, "I'm all right now Joe," and I was saying, "No you're fucking not! We're not going out there until we're ready. I don't care about the TV app and the timings, this is all slanted against us and we go out when we're properly warmed up." So that's what we did.'

Kieran, meanwhile, was desperate to get going. He'd prepared, he was ready, he was angry. 'There was no argument between me and Ant. I was like, "Ant's a top fighter, he's a top lad" but it was fucking Joe Gallagher that was getting me going! I was like, "I'm gonna fucking kill him", you know what I mean?

'I've learned now that Joe can get into a fighter's head to take pressure off his fighters. They don't feel any pressure because everyone just wants to have a go at Joe. I remember being sat at our press conference and I said, "Ant's sound but his trainer's a fucking bellend."

The temperature inside Bowlers was Baltic but the atmosphere was touching boiling point. The noise from the crowd could be heard from Team Crolla's dressing room. For a small hall show, the ring walk was a fairly long one, with corridors and stairs to navigate before entry into the arena. Farrell's fans, who'd congregated near the entrance curtain, were vocal in their assessment of Crolla's skills as he appeared. Unfazed, he sang along to Whitney's 'Million Dollar Bill' and headed for the middle of the room. Once up on the ring apron, on the outside of the ropes, Anthony had a little look around, a nod, a smile, then it was through the ropes and on with business.

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I'd never had any animosity, never had a bad reaction off a fighter. Never. With Kieran, there was a bit of needle with me and his brother [Nathan]. We were having words on the way to the ring. His brother was hard work. I didn't know if I was fighting Kieran or his brother! He gave me the throat-slit gesture and all that.

Kieran followed Crolla, revelling in the attention from his supporters on his way to the ring. He bounced through the ropes and made a beeline for his opponent – standing in front of him, eyeballing him before heading back to his corner.

Joe had a plan. It had as much to do with mind games as game plans. 'I had to upset them [Team Farrell],' he explains. 'I thought ... no! We're the experienced partner, I've got to get under their skin.'

Joe's preparations appeared to be on the button. Following referee Howard Foster's final instructions and the timekeeper's first bell, Farrell, wearing green shorts with his moniker 'Vicious' emblazoned across a yellow band, fired into Crolla at a fierce pace. The tone of the contest was set, with Crolla declining to go on the back foot and work behind his very fine jab, preferring instead to stand toe to toe – and so a domestic barnstormer took shape.

As the contest progressed, the pace remained frenetic. The plan had been to allow Farrell to burn himself out and while that didn't exactly happen, eventually Crolla's superior skills became evident.

'I got under Kieran Farrell's skin and he fought like a man demented,' Joe reminisced. 'In his corner I could hear, "Go on Kieran, that's it, go on lad! Go on Crolla, they [punches] don't hurt! Crolla's blown himself out!"

'Kieran then put his foot to the floor even more, giving it "Aaarrggghhh!" Do you understand? I'd psychologically got inside his head. I spoke to Kieran afterwards and he said, "You fucking killed me that night. I was fucking hitting him and you were in the corner going 'cunt' and I was going 'Aaargh!'"

'But there you are, that's experience.'

Farrell withstood some heavy artillery in the latter stages of the bout but was never out of the fight and was there at the final bell. Both fighters were lifted into the air by their respective trainers but the three ringside judges scored it unanimously in favour of Crolla.

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‘I thought I won the fight, just through my workrate and aggression,’ said Kieran. ‘But I can see where the judges were coming from. Any round could’ve been scored either way. After the first five or six rounds, when I started feeling it on my head [bleed on the brain] – and that’s not an excuse by any means but it’s what happened – it started hurting me. Anything that skimmed past my head was hurting me.

‘The pain slowed me down, my hands started coming down. I was coming forward relentlessly, but Ant was then picking his shots and when I watched it back I could see how those four rounds had gone to him.

‘As much as I worked hard throughout, he was picking me off – “there’s one for the judges”, you know what I mean?’

Before the decision was announced, Kieran slumped in the ring and was manoeuvred back to his stool in the corner. Anthony had been stood on the ropes, arms raised, celebrating with his fans. As soon as he realised something wasn’t right, he gestured to his supporters to calm things down.

