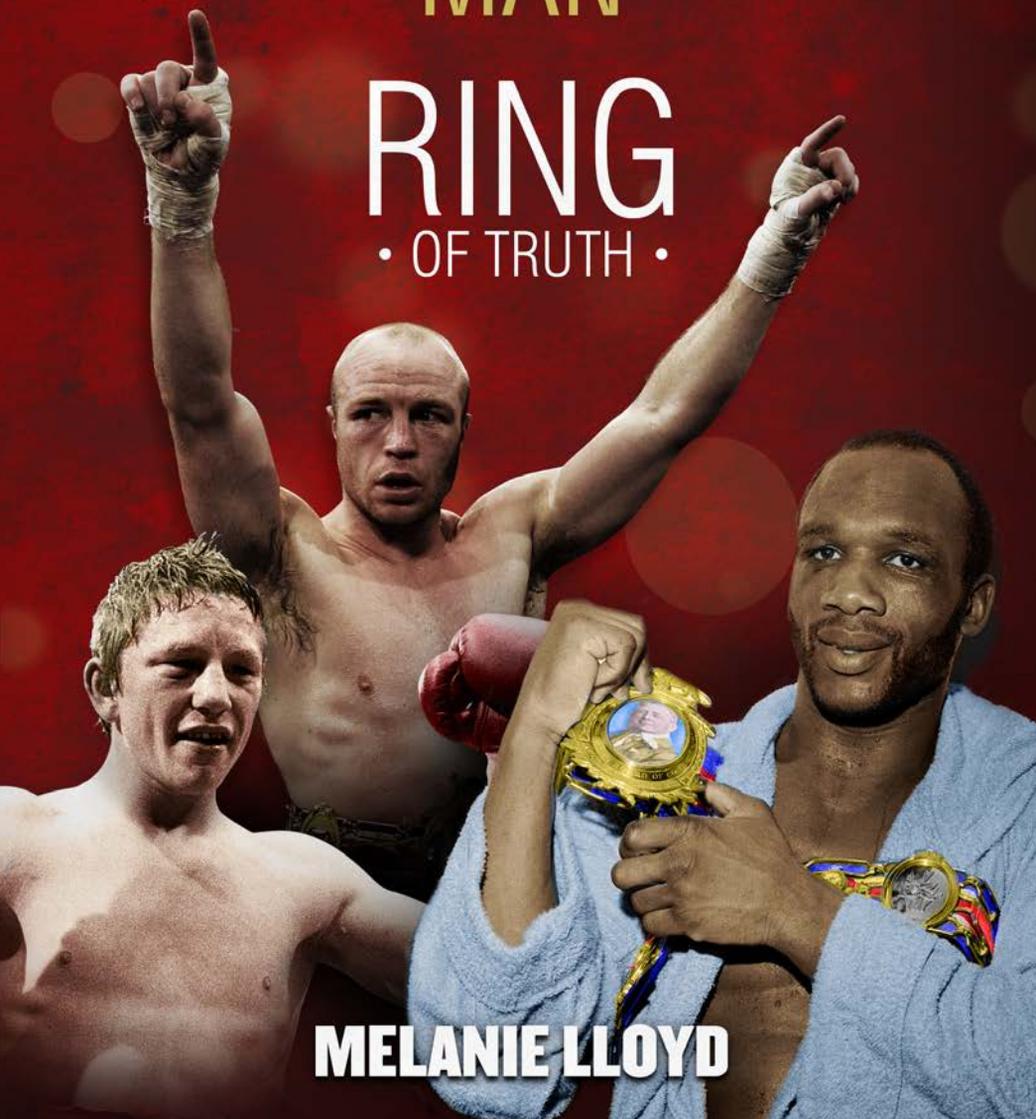


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MELANIE LLOYD

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CHAPTER 1

Jon Thaxton

'Sharing the ring with Jon Thaxton was definitely the hardest fight I ever had. It was the only time I ever went 12 rounds and I ran out of steam from the ninth round onwards. I remember the agony and the exhaustion when I was sitting down in the corner between the rounds. With every big attack I made on him, I had to struggle to stay on my feet. After a fight like that, you both earn each other's respect. I've only met Jon once since our fight, so I don't really know him. But, even before I fought him, he always struck me as a positive person. Sometimes, I imagine how it would be if I were to simply bump into him in the street, because he's a nice guy and I'd just like to shake his hand.'

Dave Stewart

BOOKS take a long time to write. Due to a succession of obstacles placed in my path by that old devil called life, this one took almost six years to complete. This interview took place back in January 2010. Six months earlier, I had arranged a preliminary meeting with Jon

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Thaxton in an upstairs room at York Hall in Bethnal Green at the weigh-in for his penultimate fight. After a 17-year switch-hitting career, during which he fought his heart out and captured the British and European lightweight titles during the last quarter, Jon's time in the ring was finally drawing to a close.

When you meet him in person, Jon's natural fitness instantly jumps out at you. He bristles with energy. He is a great talker but he is also a good listener. He has a tendency to think before he speaks and his answers are always eloquent. He was only too happy to agree to be interviewed for this book and, before we parted, I gave him a copy of *Sweet Fighting Man (Volume II)*, so that he could see the sort of shady outfit he was getting tangled up with. He accepted the book with a reverent air, as though I had presented him with something truly precious.

Our first attempt to get together to make our tape was defeated by snowy weather. A week later, when the deferred day arrived, I woke up to a clear blue sky. Norwich, here I come! I walked out of the railway station and Jon was there waiting. As we strolled towards his car, he said, 'I know a nice pub where they do a good lunch.' He then began to enthuse about one of his recent projects, a fitness class which he has christened his boot camp.

As he turned the ignition key, he explained, 'When I started it, three people signed up. By the end of it, we had 16 people. I thought I was going to get really fit people, but they weren't. They were just everyday ladies who needed to lose some weight. One woman lost 1st 4lbs in four weeks. They've been listening to me, doing what I tell them. My sister, who is a great nutritionist, has helped me with my diet plans. I really love what I do and you can't beat being happy.'

'I've got a great wife, Mikaela. Our children are Ella and Kacey, and they're brilliant. I love Mikaela more now than I did when I married her, and not many people can say that. I met her at a leisure centre where I worked as a fitness instructor. I'd say that she was chasing me left, right and centre, but I'd be lying. I saw something I wanted and I thought "I'm having that". Mikaela absolutely hates boxing. I think it's the politics that she doesn't like. One minute I'm fighting. Then I'm not. Boxers pull out, things change and she can't adapt to that. She knows I train hard, I work hard, I'm all up for a fight, and then, all of a sudden, it gets cancelled or the opponent gets changed.

'Mikaela went to a few of my early fights when we first got together. But when we got married, she refused to come any more. Mikaela isn't one of these wives who wants to be seen. If the cameras come round the house, she wants to be out of the way. She's one person who's kept my feet on the ground. We live well within our means. She's in charge of all the financial side of everything and all I have to do is go out and work. She supports the family and everything else. I couldn't be without her. I just love being with her. After all these years, I didn't think I'd be this happy and this content.

