

"This is a terrific book from a true boxing man and the best account of the making of a boxing legend."

Glenn McCrory, Sky Sports

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Jay Z gave
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greatness



ANTHONY
OSHUA

The
Joshua
Files
Matt Bozeat





The
Joshua
Files
Matt Bozeat



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Introduction

GROWING UP, boxing didn't interest 'Femi'.

'Never watched it,' said Anthony Oluwafemi Olaseni Joshua, to give him his full name.

He was too busy climbing things!

'As a child, I used to get bored a lot,' Joshua told Sky Sports. 'I remember being bored, always out. I'm a real street kid. I like to be out exploring, that's my type of thing. Sitting at home on the computer isn't really what I was brought up doing. I was really active, climbing trees, poles and in the woods.'

He also ran fast. Joshua reportedly ran 100 metres in 11 seconds when he was 14 years old, had a few training sessions at Callowland Amateur Boxing Club and scored lots of goals on the football pitch.

One season, he scored 43 goals for Kings Langley School in Watford and had trials with Charlton Athletic, but his temper let him down.

'During one game, this guy was trying to wind me up,' remembered Joshua in *The Sun*. 'I got him round the neck and threw him over my shoulder.'

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‘I didn’t know my own strength and he didn’t land too well. Incredibly, it went to court and I was charged with ABH (Actual Bodily Harm). Luckily, they ended up giving me a slap across the wrist.’

The following year, Joshua got more than a slap on the wrist. He spent two weeks on remand in Reading prison for what he described as ‘fighting and other stuff’.

‘My dad is a fighter,’ revealed Joshua to Sky Sports when asked the roots of his boxing. ‘I’ve heard some stories about my dad. He’s a real warrior.’

‘He is also a real hard worker and I feel that is where I have inherited it from.’

‘I am my parents and my parents are hard-working people, very strong-minded people, and that’s who I am.’

His parents, mother Yeta Odusanya and father Robert, had left Nigeria in their 20s and settled on the Meriden estate in Watford, a town around 20 miles north of London.

Anthony’s parents separated when he was still an infant and Yeta took him to Nigeria when he was ‘12 or 13’, apparently intending to move back there.

‘I thought I was going there on holiday,’ said Joshua, but he found himself being enrolled in a boarding school.

‘Every morning we would be woken up at 5.30 and then we had to fetch water,’ he said.

‘You had to heat the water up by putting a hot iron in it, then you had to make sure all your school clothes were cleaned and ironed.’

‘The discipline was tough. Sometimes the whole block would just get punished. It might be the cane or you would stand and squat and hold it for 30 minutes. It was tough.’

‘We got beaten, but that’s my culture, beating.’

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Joshua said 'I thought I was in heaven' when Yeta took him out of the school and back to Watford and he stayed there with his mother until she moved to London when he was 17.

'It really worked for her,' remembered Joshua, 'but where my heart was, was in Watford.

'I had about five of my aunties and uncles living around the area within a two-minute radius of each other and I did not want to leave the town for any reason, so I asked my aunty if I could stay with her. My mum was happy with it.

'My aunty really looked after me and it got to the point where I left school and thought I was a lot more mature than I was and knew a lot more than I did, so I moved out on my own.

'Living in a room in a hostel, you felt you had nothing to lose.

'In Watford, you have the high street and the bars and the pubs and later at night, the chicken shops.

'Even if you don't drink, people get in your space and it easily kicks off. So yeah, it kicked off a few times and I got arrested.

'I had to relocate to London to get away from all the trouble because the police banned me from the district for a year.'

He moved in with his mother in Golders Green in north London, where the police kept an eye on him.

They fixed an electronic tag to Joshua's ankle to trace his whereabouts and ensure he was where he was meant to be.

'I had to be home at 7.30 every night and it was really tough,' said Joshua, 'but it taught me discipline, it taught me a routine that I never had.

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‘Being on tag for 13 months meant I had to be home, I had to go and sign in at the station three times a week.

‘I had a regimented lifestyle and knew I wanted to put on some size. I wanted to go back to my area looking a lot bigger, a lot stronger, because I wanted to maintain that level of respect that I had, so I started lifting weights.’