There was panic in his corner. It was very worrying to see the way he went down. The result hadn’t been read out but all I was thinking was, ‘I hope he’s gonna be OK.’

Kieran was placed on a stretcher with an oxygen mask covering his face. The mood in the arena changed dramatically.

‘My last memory was when I was sat in the corner and the doctor was shining a torch in my eye and he was going “Kieran, Kieran, can you hear me?”

‘I was looking at him with my jaw hanging down and I could actually see and hear what he was saying but I couldn’t react. I was spaced out. I couldn’t physically move. Then I started fitting.’

As the stretcher was carried from the ring towards the exit, the scorecard of 99-92, 96-94, 99-93 was read out by MC Simon Goodall. Anthony Crolla’s arm was raised by referee Foster, but it was a surreal scene.

I was stood in the ring. I was gutted. I remember winning the fight, having the hand raised. Then I remember a noise. His mam. He was getting carried away on oxygen and she’s breaking her heart, holding on to the stretcher. The most horrible memory that will never leave me.

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It was weird but I just remember feeling empty. I had the belt which could save my career but I wasn't bothered. I wanted to just cry.

'When I was on the stretcher, someone said I was clapping. I wasn't. I was fitting. I was in the back of the ambulance fitting and my mum was in the ambulance screaming at me saying, "Stop it! Your dad's going to kill you!" You know, saying anything to try and make me come round.'

Serious injury in the ring, of course, affects both fighters. Whether the injured party or the one responsible, many are never the same again. Punishment had been given and received. The deep aches and pains aren't conducive to sleep at the best of times.

I went home and sat up all night. Chinese whispers start. I was constantly looking at my phone. I'd been in a hard fight so I was exhausted, but I kept looking at my phone and kept thinking. I went to bed but I couldn't sleep. I was shaking.

I was just flicking on social media all night. You'd notice this person say this and another says something else. Someone says he's taken a turn for the worse and I'm then looking at all sorts of medical stuff on the internet.

I was thinking, 'Do I go to the hospital?' Even though I knew there'd be no problem – his dad had come up and spoken to me at the press conference – I just didn't want to turn up when his son was in intensive care. Was it my place to turn up?

'I remember waking up, maybe six in the morning. My brother came in and he was like "Kiers, do you remember me?" I couldn't say anything. Then my dad came in and said, "You all right, son?" I said, "Dad, I just want to be world champion." He started crying his eyes out and I started crying my eyes out.

'When I came round the next day, I was like, "Nath, did you get my belt?" I thought I'd won the fight. He read me the scorecards, and I was, "Aahh fuck."

'My reaction might have been good for them but it was fucking horrific for me. I was like, "You what?"'

Early suggestions that Kieran was merely suffering from exhaustion were overly optimistic, but matters could have been considerably worse.

‘In the hospital, they’d done scans to make sure the bleed had stopped on my head. There was a lot of blood. The doctor said it was a small bleed, but very significant in size. I looked at the scans and where the brain normally looks like worms and intestines, mine was black. Covered in blood. All of it.’

Recuperation was painful. The physical and mental wounds began to heal at nature’s pace.

‘Over the space of four months, it [bleed on the brain] had cleared up and gone. The last appointment I had, they were saying they’d have to operate if the blood hadn’t gone. I was thankful they didn’t have to cut my head open.’

I was always asking about him, and it sounds bad on my part, but I didn’t see him for a while after he got out of hospital. I was always sending my well wishes and I wanted to go and see him, but I didn’t. Then one day, I just went to his gym. I messaged him and said I was going to pop up and he was like, ‘Yeah, come up.’

I was as nervous as anything driving to his gym. So nervous. It was sound within about 30 seconds, but on my way I wanted to spew it. It actually felt like I was going to a fight I was so nervous. I just didn’t know what to say, what to do.

It had taken me a long time to meet Kieran after the fight and I wish I’d done it sooner, but now we’re sound, we’re mates. There wasn’t any animosity, it was just awkward for a while. When I got there, all the kids were in and they were all asking questions. I wish I’d done it earlier but by the time Kieran was making a full recovery, I was going into another fight – Derry II. Selfishly, it wasn’t the time to go and see him.