'The first time Mikaela took me to meet her mum and dad, her dad was not impressed one little bit that she'd brought a boxer home. He was telling her that she needed to get a boyfriend with a trade. But I've turned it round. I've looked after his daughter, so he's happy now and he's very proud of what I've done. I am who I am. You either like me or you hate me, but there's nothing I can do about it, so I'm not going to change for anyone.'

We arrived at the designated pub, found a window seat and, as we sat looking out over the River Yare, Jon continued

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to enlighten me about who he was. Jonathan Lee Thaxton was born in Norwich on 10 September 1974. He told me that his father, Kenny, had been his biggest fan and, at the same time, his harshest critic. 'I always went to him directly after a fight. He's one person who'll be honest with me. If I fought well, he'd tell me I boxed well. If I fought rubbish, he'd say to me, "You know what? You fought rubbish." He never gave me false praise or anything like that.

'My dad always wanted me to be a footballer. He was a footballer himself. He wasn't a great footballer, and you can write that down! But he reckons he was as fit as me when he was my age. I tell him, "That's rubbish. Your sport was putting jumpers down and playing football in the park with your mates. I'm a professional sportsman." But he's so passionate about the boxing game and he's so passionate about me. He wants me to do so well, and that's why he's so critical. You'll get honesty with him and I love that. Sometimes he can be *too* honest, but that's how he is.

'My mum's name is Marion. She's been a fantastic support to me. She used to help sell all the tickets and it took a big weight off my mind, because you might be the best fighter in the world but, if you can't sell tickets, you're no good to no one. My mum would put coaches on and she'd go round the bus giving out sandwiches to everyone. Whenever she meets anyone, she's like, "My boy, Jon", and she's so popular around the place. I can be anywhere in Britain and people say, "Hey, Jon, how's your mum?" They've most probably spoken to her on the phone about tickets or she's been at ringside. I've got a very proud family. My sister, Julia, and my brother, Jason, have been a big help and a big support, and my mum and dad have been to all my fights.

‘My upbringing was brilliant. We lived in a great neighbourhood. I never had to fight my way out of the gutter like some boxers do. My mum and dad have given me everything I’ve ever wanted, from support to material things as well. They’ve been hard-working parents and that’s what rubbed off on me, I suppose. They’ve always had a big line of discipline. Even now, I’m always eager not to upset the family.

‘When I was eight years old, my dad brought home a Bruce Lee film and I watched it and I thought, “I want to do that. I want to do karate.” Dad took me to this club and we thought it was a karate club. It was actually a kickboxing club, but we didn’t know any different, so I started kickboxing and I started doing okay. In total, I had about 60 kickboxing fights. To be fair, I was very good at it. I couldn’t kick very well and I couldn’t punch very well, but I could have a bit of a ruck. Before I was 16, I was British and European kickboxing champion. When I was in my teens, I was fighting grown men and giving two stones away in weight. Nowadays, it would be unheard of. I’d fight anywhere and everywhere. I’d fight three times in one night sometimes. I used to just love fighting.

‘Right at the start, I decided to go to an amateur boxing club to improve my kickboxing, so I went to Norwich Broadside ABC. I went in and I thought I trained well. The second week, I went back to train and the guy called me over and I said, “What’s up?” He said, “I don’t want you here any more. You’re crap. I want you to leave.” I was only an eight-year-old kid. He said, “When I’ve got people like him, him and him”, and he pointed at the other boxers, “I can’t waste my time with you.” I said, “When do you want me to leave?” He said, “Now.” So I had to wait outside in the pissing rain

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for my dad to come and pick me up. I saw that guy about six months ago and I said to him, "You kicked me out of the club." He denied it all, but I know what he did and, to be fair, it was very motivational because I could have thought, "I'll never be a boxer, I'll quit and I'll never do it again." But I thought, "No, it's something I want to do." Then I started at the Norwich Lads Club and that's where I stayed for the rest of my amateur career.

I left school with no qualifications. All I ever wanted to do was fight. Two months past my 18th birthday, I turned pro with Brendan Ingle in Sheffield. The first time I went there, Brendan said, "I want you to spar with this guy called Jason Barker." So I sparred with Jason Barker, who was a bit of a journeyman. I was allowed to hit him to the face and the body, and all he was allowed to do was touch me to the body, but I couldn't catch him and I couldn't believe it. I got really frustrated. Then Brendan got this little Arab fella in to spar with Jason Barker. The little guy was about 5ft nothing and he started smashing Jason Barker up, making him look two bob. Brendan said, "That's Naseem Hamed. He's going to be a world champion." When I looked at Naz, I could see it. He was so confident and he had this aura about him. Then Brendan said to me, "You're going to be a champion as well." What Naz had just done to this guy and what this guy had just done to me was completely different, and I don't know what Brendan must have seen in me, but he certainly saw something.

'Naz used to beat me up every night in that gym, but I'd learn everything from those sparring sessions. He used to hit so hard. If he wanted to hit you on the nose, he'd hit you on the nose every time. If he wanted to hit you in the solar plexus, he'd hit you there. He'd place his shots

absolutely brilliantly. He had accuracy, power and speed. In my opinion, he had the damn lot. Also, we had fighters in that gym like Ryan Rhodes, Neville Brown and Herol Graham, and I used to spar with everyone. Some people can do it in the gym and look a million dollars but, when they get on a big occasion, they can't produce what they do in the gym. I was the other way round. I could never produce it very well in the gym, but I could have a fight in the ring, and that's the best way to be.

'I was at the Ingle gym for ten years. During my career, I also worked with a trainer based in Norwich called Graham Everett, who is so passionate, but the Ingles have always been in my corner. John Ingle has been my manager throughout. Dominic Ingle is most probably one of the best cuts men in the business. When I fought Lee Meager, I needed 14 stitches in my eyelid and I didn't worry one bit because I just knew Dominic would look after it.

'Brendan has got his style up there and it doesn't suit everyone. If you look at my fights, I can switch and I'm very comfortable on the switching. Brendan taught me to box and, at times, I did box, but I just wanted to get in there and have a tear-up. That's in my nature, but I'm not an aggressive person. I was fighting for my family and that's a big motivation. I'd plan everything. Every night, I'd go for walks. I'd put my iPod on and I used to listen to certain tracks, and I used to get myself in a frenzy. I'd come home sweating, and I'd only been out for a walk. I'd focus on what happens if I get cut, what happens if I get dropped. I even knew roughly the first punch I'd throw.

'Believe it or not, when I first went to train with Brendan Ingle, I actually thought it was still going to be as an amateur. I didn't realise I was fighting professional. One day, Brendan

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phoned me up and he said, "Jon, I've got you a fight in two weeks." I said, "Right, okay. Who am I fighting?" He said, "I don't know yet, but you've got a fight and you need a medical." I said, "I've had my amateur medical." He said, "No, you need a CT scan and an eye test." I said, "Brendan, can I ask you something?" He said, "What, Jono?" I said, "Am I fighting professional or amateur?" He went, "You're fighting professional." So I went up there two weeks before the fight. I got my medical done and had a conversation on the telephone with the Board of Control. They said, "Have you got any questions?" I said "No", and they gave me my licence. That's how it was done in those days.