He also started a bricklaying course at college and on the insistence of his cousin, Ben Ileyemi, he went to the boxing gym as well.

‘He [Ben] brought me down to Finchley [and District] ABC [Amateur Boxing Club], not to train but to watch what he gets up to,’ remembered Joshua.

‘Me, I chilled out, I sat back and I watched about three sessions, four sessions, something to keep me occupied.

‘But I’m a real active person and I went and bought some boots when he [Ileyemi] lent me some money and got involved.’

The coaches at Finchley and District ABC were Johnny Oliver and Sean Murphy.

Murphy looked after Joshua. He was a Commonwealth Games gold medallist in Edinburgh in 1986 and as a professional, he was a heart-on-his-sleeve featherweight who won the Lonsdale belt outright and challenged Steve Robinson for the WBO championship in 1993.

He got into coaching when, against his wishes, his son Danny decided he wanted to box.

Murphy wasn’t impressed by his local club, St Albans Amateur Boxing Club, and took Danny to Finchley.

He started helping out with coaching and ended up becoming head coach.

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‘Nine times out of ten I can tell if someone is going to be any good,’ said Murphy. ‘Not blowing my own trumpet, but I’ll know if they are going to be half decent the first time I take them on the pads.’

‘And from the first time I took him [Joshua] on the pads I knew there was something, I knew there was something there.’

‘I never found this out until later on, but he had done a little bit before he had come to Finchley. Not a lot, but he knew he was orthodox and he knew how to stand.’

‘He always had the perfect build, was mobile and wanted to learn.’

‘He was a pest, but in a good way. He was always, “Can we do pads? When are we going to do pads? When am I going to spar? When am I going to do this?”’

Joshua remembered his first spar.

‘I knew what I was doing until I got in the ring and sparred, and shots were coming in from all angles,’ he said. ‘I was blowing, it was tough, I didn’t have anything.’

‘But the good thing about it was, as the months went on, I started noticing improvements in my skipping, within my sparring sessions – guys that would run rings around me in the ring, I started running rings around them.’

Murphy said, ‘I took him sparring with experienced lads and after a few weeks there wasn’t any point because “Josh” was getting the better of them and wasn’t learning anything.’

‘I went to get him registered [to box] in November 2008 and all the other trainers said he wasn’t ready to box.’

‘But they all wanted to train him after they saw his debut!’

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That debut was in the function room at the back of The Boston Arms, a pub in Tufnell Park.

‘Because I watched a lot of [Mike] Tyson, you never take your eye off your opponent in the corner,’ remembered Joshua when interviewed years later by *Boxing News*.

‘It’s the stare-down. I remember him coming out and me just throwing a one-two and him falling. I thought, “This is all right, this is the hard training.” You can imagine how the place erupted.’

That was followed by another knockout win and then Joshua took a fight with Dillian Whyte at a few hours’ notice and was beaten on points.

Murphy was still happy with him afterwards. “Josh” hated losing,’ he said. ‘He took it very badly.’

Joshua told Murphy afterwards, ‘I want to fight him again,’ and remembered the loss to Whyte as a turning point. I realised boxing wasn’t as easy as I thought,’ Joshua said years later. ‘So I thought I had to up my level.’

Murphy took a liking to Joshua – he would describe him as ‘a big bubbly giant’ – and became curious about his life outside the gym.

‘When he first come to the gym he was driving a hire car and he had a couple of mobile phones, he never spoke about work,’ remembered Murphy.

‘I said, “Josh, what’s happening? You’re getting to quite a good level, and you never speak about work. What’s that car out there? Where did you get that? What’s that costing?”

‘[Joshua said] “It’s costing a one [£100] a week.”

“Well, something ain’t right if that’s the case. You’re doing something that ain’t right. Stop it. If you don’t stop it, you’re going to get in trouble.”

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‘He came in a couple of weeks later and he’s got a job. He’s a security guard. So it’s like he realised he was going down the wrong road.’

Joshua stuck with boxing and the next time he took a bout at late notice, this time in Burton upon Trent in the Midlands, he won on points.