Kieran was mad dedicated and trained as hard as anyone. It’s sad to see someone not pursue what he wanted to do. But, everything happens for a reason, and he’s doing well.

And the brother?

You know what? Even years after the fight, he was always a bit stand-offish, but recently I’ve seen him and we had a chat. He’s all right now. But listen, it was his brother and he’s an emotional kid.

It was spelled out to Farrell, in no uncertain terms, that his recovery was miraculous but his fighting days were done. This message took a while to get through.

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‘I always thought I’d fight again. I tried keeping the belief that if I didn’t get a British licence, I’d get an Irish licence. I kept that belief for a year and when I applied for a licence, I got a reply more or less saying, “Kieran, you’ve had a good career, just knock it on the head.”

‘I just couldn’t believe I had the injury. Michael Watson rang me and said, “You’re in the same boat as me.” I was like, “I’m not in the same boat as you mate,” because I just felt I wasn’t even though I’d had the same injury.’

With his boxing career cut short, Kieran threw all his whirlwind energy into pursuing a new dream – having his own gym. With sponsors on board and cash raised from a benefit night – attended by his idol and former promoter Ricky Hatton and Jamie Moore, who’d been on co-commentary duty for Farrell’s last fight – the dream quickly became reality. ‘The People’s Gym’ is just a few doors up from the Farrell family home in Wham Street, Heywood.

New dawn, new day and a new outlet for his ambitions – the local community turned out for the opening and a thriving new gym for local kids was born. Regardless of the gym’s success, the same old urges persisted. Despite all the experts and organisations that had told Kieran he could not box again, the temptation to prove people wrong, like he’d always done, was almost too great. Finally, the brutal reality of popular middleweight Nick Blackwell’s head injuries, suffered in both his British title fight with Chris Eubank Jr and subsequent sparring sessions, helped drive the message home.

‘I’ll be honest. I’m not going to say I didn’t have a spar, because I did. I sparred with pros, with everyone, and I was doing it regular right up until I got told he’d [Blackwell] been put back in hospital and that he had a bleed on the brain this time. He had a bleed on the skull the first time. He then got a bleed on the brain, the same as the one I got, and not everyone’s so lucky with that. I was told that things were looking up for him because he’d spoken a word. I was like, “Fucking hell, he’s spoken a word! It’s bad, this.” I saw a picture and I was fucking horrified. I thought, “You know what? I’ll never do that [spar] again.” I felt selfish.

‘I’ve got a ninth-month-old baby and a four-year-old daughter, so for me to be getting in the ring like that, it’s just my own selfishness. I

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needed to knock it on the head and I have done ever since November last year. It's no good.

'You just don't know what's going on inside your head and sometimes, even last night, when I was on a flight and with the pressure and all that, I didn't even know at one point if I could fly again. I know I can't drive because I can't keep in me head what I've got to learn for the theory. I am slowed down a little bit. If I go running, one side of me face will drop. Keeping fit's all right, but I can't keep up with the pros and that's what I've learned. I'm not a fighter now.

'My mum still suffers depression now and again from it [the fight]. It's like my brother. He put on three or four stone in weight. He got it all off eventually, but he tells me how he used to come and put pillows on my radiator next to my bed to make sure I didn't bang my head.

'It's the same now. He'll come to the gym and watch to make sure I don't go near the bag with my head when I'm hitting it. It's had a massive effect on my family. My dad's strong. He's never let it show that it's affected him but I know it affected everyone. They're all buzzing off how well I'm doing now.'

So, attention is now fully focused in other areas of the sport. Kieran is a coach, working with kids and professionals, along with dual roles as a promoter and matchmaker.

'I do everything. To be honest it's all in a day's work, but it's not normal hours. It's from six in the morning until 11 or 12 at night. I'm busy but I enjoy it. I'm craving a champion. That's all I want to do.