I had my first professional fight in December 1992 in Stoke against another guy who was making his pro debut called Scott Smith. Before the fight, I was sat in the changing room, nervous, and I saw some 6oz gloves. I didn't know nothing about the business back then and I didn't realise that we fought in 6oz gloves as pros, rather than the 8oz ones we wore as amateurs. I thought, "My God, 6oz gloves, I've won the lottery. He'll be wearing his 8oz gloves and I've got a pair of 6oz gloves." Jason Barker was also fighting on the bill, and I whispered to him, "Look, I've got some 6oz gloves." He just looked at me and said, "Yeah, me too." I said, "Okay, we won't tell anyone." Brendan said, "Jono, I'll do your hands now." So I took over my crepe bandages I'd bought, and he went, "You can't fight in them." I nearly started crying. I'm an emotional guy and I thought, "Oh, no, I've got the wrong things." I was so naïve. I won that first fight by half a point and it was very close. To be fair, I suppose it could have gone either way. It wasn't my ability. I think it was just my fitness and my "never say die" attitude, because the one thing about me is I will not quit at anything.

‘It wasn’t unusual for me to be boxing at very short notice. When I boxed John Smith at Wembley, that was a 24-hour notice job. Brendan had someone else on at York Hall on the same night, so I went to York Hall with Brendan. I got bandaged up and saw the doctor at York Hall, got my shorts on and my protector. The only thing I didn’t have on was my gloves. Then I was in a car heading for Wembley thinking, “I hope I’m going to get there.” I walked into Wembley, my boots on, my gumshield in, and I walked out to fight. I won the fight on points, but I didn’t look great, and I remember I got cut.

‘Then I got an opportunity against a kid called Dean Hollington. He was a big prospect and I stopped him in three rounds at York Hall in December 1993. Because I looked so rubbish in my last fight, they thought I’d be an easy fight for him. Because I was British and European kickboxing champion, as I was being introduced in the ring, I took my robe off and I had all my kickboxing belts draped over me. Dean Hollington was managed by Mickey Duff, and Mickey Duff went mad. He was going, “Brendan, take them belts off. This is boxing. This isn’t kickboxing.” Dean Hollington saw the belts and he must have thought, “Wait a minute, maybe this kid is a bit special”, putting doubts in his mind. Mickey Duff was screaming and Brendan said, “Jono, ignore it.” So I just ignored it. Brendan told me to fight him southpaw, and I boxed brilliant. In the *Boxing News*, it said “Ingle’s Kid Courage”. All of a sudden, everyone was saying, “Bloody hell, who *is* this Thaxton?”

‘Then I got the job with Bob Williams and I won the vacant Southern Area light-welterweight title. I stopped Bob in four rounds in his home town of Watford in March 1994. Bob is a great fella and he’s become a classy referee.

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For him, the night we boxed each other, that was his big stage. It was like a *world* title for him, and it was a shame, because he's such a nice kid and he just got me at the wrong time. After beating someone like Dean Hollington, my confidence was sky high.'

In November 1994, Jon travelled to Bracknell Leisure Centre to defend his Southern Area title against southpaw homeboy, Keith Marner. 'I trained for the fight, as I always do, very hard. I'd just beat Dean Hollington in his own town, Bob Williams in his own town, and then I'm fighting Keith Marner in his own town. But he was 13 years older than me, he was a roofer by trade, and I was thinking it would be an easy fight. I was thinking all I'd have to do is turn up and win.

'Keith Marner's trainer and manager was Jim Evans, and what a good guy Jim is. I was sparring with Billy Schwer in London and Jim was stood at the back of the gym with a video camera. When we climbed in the ring, I knew nothing about Keith Marner and they knew all about me. So Jim Evans had gameplan A, B and C, and I lost my Southern Area title that night on points. But what great tactics by Jim Evans and I take my hat off to him. I love the fact that he got one over on me because I can laugh about it. The Keith Marner fight was a great learning fight and it was small hall fight of the year. Whenever me and Jim Evans see each other, even after all these years, we always smile about it and have banter, and Jim is a lovely, genuine guy in boxing.

'When I boxed Delroy Leslie at York Hall, I had three days' notice for that fight. It was June 1995, and Brendan phoned up and said, "Do you want to fight Wednesday?" I knew Delroy was an unbeaten kid. I phoned Graham Everett up and I said, "What's Delroy Leslie like?" Graham

Everett is a boxing boffin who knows boxing inside out. He said, "He's an ex-Olympian Jamaican, and he's a bit tall." I turned up at the venue, weighed in, and I said to Brendan, "Who am I fighting?" He went, "You're fighting him over there." I looked at Delroy and then looked up, because his head was nearly touching the ceiling. I said, "No, seriously, Brendan, who am I fighting?" He said, "You're fighting him over there." When I got in the ring, Delroy was standing in the other corner and he was absolutely huge. But I boxed really well. I was moving and ducking, I dropped him twice and I won by one point.

A couple of months later, the chance came up to travel to Holland and box unbeaten Dutchman, Rene Prins, and I decided to take the opportunity because I'm up for fighting all the time. I lost the fight on points over six rounds. Why did we take the fight? We took it because we thought we could win. Did we win? Damn *right* we won! Did we get the decision? Of course we didn't, but life ain't always fair. We got ripped off and that's how it goes, but I had a good two days away.

Then I went down to lightweight. I did that because we got the chance of fighting Colin Dunne for the vacant Southern Area title. The *Boxing News* favoured me to win because I'd beat Dean Hollington, but I didn't make the weight properly and I got too tired during the fight. A lot of people say I dropped Colin Dunne. I don't think I did. I can't remember dropping him. After that, I got stopped in the fifth round. He had me on the ropes and I was ducking. There were no punches landing but the referee stopped the fight. Should it have been stopped? I didn't think it was a well-timed stoppage but I don't think I'd have won the fight in the end. I'll be honest and say that Colin was the

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better fighter. He had some great epic wars. I made a lot of mistakes with Colin Dunne. So I went back up to light-welter and boxed John O'Johnson again six weeks later, and I knocked him out in the fourth round.

'Three weeks later, I took a 24-hour notice job and I came down to London to box Paul "Scrap Iron" Ryan at York Hall. He'd just won the British and Commonwealth light-welterweight titles. His titles weren't on the line the night I boxed him, but I said I'd box him anyway. We arrived in London, we'd just weighed in, and we nearly got blown up by an IRA bomb in Docklands. The fight was rescheduled for the Wednesday, so we went back to Sheffield and came back to London on the Tuesday.'