‘When he came to the ring the crowd went, “Ooooh,”’ remembered opponent Frazer Clarke. ‘He was a big unit.’

Clarke is not exactly small himself at around 6ft 6in tall and around 16st and had the edge in experience over Joshua.

Named after former heavyweight champion Joe Frazier, Clarke had been part of the Great Britain set-up for a while and earlier that year, he had competed in the European Youth Championships in Poland.

Clarke remembers ‘a great little contest between two raw novices’ and Joshua won it on a split points decision.

It was a significant success.

‘The [England] coaches then came over to me and said, “Where have you been hiding him,”’ remembered Murphy.

Joshua kept the momentum going by winning gold at the Haringey Box Cup at Alexandra Palace and the real test would come when he entered the Amateur Boxing Association Championship in 2010.

Every open-class super-heavyweight in the country with ambition would be entered, with the exception of Great Britain Podium squad boxer Amin Isa, and the 2012 London Olympics was in the thoughts of every one of them, including Joshua and Dominic Akinlade, a bus driver from Brixton looking to better himself, and his community, through boxing.

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Joshua beat him on points in the London final and was handed byes all the way through to the national final at the York Hall in Bethnal Green, where he met Dominic Winrow, a chunky PE teacher who had piled on a few pounds since representing the Isle of Man at the Commonwealth Games in New Dehli at heavyweight the previous year.

The ABA finals were being filmed by the BBC and a couple of hours before the boxing started, commentator Ronald McIntosh was sitting in a cafe across the road from the venue in the East End of London doing some research when someone started throwing punches at him.

‘Joshua was shadow boxing in front of me!’ remembered McIntosh.

‘He was throwing jabs and rights and then he stopped, burst out laughing and gave me a hug!’

Joshua, it appeared, wasn’t one for nerves.

‘The first thing I noticed about him when he got in the ring was how composed and assured he was,’ said McIntosh.

‘Winrow had boxed at the Commonwealth Games, but there was no apprehension from Joshua. He just put it on Winrow and stopped him in the first round.’

The following night, McIntosh spotted Joshua at West Ham United’s Upton Park ground, where Kevin Mitchell was challenging hard Australian Michael Katsidis for the interim WBO lightweight championship, and introduced him to BBC radio listeners.

‘Anthony Joshua,’ McIntosh told listeners, ‘remember the name.’

Robert McCracken, performance director for Great Britain Boxing, had made a note of it.

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He was there when Joshua beat Winrow and remembered years later, ‘There was lots of potential.

‘He was a touch raw, but there was real potential. He was brought in for an assessment [with the Great Britain coaches] which tends to happen if you reach the ABA final.’

Joshua impressed enough during his assessment to be called up to the Development squad, the first step towards becoming an international boxer.

Every fortnight, Joshua would train at the English Institute of Sport’s boxing facility in Sheffield from Thursday to Monday, training four times every day.

The training was tough and for a while, Joshua wondered if it was for him.

‘I was pushed to places that I had never been before,’ he remembered, ‘places that I thought didn’t exist.

‘I thought, “This ain’t boxing, this is torture.”

‘I said to myself, “I don’t need this in my life right now. I’m happy to stay in Finchley.”’

After some thought, Joshua decided to push himself on and made Isa his target.

Joshua believed he had the beating of him and was disappointed when Isa was chosen for the Commonwealth Games in New Dehli in 2010 ahead of him. The reasoning was that Joshua lacked international experience and he knew that if he was to get that experience and become the ‘dominant super-heavyweight’ the Great Britain coaches were looking for, he had to beat Isa.

Joshua got a shot at him at Liverpool’s Echo Arena in November 2010.

The Great Britain Championship gave champions from England, Scotland and Wales the chance to challenge the

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number one in Great Britain, and on the flip-side, Podium squad members had the chance to cement their position.

The implication here was Joshua and Isa were fighting for Isa's place in the Podium squad.

Beat him and Joshua would get the chance to spend more hours in Sheffield and should he progress, be sent to major championships.

The major championship was the 2012 Olympics, to be held in London. "There was a lot of talk [about me]," remembered Joshua, 'saying, "This kid, he's got talent, maybe 2016 would be better off for him."