'When I trained for Crolla, I left no stone unturned. Everything I did was a million per cent and I had no regrets about having the fight, either. Shit happens and in life I think it's about your destiny. Overall, I feel all right. I get a headache now and again, like everyone. Mine probably get a bit worse. I might get a dizzy spell but nothing too major. If I do too much physically, it's bad for me.'

* * * * *

Fast forward three months and Kieran Farrell is at Gloves Gym, Bolton. Clad in baggy dark T-shirt and grey jogging bottoms, he has a towel over his left shoulder, right foot up on the ring apron, left

hand holding a water bottle, the other clinging to the middle rope. He's shouting instructions at his fighter, George Brennan, a 20-year-old bantamweight from Altrincham. Farrell's brought the novice pro here to spar with former world champion Paul Butler. It's a lively tussle and Kieran's feinting and jabbing in tandem with every shot George attempts to land. Life as a trainer is suiting him more than ever now. He's in a happy place.

Spar over, he reflects on his renewed vigour as his former foe Anthony Crolla goes to work on a heavy bag at the far end of the square room.

'If I hadn't fought Ant, I wouldn't have met George and he wouldn't be doing this now,' he says, pointing towards Brennan as the fighter towels down. 'Other fighters wouldn't have had the opportunity over in Ireland. I'm doing a lot for other people and I got a British Empire medal off the Queen. Buzzing. That's me, happy days! Everything I'm doing now, getting kids off the street and all that, I'm happy.'

'I think it's helped him [Crolla] because I've moved on from it. We've stayed in touch, we talk. If I ring him, he answers. If he can't get to the phone, he rings me back and says sorry for missing the call. He's bang-on. When people say he's one of the nicest lads and all that, well, I've never met a nicer lad than Ant.'

'For Ant to keep doing what he's doing does me proud. Every time he wins, I'm like – "Yes!" I think first time it was a tight fight but Linares pipped it. Ant's now got the raging burn inside him to get that title and then unify the division. For me, him achieving that goal, you know what? That'll mean I only got beat once and that was by the unified lightweight world champion. I'll buzz off that.'

'Not getting that win when we fought, it doesn't matter to me now. Just to be here and to watch Anthony do as good as he is, and be in a fit state to do that, I'm happy.'

'At the end of the day, I'm glad Ant got the victory because if he'd have lost, it could've been him retired. I'd have still got a bleed on the brain. I might have won the belt, but I'd still have a bleed on the brain and would never box again.'

'He's done it for both of us, for him and me. He's achieved world glory and that's all I ever wanted to do. I'm buzzing he's done it.'

Joe Gallagher walks past and smiles at Kieran, who nods and says, 'Cheers Joe.' Is this the same Joe Gallagher who had riled him so much? The same 'bellend'?

A boyish grin lights up Farrell's face. It makes him look younger than his years – a cheeky, freckly kid, his eyes wide open as he explains, 'Before the fight there were words said – it's one of those things. I was a wild man. I was 22 years old. I've calmed myself down a bit now, but back in the day I was a bit of a psycho, like.'

'I've heard a lot of people say this and that about Joe, but it's because they're not in his circle, and it's a high circle to be in. There'll be gossip and stories made up but I know Joe's bang-on. I've been helping Joe with things he's doing and he's always helping me.'

Along with a busy diary – amateurs to nurture, professionals to find dates for and his own shows to sort – it's a year to look forward to for the one-time 'Vicious' Farrell.

'It couldn't really be better for me. I keep improving. Even though I feel 100 per cent now, I reckon in a year I'll look back at me now and think, "Fucking hell, look at me there!"'

'I slur my words and I stutter but I keep seeing now that I'm getting better with all that. Walking down the street, I don't look any different to anyone else – bar the dodgy haircut, know what I mean!'

Derry Mathews II

Joe had been saying that I wasn't myself and that I hadn't been for a while. I didn't know it, but that's what he says. Kieran had had to retire and the lads in the gym were very supportive, but I couldn't stop thinking about it. It was bad.

It was the first outing after the Farrell fight. Emotionally, there were many questions to be asked and answered. The fact it was a rematch against Derry Mathews – the man who'd stunned him by inflicting his first stoppage defeat – only added to an already intense and draining period in Crolla's life.