Paul Ryan was one of boxing's rogues, and no stranger to lodging at Her Majesty's pleasure. Prior to his fight with Jon, he had reportedly spent no fewer than five Christmas Days incarcerated and allegedly took humorous pride in being known as 'the worst burglar in Hackney'. Jon sent shockwaves through the British boxing scene on that winter night when he blasted the flat-capped hard man into oblivion in the first round. 'From the minute I done that, I became number one in Britain and I was either number one, number two or number three throughout my career after that,' Jon recalled. 'When "Scrap Iron" Ryan went down, he went down badly. I walked away to the corner as if I would do it every day and then everyone started jumping in the ring. Roy Francis was the referee and I remember him coming over and saying, "A fighter's hurt. Quiet." That's when, all of a sudden, you see there's another side to this coin. I might be victorious, but let's just make sure he's all right. He was all right and then I gave a really good interview. Why was it good? Because I'd had 24 hours to

plan it and I planned it perfect because I *knew* I was gonna win that night. I just wish it had been for the British title but it wasn't to be.'

During the next two years, Jon took part in a cluster of intercontinental title fights. Amongst the boxing pundits and journalists who sit on the safe side of the ropes, there is generally not a lot of weight attached to these ambiguously named belts, which are often referred to as trinkets and baubles. However, Jon has remained appreciative of the experience he gained and the progress he made during that stage of his career. 'I went for the intercontinental group, where I could test my skills that way, bringing me up slowly. When I was defending those intercontinental titles, they served their purpose. They got me experience, and I'd have not so much safe defences, because nothing is safe in boxing, but defences where I'd learn, and I think that was a great move by the Ingles.

'I won the IBF light-welterweight version in June 1996 against Mark Elliott at the Mansfield Leisure Centre. I stopped him in the fifth round and it was a hard night's work. Brendan didn't want the fight but we had to take it because we had a TV date. Elliott dropped me in the third round, and that was the first time I'd ever been down. It's like taking three seconds out of your life. You can't remember nothing about it. Anyway, I got up and, in the next round, I threw a right hand over the top and I knocked him spark out. I done "Scrap Iron" Ryan with a left hook and I done Mark Elliott with a right hook.'

Three months later, Jon added the WBO light-welterweight belt to his intercontinental collection. He took the verdict on points against a man who was fondly

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known as 'The Punching Postman', Bernard Paul, who hailed originally from Mauritius and made his home in Tottenham. The match took place at the Concorde Leisure Centre in Sheffield and it turned out to be an epic contest. 'I was very nervous about that fight because I knew Bernard Paul could bang,' Jon remembered. 'He'd just knocked out Jason Rowland. It was a tough fight and I was more nervous because I was sure that it was going the distance and I'd never been 12 rounds before. During the fight, I saved a lot in the tank and Brendan kept shouting at me in the corner, *really* having a go at me. But I proved to myself that I could do 12 rounds for the first time. You should always work to your strengths which, for me, were my fitness and power and the determination in my mind.

'I defended my intercontinental titles against Paul Burke in March 1997. He was a former British and Commonwealth lightweight champion, he'd twice challenged for the European title and, in his fight after me, he regained the Commonwealth title. That was my first fight at the Norwich Sports Village and we packed the place out. Paul Burke was maybe outboxing me a little bit with his experience and his knowledge. But I just got on top of him with my conditioning, my power and my determination, and I stopped him in nine rounds. That was the fight when, all of a sudden, all the Norwich public came out to watch me. There were about 2,500 people there. My first ever fight, I had three people there, my mum, my dad and a girlfriend. From three people to 2,500, that's something I built up. People were coming to watch me not because they were into boxing, but just to support me, and I had a great following like that. Also, I liked boxing at Norwich best because I could get home to Mikaela quicker.'

Jon rewarded the loyalty of his local fans with three more heroic defences of his titles in his home town. He did the job in less than four minutes against Hamburg-based Armenian, Gagik Chachatrian, in June 1997. 'I was on the undercard. We had about 5,500 people at that one. You had Herbie Hide fighting Tony Tucker for the WBO heavyweight title and you had me fighting Chachatrian. I thought it was a fantastic performance from me. I dropped him twice and banged him out in the second round and that was a really good, classy knockout.

'In my defence against Rimvydas Bilius, I broke my right hand in the first round and my left hand in the third round, and I had nine rounds to go with two broken hands. But I just carried on and I won on points over 12 rounds. After the fight, I took my bandages off and my hands blew up like balloons. The doctor said to me, "Jon, go straight to the hospital and get them set right now." Mikaela came to see that fight and she'd been drinking because she needed to calm her nerves down. We got into the car park and she said, "I've been drinking. I can't drive." So I drove myself with two broken hands, with Mikaela changing gear. We laugh about it now, but that's how it was.'

In September 1998, Jon made the final defence of his intercontinental titles against Emanuel Burton, who had come over from Chicago. 'I'd been out for ten months and they said, "We've got you this guy. If you win this fight, you've got a world title fight." I went in that ring that night thinking I was chocolate. I'd knocked out "Scrap Iron". I'd defended my titles three times. I'd won with two broken hands against Rimvydas Bilius. How the hell could I get beat by a muppet like Emanuel Burton?

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‘Anyway, what a brilliant fighter Emanuel Burton turned out to be. If he had been managed correctly, he’d have been a world-beater. He could have gone somewhere real. I won the first five rounds and then he started playing with me. Where I should have won comfortably, he done my head in and then he beat me. He stopped me in seven rounds and I think that was the only time I’ve genuinely been stopped. I’ve only got a few regrets in life and one of them is not taking Emanuel Burton how I should have took him. If I’d have took him seriously, I *know* I would have beat him. I wish I could fight him again just to prove that point because, although he’s a very talented fighter, the person who beat me that night was me and I don’t like that. I can handle getting beat, but not by myself.’

After rebounding from the Burton defeat with two points wins, Jon set his sights on the British light-welterweight title. The champion at the time was Jason Rowland of West Ham. They boxed in November 1999 at York Hall. ‘I waited ages to get Jason Rowland in the boxing ring. I prepared immensely for it. In the third round, he come in with his head and split my forehead and the blood was coming down. The fourth round, I went out to destroy him and I dropped him twice. In the fifth round, without any significant punch landing, with the blood stopped, the referee stopped the fight. Should he have stopped it? No, I don’t think so, because I was well in charge of the fight. But that’s how the cookie crumbles. He beat me that way and he’s always said to me, “I wish we could have fought again.” But we didn’t and there you go.’

As Sugar Ray Robinson once famously said, it is the punch you don’t see coming that hurts the most. After the Rowland fight, Jon undertook a routine blood test and it

came as a huge shock when he was told the results showed he was just over the allowed limit for an anabolic steroid called Nandrolone. 'I'll tell you this now. I'd *never* take drugs. I went to the hearing at the offices of the Board of Control the first time and they said, "We're finding you guilty." They banned me for nine months and fined me £1,500, but it ended up costing me a lot more than that.

'I appealed their decision and I had to get a barrister, and I never got that money back. In the appeal, we ran out of time and people had to go off, so they couldn't give me a verdict there and then, whether I was cleared or not. They said they'd let me know in a week or so. My dad took it really bad. The way he's brought me up, I don't smoke, I don't drink, I don't gamble and I don't womanise. When I got banned for taking drugs, my dad got really depressed. He wouldn't go out of the house. It's not the fact that he thought I'd done it. It was the fact that he just couldn't handle the situation. He kept phoning me up and asking me when I was getting cleared.

'Me and Mikaela had planned to go on holiday and I just wanted to get away. I decided that, when I got back, if they still found me guilty, I was going to walk away from the sport, because I'm not having someone accuse me of being a cheat. I hate losing but I would never, ever cheat to win. So we went to Sri Lanka on holiday. I turned my phone off. I didn't want to speak to anyone. When we landed back home, I turned my phone on.

'Brendan rang me and said, "Jon, good news, you've been cleared." I sat there waiting for my cases, crying my eyes out, and Mikaela put her arms around me and she said, "Don't worry, Jon, we'll get through this." I said, "I've been cleared," and then we just cried together. It was a sweet

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victory. But, at the same time, it wasn't a victory because I didn't do it.'

The appeal found that Jon had possibly failed the test due to either drinking large amounts of mineral water during training or eating steroid-injected meat during a recent visit to the USA. 'It was a waste of time and it took ten months out of my boxing career. It took ten months out of my life. During that time, my nan was very ill. My dad was saying, "You'd better be cleared by the time she passes away. If she passes away thinking you're a drug cheat, you can't have that." So I *had* to clear my name. We got so many letters of support and all the local press and TV supporting me. But, every now and again, people would go, "Yeah, but there's no smoke without fire." The bottom line is I didn't do it and I don't care what people think. But it's all experience and it made me a stronger person.'

Jon's comeback to the ring was arranged for July 2000. His opponent was Kimoun Kouassi and they boxed at the Norwich Sports Village. Jon stopped the Ivory Coast fighter in three rounds. 'He was African champion and it was a little small hall show to get me back in the ring. I split his eye and they stopped it on that. But that wasn't a bad performance considering everything and it was a good fight for local support.'

In October 2000, Jon challenged the then up-and-coming Ricky Hatton for the vacant British light-welterweight title on a promotion that was dubbed 'Civil War'. They boxed at Wembley Conference Centre and it was the Mancunian who had his glove raised at the end. 'When people ask me what's the best fight I've ever been in, I always tell them it was Ricky Hatton because that night I couldn't have gave no more. I trained so bloody hard. I done 5,000

sit-ups every day for that fight because he punches [hard] to the body and I wanted to be ready. After the Hatton fight, I was passing blood all the next day. But I loved that fight. I remember, in the fight, I was *enjoying* it. I remember splitting his eye in the first round and I thought I'd won the lottery! The second round, I had all my victory speech worked out. The third round, my mortgage was paid. I thought I'd done it. But he changed tactics and it worked. He had a great cuts man in Mick Williamson and he fought a hell of a fight.

'When the final bell went, I knew I'd lost but I still went over to the referee to put my hand up. He bloody didn't put my hand up but there you go. The better man won on the night. Ricky's got the same determination, the same passion, the same everything as I've got. The only thing he's got different to me is he's got more talent than I've got and I can live with getting beat by someone better than me because that night I gave my utter best. After we'd knocked the shit out of each other for 12 rounds, I was on one bed and Ricky was on the next bed. He got a massive cut on his eye; 28 stitches he needed. I was getting stitched up, he was getting stitched up, and we were laughing and joking about our fight. I said to him, "We should do this again!" And he went, "Thaxton, fuck off!" Our mums and dads had pictures together, and me and Ricky had pictures together. You'll never get another sport like boxing. It's unique.

'My next fight was against Alan Temple. That was the first time I boxed Alan Temple, in March 2001 at the Wembley Conference Centre. I dropped him in the first round. I won the second round. The third round, he came back and I was knackered because I'd just done 12 rounds with Hatton. I went out too fast and I started tiring, and I

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won by one point. The only thing that won it for me was the knockdown, and I should have won it easy.

‘A few years down the line, when I was making a comeback, I never wanted to fight Alan Temple ever again. I never wanted to *see* him! It was like facing your fears. Whenever John Ingle said, “Jon, I’m trying to get you a fight, and I might get Alan Temple, or him, or him”, I’d say, “*Never* get me Alan Temple. *Don’t* get me Alan Temple. I do *not* want to fight Alan Temple.” So they’d get me somebody else. Anyway, it was February 2006, I’d been training for a fight all over Christmas, and John Ingle says, “Your French guy has pulled out, so I’ve got you a new fighter.” I said, “Who am I fighting?” He said, “All we’ve got is Alan Temple.” Graham Everett said, “Jon, you’ve been training all over Christmas. Are you going to pull out?” I said, “No, but I don’t want to fight Alan Temple.” We all have fears in life and my biggest fear in boxing at the time was bloody Alan Temple from Hartlepool!

‘So I boxed Alan Temple again. I dropped him in the first round, dropped him in the second round, dropped him in the third round and knocked him out in the fifth round. I thought to myself, for years and years this guy has been a big thing and I never wanted to fight him. Why? Because he pushed me so hard the last time, when I should have won easy. So I boxed him and I faced the fear and it was bloody easy. I’m so glad, because I think, if I’d have retired without fighting him again, I’d have felt like a fraud. But, let me tell you, Alan Temple earlier in his career, when he was on his day, he was a damn good fighter. But he became one of the journeymen, got a last-minute job against me and that was his last fight. After he boxed me the second time, he retired.’

To state the bleeding obvious, being physically hard is an essential requirement for a boxer and few came tougher than Eamonn Magee. During his ring walks, the Belfast southpaw would wear a rugged, deadpan expression that depicted a closed book, and simultaneously told a thousand stories. In February 2002, Jon challenged the Irishman for his Commonwealth light-welterweight title. ‘When people ask me who was the best fighter I ever fought, I always tell them Eamonn Magee could have been because he had an answer for everything. I was in great shape for Eamonn Magee but I underestimated him. I thought it was going to be a war, but he was a great counterpuncher and he had a hell of a lot of knowledge.

‘When I’m boxing, normally I don’t see the cameras. If I’m in my zone, I don’t hear the crowd or the music. All I see is my opponent. With Eamonn Magee, it was a different kettle of fish. I walked out to the MEN Arena all psyched up and I looked up and I saw my big face on the screen. All of a sudden, I lost concentration. I was more concerned about what I looked like rather than the fight. Then I got in the ring expecting a big punch-up and all Eamonn Magee did was counterpunch me. When the referee stopped it in the sixth round, I protested. Magee had hit me with about 20 unanswered punches but I was fine. He was just hitting my gloves. You can take a positive from that because you learn not to bloody do that again. I should have been focused on what I was doing rather than what I was looking like.