For Derry, it was simple. He'd beat Anthony again and move closer to his dream of winning a world title.

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The first fight, on 21 April 2012, was held at Oldham Sports Centre, just down the road from Crolla's home. The venue has since been replaced by a spanking new £15m facility, but on this night it was the old head who prevailed over the young gun.

Always a ticket seller, Derry had his usual vocal support, which added to a fevered atmosphere in the small but packed hall. He'd been saying all along in the build-up that he'd shock the boxing world and take Anthony's Lonsdale Belt. Along with trainer Danny Vaughan, Derry locked himself away in Scotland, away from his family and home comforts. He was hungry to prove everyone wrong. He believed he had a game plan to win.

While Derry was convinced, his previous fight, a crushing defeat to Ermiliano Marsili for the vacant IBO lightweight title, had left many questioning the Liverpoolian's future in the game.

Meanwhile, the career trajectory of Anthony Crolla was going only one way. He was on the up. He had a belt, and as Joe always says to his fighters, if you have a title you'll have work.

The British lightweight crown had been claimed in typical Crolla fashion. An opportunity had arisen while preparations were in full swing for a fight with Carl Johanneson. Gavin Rees was meant to be defending the title against Liverpool's John Watson, but injury forced the Welshman to vacate. Crolla was asked if he fancied stepping up from super-featherweight to embrace the challenge. He did. So, it was all about defending the belt. All looked well as a smiling Crolla confidently made his ring walk, with Whitney Houston's 'Million Dollar Bill', as ever, accompanying him in.

Anthony started well with a good tempo, landing the better shots as cries of 'Manchester, la la la' rang around. It was give and take until things began to unravel in the third round. A huge right uppercut put Crolla on the canvas for the first time in this career – amateur or professional – and a cut to the right eye didn't help matters.

Into the fourth round, a bad cut by his left eye added to Crolla's woes. It was toe to toe again, with Crolla finishing strongly. A decent fifth round in which Crolla landed some good body shots offered some hope. But a big left hand wobbled the champion and as Derry sensed blood, John Keane stepped in and waved the contest off.

'I remember the Hattons were promoting him [Crolla] at the time,' Derry explains. 'Ricky rang me personally and offered me the fight. I jumped at it. I knew I could beat him. I think that when I boxed him, and they might say I'm wrong, but Joe Gallagher's boxers all seemed to come forward in straight lines.

'He just kept coming at me, coming at me. I knew that if I caught him with an uppercut ... we'd been working on it for five weeks in the gym and it paid off.

'The build-up to the fight was brilliant – Liverpool vs Manchester rivalry. All the social media stuff, Twitter had started and that was good. It was a great night.

'After the fight, I remember going up to him in the corner and just thanking him for the opportunity. I told him he'd come back a better man. He has. He's at a position at lightweight where I wanted to be.'

The Mathews defeat was the first high-profile TV loss of Crolla's career. A devastating blow. It was more surprising given the fact Anthony had gone into the fight following a dominant performance against Willie Limond in Motherwell a few months previously.

I went home and my dad had the fight on. I remember my brother [Will] saying, 'Dad, turn it off!' I was thinking I'd let everyone down and was watching it in tears. My dad's like, 'Look at this bit here, Ant, you're doing this wrong and that wrong.' He just kept talking at me, 'Look at this round.' I'm thinking, 'Oh dad. stop it!' Bloody hell. I was cringing.

I wouldn't change it now. It was a massive blessing in disguise. It shouldn't have been stopped, but it was the best lesson. If I'd have won, I would've boxed Gavin Rees next. If I'd have boxed like that, I'd have got flattened.

Next up was *Prizefighter* at the Olympia in Liverpool, a tournament that also included Derry Mathews, another old foe Gary Sykes and up-and-coming Mancunian Terry Flanagan. The draw threw up Anthony against local man Stephen Jennings.

He navigated that three-round hurdle to shake off the demons in front of a rowdy crowd and a live Sky Sports audience. The semi-final stage is where this journey would end. A points defeat to Gary Sykes, the Indian sign still hanging over Crolla. Meanwhile, Derry was outdone by Terry, who went on to beat Sykes in the final.

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The *Prizefighter* gamble hadn't come off, but a defeat in the three-round lottery is never considered a crushing blow for any fighter. For Anthony, it was just another of life's experiences, then on to the next challenge. Kieran Farrell.

The Farrell victory set up another night with Derry and a chance for Anthony to avenge the loss and claim the vacant Commonwealth lightweight belt. Since their first fight, Derry had lost the Lonsdale strap after being stopped by Gavin Rees. Dirty Derry vs Million Dollar was chief support to Tony Bellew's WBC silver light-heavyweight title clash with Isaac Chilemba at the Liverpool Echo Arena. Lower down the bill were Anthony's stablemates Callum Smith and Scott Cardle, both enjoying routine victories.

Anthony started well enough, blocking most of Derry's shots or taking them on the arms and landing a couple himself when the opportunities presented themselves. Working off the back foot, the second round was positive, with cut-prone Derry leaking blood from a nick on his right eye. The third round was better again for Anthony as his shots were finding the target and silencing the Scousers temporarily.

A change in tactics saw Crolla press forward, seemingly in control of the fight as the middle rounds approached, but Mathews forced his way back in and started to land heavy blows, damaging Crolla's right eye in the process.

Mathews continued to enjoy a good spell, taking rounds until Anthony once again stepped up the tempo in the eighth, using the jab well.

Derry was still proving awkward and landed the most eye-catching punch of the contest in the ninth, but Crolla's fitness showed. He withstood it and came back stronger, dominating the final two rounds of an absorbing contest. Both camps celebrated at the final bell. A close fight was decided by Steve Gray's card of 115-115 after Marcus McDonnell judged in favour of Mathews, 115-113, while Ian John Lewis went for Crolla, 115-113.

Neither man could hide their disappointment at the draw.

'I thought I won the fight by two rounds,' Derry said. 'I watched it over and over again. But then, he'll say he won the fight by two

rounds. It was one of them give-and-take-fights. I think it was round eight, I hit him with a right hand and he nearly went. I don't know how he stayed up. I think in the last round I had in my head that I'd won the fight, so I took my foot off the gas and tried to box. He won the last round and got the draw. It's one of them where I was frustrated, but at the same time it was a great night and a great fight.'

I felt I'd done enough. It was a great fight, a close fight, but I thought I won the championship rounds. But you know, Derry thought he'd done enough. I thought I won the early rounds because my shots were landing. He did catch me with some good shots but my fitness carried me through. The Liverpool crowd was great and it was the type of fight fans would want to see over and over again.

Liverpool people love their boxing and they've always been sound with me, even when I've been fighting their lads. The rivalry in boxing is obviously different to the football!

It's a sentiment Mathews agrees with. 'Ricky Hatton, Terry Flanagan, Anthony Crolla – I'd pay to go and watch them,' he said. 'They're the same as us, we're both fighting cities. The North West is the best boxing region in Britain. It's good to be a part of it.'

With his own inner-city gym, the 'Derry Mathews Boxing Academy', Derry is following in the footsteps of so many other fighters in making sure he does his bit for his community. Along with the familiar tale of kids coming in off the streets, the gym also delivers sessions for people with learning disabilities and conditions such as cerebral palsy, autism and spina bifida.

'I love the sport and the sport's been good to me,' he explains. 'I love getting up of a morning, half-five or six, to go training. I open the gym, I get the buzz. I do it because I love the sport.'

'It's mad how boxing is. Me and Anthony went from a sports centre, fighting for peanuts, and I mean peanuts, to him becoming a world champion and me having world title fights. Anthony's a tremendous athlete and a great fighter. A lovely person, a family man like myself.'

'If anyone can make money out of boxing, then they deserve a pat on the back. People who've beaten me, anyone in boxing, I just want

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them to win, not so much to get the win, but to get money to secure their children's future or their future.

'Anthony's a great fighter, one I've got a lot of respect for. He was and still is the Mr Nice Guy of boxing. The crowd love him. He turned his career around and he deserves a medal for that alone. I stopped him, but look at what him and Joe Gallagher have gone on to do.'