‘I was going to retire after Eamonn Magee because I thought I wasn’t going to make it and I thought Mikaela would have been happy if I retired. But Mikaela asked me, “Do you want to retire?” I went, “No, but I’m not going to be a world champion.” She said, “What if you go down to

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lightweight, go down in weight so you're stronger?" Mikaela hates boxing but she said to me, "Jon, if you want to fight, I'll support you." So I thought I'd give it one more go and I'd go down to lightweight.

'My next fight was in Norwich against Chill John from Brighton. I've got an excellent fitness trainer called Neil Featherby and two weeks before the fight he said to me, "You know he's unbeaten in seven. Shall we get an easier fight?" To be honest, yes, I wanted to. But I thought, "No, we'll go for it," and I was brilliant that night. I stopped him in two rounds and that was a very good win. All of a sudden, I'd arrived. I was a lightweight. I was comfortable at the weight now and I thought, "Right, let's kick ass. I've still got it. I can *do* this."

'The night I boxed Viktor Baranov in front of my home fans, that was a brilliant win. He was a tough Russian and he'd just gone the distance with some really good fighters over in this country, and I done him in one round. No one could believe that I'd done it that quick. That was more or less the first punch I threw and I sent a few shockwaves through the lightweight division by doing that. In a way, I felt bad because people had paid good money to be there that night and it was over so quick. But it was a great win.'

Exactly a week after the Baranov victory, Jon was involved in a car crash. His daughter, Ella, was also in the car and mercifully escaped unhurt, but Jon sustained a badly injured shoulder. 'I was driving Mikaela's car and she doesn't let me forget that! I had the little one in the back. I was driving down the road and a lorry hit me. I got out of the car and I went mad. I was trying to get at the driver and he had to lock himself in his cab. The police were called and everything.'

‘After that, I carried on training but I kept breaking down because of my shoulder, so I retired. For two years, I worked at a development centre but the boss I was working for wanted complete control of me. One day, he was trying to sell a ten-acre site and he said to me, “Jon, I need all this grass cut because I’ve got a buyer coming over tomorrow and I want this looking good.” I said, “The ride-on mower is broken.” He said, “I don’t give a shit that the ride-on is broken. I want this fucking grass cut and I want it done now.” So I had to push a push-mower for ten acres and cut the grass. It took me all day and all night.

‘That was the best thing that ever happened really. I was two years into my retirement and I thought, “Boxing is a lot bloody easier than this, being spoken to like that. I’m getting on now and people are treating me like a kid. If I don’t do something now, I never will.” So I spoke to Neil Featherby and I said, “I’m gonna make a comeback.” He said, “I knew you would. I don’t blame you. We’ll sort it out and we’ll get it done.” Also, there was this local businessman called Carl Moore. Carl heard I wanted to make a comeback and he wanted to give me a chance, so he came in and financed me. He paid for me to have physiotherapy on my shoulder. If it wasn’t for people like Carl Moore, Graham Everett and Neil Featherby, I wouldn’t have been boxing again.

‘In October 2004, I made my comeback against Silence Saheed of Nigeria. I beat him on points at the Norwich Sports Village. By now, I was 30 years old. I fought at my own pace and used my experience to calm everything down. You’ve got these young fighters coming in wanting to tear your head off. One thing about me is I’m a banger. Anyone coming to fight me, I’ll bang ’em put them in their place. The last thing you lose is your punch and that’s a good thing.

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‘The following April, I stopped Christophe De Busillet in front of my home fans for the WBF lightweight title. Carl Moore told me, “You win that title and I’ll buy you a car.” Also, the guy who I worked for at the development centre wanted me to fail. Anyway, I got dropped in the third round and I saw two things. I saw that guy thinking, “Yeah, I knew he wouldn’t make it,” and I saw my bloody brand new car driving off. So I got up, went back to my corner, regrouped myself and knocked De Busillet out in the fourth.

‘I’m a Norwich City fan and they were playing Manchester United at Carrow Road the same day. I’d said to my fitness class, “If Norwich beat Man United and I win the WBF title, I’m gonna take everyone out for a drink.” What are the bloody chances of that happening? None! Norwich are *never* going to beat Man United! So Norwich beat Man United 2-0 and I took them all out for something to drink. It was fantastic. Although people look down on the WBF title and, yeah, I suppose I do as well, that title done me great and I’m very proud of holding it. There must have been 3,000 people in there, the atmosphere was electric, and it was a great event for me. My little girl was there and she saw me win a very, very small version of a world title. When I jumped on the ropes to salute the crowd, the first person I saw was my little girl, Ella, on my mate Lee Perry’s shoulders. They were at the back and she was waving at me. You can’t make them moments. That was something that will always stay with me.

‘I defended my WBF title in September 2005 against a Romanian guy called Vasile Dragomir, who was a good fighter. He cut me in one of the rounds but I dropped him and knocked him out in the fourth. It was an open air show on a beautiful summer evening, but the attendance was a

disappointment. We should have kept to small venues but we went to Carrow Road football stadium and it just didn't catch the imagination of the Norwich public. Carl Moore hosted the show and he lost a hell of a lot of money. We had fireworks, the lot. Carl put the show on for me and for all the other local fighters, but I suppose, in a way, we were trying to run before we could walk. You get 25,000 to watch Norwich City play, but Jon Thaxton hasn't got 25,000 members in his audience. We all make mistakes and the biggest loser that night was Carl Moore. He does so much good and he doesn't get the recognition he deserves. I look at the house I live in now, I look at the car I drive now, everything I've got now, and without Carl Moore I wonder where I would have been.

‘Three weeks before my fight with Jorge Daniel Miranda in May 2006, I got punched in the chest when I was sparring and I cracked my rib. I used to lie on my bed after training and I could hardly breathe. Mikaela wanted me to pull out of the fight, but I said, “I ain't pulling out of this fight.” This was Sky Box Office to get me back up there with this unbeaten kid. We boxed at Ponds Forge Arena in Sheffield. I got in there and boxed brilliant. I started having a fight with him and I got cut. Having a cut, believe it or not, was the best thing that happened to me because then I boxed him from the outside. I boxed his head off, dropped him in the fifth or sixth round and I went to finish him off but he was still up for it and he wanted a punch-up. I carried on with the boxing and won virtually every round. Even my dad said I boxed brilliant that night, so I *must* have done well.

‘I remember walking back to my corner and I said to my trainer, “Graham, I've got to tell you something. I cracked my rib.” He went, “What round?” I went, “About

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four weeks ago,” and he went, “You cunt!” That’s what he said because I didn’t tell him. Then, after that fight, I went up to Simon Block, the secretary of the Board of Control, and I said, “Right, I won this fight. I want Lee Meager,” because Lee Meager beat Dave Stewart the night before and won the British title. I said, “I’ve earned my stripes. I should be number one contender now.” Simon Block said, “We’ll see, Jon.”