Gavin Rees

I always liked him, a tough, busy fighter with fast hands. If I could choose one person not to fight outside a boxing ring, out of all my opponents, it'd be Gavin Rees.

While not an ideal outcome, the second Mathews fight kept Anthony in the mix. Proving once again that he'd face any domestic opponent put in front of him, a fight with former WBA light-welterweight champion Gavin Rees was made at Bolton Arena. The venue was handy for Crolla despite 'The Rock' being the Matchroom fighter on a Matchroom promotion. With Eddie Hearn at the helm, it meant another night of live Sky Sports coverage and potentially another fan-friendly tussle. The Welshman was returning to action following a brutal TKO at the hands of then rising superstar Adrien Broner. No shame in that, of course, but at 33 what had it taken out of him?

Rees, as had usually been the case, would be giving up more than four inches in height to Crolla. Whether fighting at lightweight or super-lightweight, a lack of inches hadn't ever really hindered the tough-as-teak man from Newport.

I always liked him, a tough, busy fighter with fast hands. If I could choose one person not to fight outside a boxing ring, out of all my opponents, it'd be Gavin Rees. He's short, hard and takes a shot.

I was the opponent, even though we were in Bolton! Francesca was a few months away from giving birth to Jesse. My dad is old school and I used him for motivation. I remember telling him that Fran had fallen pregnant. I was 26 at the time and I remember him saying that I didn't have a house. It added motivation. I knew if I beat Gavin, there'd be a Matchroom contract waiting for me. Not officially, but I was sure there would be. But if I lost, then I'm an opponent again.

DARK NIGHTS, NEW DAYS

First child on the way, saving to get a deposit to put down on the first house. So much was riding on it.

If added motivation were needed, it was easily found in the fact the pair were competing for the WBO inter-continental title. It was, in effect, a world title eliminator that could set up a shot at Scotland's WBO champion Ricky Burns.

The build-up was, as expected, hugely respectful. Again, it was a Crolla fight where everyone could see the event for what it was – a well-balanced boxing bout. No frills, no nonsense, just two good lads who were ready to go at it.

A good undercard set things up nicely. There were stoppage wins for Crolla's pals Scott Quigg, who was too much for William Prado, and Paul Smith, the eldest of the fighting quartet of brothers, who settled an all-Scouse argument with Tony Dodson in the chief support.

Not surprisingly, Crolla was feeling the love from most of the supporters crammed into the venue, which sits in the shadow of the Macron Stadium – home of Bolton Wanderers FC. The fans who'd made the short trip from Manchester were creating a football atmosphere, constantly singing the familiar 'Ooooh Anthony Crolla ...' to the tune of The White Stripes' 'Seven Nation Army'.

Once referee Phil Edwards got matters under way, Rees started busily, pawing away at Crolla's high guard without much success. Workrate had him edging Anthony in the early stages, although the cleaner shots were coming from the younger man, who picked off Rees as he applied constant pressure.

A clash of heads in the fourth saw Rees pick up a small cut by the left eye. This spurred on Crolla, who upped the pace in the fifth, forcing Rees backwards. The action picked up again in the sixth with good work from the Welshman.

As the fight went into the latter stages, both men were happy to trade. By now, they were covered in blood after another accidental head clash. Each man called on his resources for a final hurrah down the home straight as weariness took hold, Rees touching the canvas in the tenth, although this was ruled as a slip.

It was another close contest to back up the claims that Crolla's 'never in a bad fight'. Two judges made it 115-113 and 116-113 to

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Crolla, with the third scoring it 115-115. It was a majority decision for the man from New Moston.

I thought I'd done enough, but you never know. Nothing surprised me about him. He's a tough, tough man. I trained so hard for that fight because I knew to beat a world-class fighter you have to put in a world-class performance. I felt I boxed well at times and boxed to a plan. I stuck to the plan and it paid off. When it got tough, the crowd really helped me home. Afterwards, it was one of the most emotional nights. It was the difference. It bought me some time to give us a start.

Along with a bit of financial stability, the victory paved the way for the tantalising prospect of Crolla fighting for a world title. To make that dream a reality, Ricky Burns needed to come through his fight with tough Mexican Raymundo Beltran, a man Anthony had sparred at the Wild Card Gym in Los Angeles.

New dawn

I'm delighted to join Eddie Hearn and Matchroom and I cannot wait for my first fight with them.

The setting is the Radisson Blu Edwardian Hotel, Manchester. This 'Palazzo' building – the Free Trade Hall – was originally a public assembly hall that turned into a concert venue. It was home to the Halle Orchestra and the Lesser Free Trade Hall (an upstairs room) is most famous for a Sex Pistols gig in 1976 that inspired a plethora of Manchester bands, including Joy Division and The Smiths.

History is all around then as Anthony Crolla is officially unveiled as Matchroom's latest signing. It's a sideshow to the main event, the press conference to promote Carl Froch against George Groves, an eagerly awaited super-middleweight showdown at the then-named Phones4u Arena.

Anthony was right. He knew that a career-best victory over Rees would result in a new, mutually beneficial partnership. Sitting at a table, posing for the cameras, Anthony looked relaxed. Casually dressed in a blue and black check shirt, pen in hand, Eddie Hearn leaning in on the left side with Joe on his right, Anthony flashed a big smile for the snappers.

I'm delighted to join Eddie Hearn and Matchroom and I cannot wait for my first fight with them. Froch vs Groves is a massive night and it's great to be a part of it. I am right up there in the reckoning now and I know Eddie believes I am close to major fights, so it's down to me to prove that, starting in Manchester on 23 November.

Eddie Hearn beamed about his new signing. 'His [Crolla's] victory over former world champion Gavin Rees has propelled him to another level, and beyond the huge domestic opportunities lies a world title challenge for him in 2014.

'He will be part of the huge Froch vs Groves show on 23 November, with the opponent and undercard announcement the week commencing 30 September.'

By this point, the projected Ricky Burns fight was off the table. The Scot had endured a 'life and death' with Beltran but somehow kept hold of his WBO belt following a highly controversial draw. Burns, who had his jaw broken in the second round and suffered a heavy knockdown, showed tremendous bravery but was left disfigured at the end of the contest and looked as surprised as Beltran was sickened when the scores were announced. Not the greatest advert for boxing officiating in front of a partisan Glaswegian crowd.

The seriousness of the injury – titanium plates were fitted the day after the fight – put a question mark over when, or even if, Ricky would return to action. So, for Crolla, it was on with another route.

Meanwhile, Joe was happy with Anthony's Matchroom deal and the relationship remains strong to this day, despite all the challenges professional boxing presents.

'Eddie Hearn, Frank Warren, Mick Hennessy – they're promoters who all want to put on the biggest shows, bring in the most money and pay the least,' Joe said. 'It's my job as a trainer and manager to get the most money for my fighters. We have games of tug-o-war – they'll pull one way and I'll pull another, but somewhere in the middle you meet. They have a responsibility to their broadcaster, whether it's BT, Box Nation or Sky, to deliver the best fights. It's up to me to make sure the fighters are well paid.

'Boxing is legalised killing. Dress it up any way you want, but it's legalised killing. At the end of the day, you're talking about someone's

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child. I have a responsibility to my fighters that they arrive home safely, with their health intact and with decent money for their work. The reward has to be worth the risk, that's why it's called prize fighting.

'Eddie Hearn's an ambitious young promoter. He's growing all the time. There's great competition now with ITV as well, so Eddie has to up his game. There's not a monopoly any more and there are probably a few Matchroom fighters looking at what everyone else is doing.

'You know, Eddie sometimes calls me the biggest pain in boxing but that's only because of the number of fighters I have. I might have a two-hour telephone call or discussion, disagreement, agreement over say, Anthony Crolla. But after that two hours we might move on to Scott Cardle, then there's another argument and then we move on to Stephen Smith.

'To Eddie, it seems that I'm always on to him, but most of the time we work things out, we get on, and the lads are all in big shows. He's delivering the titles and the fights for my lads and most of the time they're delivering the results for him.'