On 8 December 2006, just one day short of 14 years since he made his professional debut, Jon got his wish and boxed Lee Meager for the British lightweight title. ‘We boxed at the Goresbrook Leisure Centre in Dagenham and I finally won the British lightweight title, which was a very proud moment. My dad said to me when I was 18 years old, “Whatever you do in life, win the British title” – and I won it. I had great preparation for the fight against Lee Meager. Graham Everett studied DVD after DVD. He got sick and tired of it. I’d phone him up and I’d say, “What are you doing?” He’d say, “I’m watching your bloody opponent.” Graham Everett is so passionate about his boys doing well and Neil Featherby is the same again with the fitness. They’ll communicate with each other. So, if I’d done a hard road session with Neil Featherby, I’d do an easy session in the gym with Graham, and vice-versa, and it went like a dream. Also, I *loved* it because I was the underdog. I always performed better when I was the underdog because that pushed me that extra ten per cent when I was running and when I was sparring. Whatever I do, I hate it when people say, “It’s an easy fight for Jon” because, when you win it, where’s the praise?

‘Before the fight, my dad told me to “go out there and show them how good you are”. It was a fantastic team

effort that night. I remember getting cut in the sixth. I went back to the corner and I had Graham Everett giving me instructions, John Ingle giving me water and I had Dominic Ingle working on the cut. People think boxing is an individual sport. That's exactly what it isn't. It's a team effort. I might be the one who'll get all the praise, but I can't work without these guys behind me. Without them, I'd be nothing.

'Mick Hennessy was the promoter and beating Lee Meager on his own promoter's show was a very big thing for me. I remember Mick was going mad, screaming for Lee Meager to knock me out, and I thought, "I'll *never* sign with that promoter!" But, in the end, I signed with Mick Hennessy and I'll tell you what, Mick Hennessy wasn't screaming for Lee to knock me out because he hated me. He's just very passionate about boxing and he loves his boys. He makes it personal. I think Mick Hennessy is a cracking guy. I really like him as a promoter but as a person as well. He's given me chance after chance and I appreciate that so much. I've earned a lot of money with him and I'm very pleased with that. I really owe him a lot.

'I defended my British title at Norwich Showground in March 2007 against Scott Lawton, who is a great person inside the ring and outside the ring. Before the fight, I asked my dad to carry my Lonsdale Belt into the ring and that was a big thing for my dad. He came in the changing room, and no one ever sees me in the changing room, only my team, and he says, "That's not my son in there," because he saw a different me, very aggressive. I have routines I do and I punched the wall. But because I punched the wall that hard, I thought I'd broken my hand. This was two minutes before I'm due to go out and fight. I sat there and I went all quiet.

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Then I started walking round and I was thinking to myself, “Oh, fuck! I’ve just broke my pissing hand!” I started trying to move my fingers and I couldn’t move them but I knew I had to go out and fight. Luckily, I didn’t break it. I just bruised it. So I went out there and stopped Scott Lawton in the seventh round and then I defended my British title against Dave Stewart.’

Dave Stewart, a quietly spoken Scotsman with a deeply profound nature and the heart of a lion, was 6ft tall, lithe as anything at the lightweight limit and an impressive sight as he took his place on the battlefield. Jon marched through a steamy, packed-out York Hall to the beat of ‘I Predict a Riot’ by the Kaiser Chiefs and, that night in October 2007 in the East End of London, these two put on one of those classic fights that will forever keep the British championship strong in the hearts of boxing fans. ‘That fight was the hardest time I’ve ever had in the ring. We had an absolute war. I fought so hard that night and I promised Mikaela I was going to win. I felt I was getting outpointed earlier on and then I came back.

‘Going into the last round, I thought it was level pegging and I just wouldn’t give an inch. I got up off the stool and Graham whispered into my ear, “Jon, this fucking belt is for you and your kids. Don’t leave it in here. Don’t leave it up to the judges.” All of a sudden, I thought of Mikaela and, where I was knackered, I just had all this energy inside me. I went out for the 12th round and I started smashing him. I dropped him once and I wouldn’t stop punching. Then he went down and he didn’t beat the count. Then, all of a sudden, the tiredness came back and I stumbled back to the corner and I’d won the fight. I said to Graham afterwards, “Why the fuck didn’t you tell me that in the *first* round?”’

After it was over, as the fighters met in the centre of the ring to embrace, the crowd rose to their feet and gave both men a standing ovation. At the actual moment they were announcing him the winner, Jon was looking up into Stewart's eyes with concern, asking the gallant and exhausted Scot if he was okay. 'York Hall was very hot', Jon recalled. 'After the fight, I couldn't stop shaking. I was freezing cold but I felt boiling hot inside. Sometimes, I think maybe I should have retired after that fight because it took so much out of me and it was such a dramatic win. I gave my absolute heart and soul. I remember thinking in that last round of my kids, wanting to do it so much for them. The next day after a fight, the kids will jump on my bed going, "Daddy, Daddy, did you win? Did you win?" I'll say, "Yeah, but shall we go swimming?"'

It was six months before Jon boxed again. Once more, he was back in the frenetic bear pit of York Hall, this time challenging Yuri Romanov for his European lightweight title. The man from Minsk was 25 years old, eight years the younger man. The fresh-faced Eastern European had a deceptively impish look about him outside the ring, but he effortlessly changed into self-assured smooth operator at the sound of the bell.

'Romanov was a talented kid. Four weeks before the fight, I got a little nick over my right eye. Everyone said I should pull out. I said, "No, I'm not pulling out. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. It's a European title. I haven't got a European title and I can win this." In the fourth round of the fight, a cut opened up. By the fifth round, the cut went 8cm long, right across my eye.

'I walked back to the corner and Dominic Ingle stopped the fight. I was absolutely furious that he'd stopped it

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because I was just coming into the fight. We got back to the changing room and, I'll be honest, I was maybe going to have a little bit of a go at him. Then I looked at the cut in the mirror. I went over to Dominic, I shook his hand and I said, "Dom, thanks very much, you done the right thing." Dominic Ingle thinks about his fighters and I thank him for doing that. John Ingle said, "Jon, if that had gone into a muscle, you'd have had a lazy eye." I've got a young family and I don't need that.

'Because the cut hadn't healed, I had to vacate my British title. So Lee Meager fought John Murray and I was down to fight the winner as a mandatory contender. Then Mick Hennessy gave me another fantastic chance, six months more or less to the day from the Romanov fight. Romanov had relinquished his European title, so I boxed Juan Melero of Spain for the vacant belt at Norwich Showground. I knocked him out in the third round and I fought brilliant that night. I didn't have to go in the trenches like I did for Dave Stewart. I got him with a cracking shot, and down he went. It was one of the best punches I've thrown in my career, a right hook, and it felt so great to be European lightweight champion.

'I lost the title in my first defence against Anthony Mezaache. I was gutted. The first round, I dropped him, and that was the worst thing I could have done. They gave him a standing eight count and he was totally gone. I went to finish him off and he spat out his gumshield. He had a point deducted for that. But, instead of having eight seconds, he had 44 seconds of recovery time. After that, he got on his bike. I went after him to try and knock him out because I thought I could drop him, and I punched myself out a little bit, so he won on points.

‘Everyone around said I was robbed. Was I? I don’t know. My dad thought I won. Barry McGuigan thought I won. Losing like that in your hometown, that was hard. When they announced, “And the new”, the crowd were quiet. They were in shock. They couldn’t believe it. But that’s life. The day before that fight, Mick Hennessy had lost his mum. I had a guy walk me to the ring, a soldier who’d been in Afghanistan who had lost the use of his legs. He couldn’t walk without crutches. I lost my European title. Who would you rather be? I could win back my European title. You can’t get the use of your legs back and you can’t get your mum back. When I got home, I said to Mikaela, “There’s a lot of people worse off than us,” and we put our arms round each other and went to bed.

‘I’d sparred with Tom Glover a few times and I boxed his head off. When they said, “You’re fighting Tom Glover”, I asked them to get me someone else. But, even at that age with all the experience I had, I still underestimated him. His will was greater than my experience and knowledge. We boxed at York Hall and, when I went to the weigh-in, I was doing funny interviews. I wasn’t in the zone. Tom Glover walks in and I went, “Hi, Tom, you all right?” because we were friendly. But he just looked at me and I thought, “Oh, he’s up for it.” When it came down to it, his will was greater than mine, so he beat me. People say it should have been a draw but I don’t care. The guy took his chance and he beat me, fair and square. I’ve took my chances before and I’ve won. In that fight, I thought, “I’m getting too old for this,” and that was actually happening during the fight.’

Jon Thaxton stepped through the ropes for the final time on 3 October 2009. In the opposite corner was John Murray, a Mancunian who was ten years Jon’s junior and

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undefeated in 28 fights. The prize on the line was the vacant British lightweight title and they boxed at the Altrincham Leisure Centre. 'I went to the weigh-in and there were about 400 people there. They booed the hell out of me, swearing at me. My little girl had bought me some Cheeky Monkeys. They were silly boxer shorts and I suddenly remembered that I had them on. I thought, "Oh my God! I've got to strip off to my underpants and I've got all these people screaming and swearing and booing, and I'm wearing my Cheeky Monkeys!"

'When I walked to the ring, I had Frank Sinatra's "My Way" playing and I thought "I'm going to give it my all." But I wasn't given the chance. Towards the end of the fourth round, the referee stopped the fight. Should the fight have been stopped? No chance. There was no way that should have been stopped. It was a championship fight. We're not playing marbles in there and I thought it could have turned out to be a good fight. Could I have won the fight? I don't know. But give me a chance. I do have a few regrets about that fight, though. After the fight, I didn't praise John Murray up enough because John Murray didn't need that fight. He took the fight, so well done to John Murray. I think John is a very exciting fighter. If you fight the best and you lose, there's nothing you can do about it.

'I'd more or less promised Mikaela that John Murray was going to be my last fight and she was glad because I'd got so much happening outside the boxing, and I wanted some time to concentrate my efforts on other things and I wanted to spend time with my kids. So that's what I done. A lot of boxers are very laid back. They think when they finish boxing they're going to live happily ever after, but it doesn't work like that. Even if you earn all the money in the world,

you've still got to have other interests outside of boxing. It's a short career without a doubt and, when it finishes, you've got to have a reason to get up in the mornings. I've got 101 reasons to get up in the morning. If I'm not doing this, I'm doing that or the other. If I'm not doing anything, I'm touting for work. I've built something up and I'm very proud of what I've done, but I'm not saying I'll always be like that. If I had to go and stack shelves to support my family, bloody right I'll do it. If I have to go and labour and move sand and mix concrete for someone, I'll do that for my family. I won't even hesitate.

'I didn't do well at school but being with Brendan Ingle up in Sheffield was like school. I didn't make it as a world champion but I'll achieve other things, and I was the best fighter I could have been. I never ducked a soul. I'm very proud of how I conducted myself. I love who I am and I love what I do, and not many people can say that. Whatever happens in my life, I'll always find a positive from it because if you do everything right you're never going to learn. If you look at my career, I lost 11 fights. I lost my last three maybe because I was getting old, slow or whatever, but my early fights, whenever I lost, I learned from it. I wasn't a world beater. I wasn't a Ricky Hatton or a Joe Calzaghe. But the tools I had I used to my best advantage and I achieved a hell of a lot. I've always been an honest pro throughout my career and, when I look back, I have to say that I'm very happy with what I achieved in the ring.'

* * *

Now that this book has finally materialised, I found myself wondering how Jon Thaxton's life had panned out since our interview six years ago, so I rang him up and he put me in the picture:

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‘At the moment, I go round schools doing anti-bullying workshops. There’s an element of bullying in every school. So I go in there and I’ll set up a little boxing ring in the middle of the hall. I’ll do a little introduction about me. Then I’ll put on a pair of gloves and I’ll invite different students to have a go. I tell them, “You knock me out and you get a hundred quid from your headmaster!” Luckily, I haven’t been knocked out yet, but there will be a time, no doubt! Then I’ll get a teacher up and we have a little bit of fun. But then I tell them that boxing is done in a boxing gym under supervision, not in the playground or in the park. I talk about my career, how I wasn’t very good, but how I worked hard, I listened, I had my setbacks, but I had my comebacks and I achieved, and it goes down very well.

‘I also work with people with Parkinson’s to help them make their movement a lot more fluent. I get them to work together, holding the pads, hitting the pads, so they’ve got to work as a couple and get the best out of each other. When you work with people with Parkinson’s, you’ve got to be very patient to get them to the best of their ability. Advice is easy to give and hard to take. I’m not a miracle worker. I just show people what they can do.

‘Now that time has passed and I’ve had time to reflect, I think Howard Foster, the referee for my last fight, maybe did me a favour when he stopped my fight against John Murray. At the time, I was angry when he stopped it because I wasn’t hurt. But, when you look back, things aren’t always so black and white. When I got to the ring that night, in my mind, I thought I could do it, but I was conning myself because physically my body wasn’t able. I haven’t seen Howard Foster for a while now, but I’d like to go over to him and shake his hand. In the end, I was fighting for all

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the wrong reasons and I could have got hurt because I'm one of those guys who would have fought to the end.

'On 1 December 2014, my mum was diagnosed with terminal cancer. The doctor said she had nine months to a year left. Seven weeks later, she passed away. My dad was in turmoil at seeing his wife in that situation. I was there to share his burden of her pain. I grabbed hold of my mum's hand and I said, "Mum, if you can hear me, just give my hand a little squeeze," and she squeezed my hand. So I told her everything I wanted her to hear, how proud I was of her, how she's helped me and how I wouldn't have achieved half as much if it wasn't for her. So I feel very fortunate that I was able to tell my mum everything I wanted to say, and I think that helped me through her passing. My mum was always there to support, motivate and encourage me, and I know that she was so very proud of me. She really was my rock and I know that she will always be with me.'