The walls of the gym in Sheffield were decorated with photographs of previous Olympic medallists.

Audley Harrison and James DeGale gazed down at the fighters as they trained and under 2012 there was a blank silhouette and the words, 'This Could Be You.'

Earlier that year, Isa had lost in the opening round of the Commonwealth Games, indicating he possibly wasn't going to fill that space. From Miguel's Amateur Boxing Club in Brixton, Isa had a fiddly style that was designed to frustrate and draw mistakes from opponents.

Tall and spindly, he switched stances and made it hard for opponents to beat him and those that did beat him seldom looked good in doing so. Joshua didn't find it easy against Isa either when they met in the Great Britain Championship, but he found the answers to score a 6-3 victory on the computers.

It was, he would say later, 'a very, very crucial' win.

Isa dropped out of the Podium squad and though McCracken decided Joshua needed more experience before stepping up, he was well placed to replace him.

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Joshua remained on the Development squad with Frazer Clarke, a fighter he had beaten.

Then it all threatened to fall apart.

In March 2011, the police pulled over Joshua while he was driving his Mercedes-Benz on the Grahame Park estate in Colindale, north-west London, and found him with a package containing 8oz of cannabis hidden in a sports bag.

Joshua pleaded guilty to possession, but not guilty to intent to supply and was handed a 12-month community order and told to complete 100 hours of unpaid work. He spent the 100 hours helping elderly people on their allotments 'digging the place up and chopping wood' and helping to grow carrots, tomatoes and courgettes.

Following his conviction, Great Britain banned Joshua from training with them.

Feeling that was harsh, Joshua briefly thought about walking away from boxing before seeing sense. 'I was doing something positive for once, something that I could see a future in,' he said.

The defence of his ABA title gave him motivation, but because of his ban from Great Britain, there were objections from some clubs before, eventually, Joshua was given the all-clear to compete.

He won the London final with a first-round stoppage of Joe Joyce, a future Olympic silver medallist and fine arts graduate, and following two byes, possibly a sign of his growing reputation, Joshua was through to the final in Colchester.

Also there was his cousin, Ben Ileyemi.

He won the ABA heavyweight title with a points win over Stockport & Bredbury ABC southpaw Chris Healey

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and next in the ring were Joshua and Fayz Abbas, an Iraqi boxer out of Northside Amateur Boxing Club in Manchester, to contest the super-heavyweight final.

Joshua boxed his way to a points win and while he didn't excite the crowd greatly, he did strengthen his position as Great Britain's top super-heavyweight and was getting noticed by professional managers.

He turned down a £50,000 signing-on fee to turn professional, explaining, 'I didn't take up the sport for money, I want to win medals.'

The Great Britain coaches thought he had a chance of winning medals. They lifted Joshua's ban, called him up into the Podium squad and sent him to the European Championships.

'The first time I met him,' remembered McCracken, 'I thought he was too good to be true.'

'Here was this big, athletic fella who was a good fighter and a nice guy too. But it turned out he was everything he seemed to be.'

McCracken had been a good fighter himself.

One of three boxing brothers from Birmingham – Spencer and Max were also professionals – McCracken won a silver medal at the World Cup in Dublin in 1990 and also that year, he reached the last eight of the Commonwealth Games in New Zealand.

McCracken would later say he regretted turning professional at 22 years old rather than staying as an amateur and targeting the Barcelona Olympics in 1992, but he went on to have a good career under manager Mickey Duff. A textbook, stand-up boxer, McCracken won the British light-middleweight and Commonwealth middleweight titles and

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was beaten in 11 rounds by Keith Holmes in a challenge for the WBC middleweight championship at Wembley Arena in 2000.

He went on to coach Mick Hennessy's stable of fighters, including Carl Froch, and in 2009, his former Great Britain coach Kevin Hickey asked him and Richie Woodhall, a bronze medallist at the 1988 Seoul Olympics, to give advice to the Great Britain amateur squad.

Woodhall was also training professionals at the time and with amateur boxing matches being switched from four two-minute rounds to three three-minute rounds and a more professional feel, Hickey reckoned their input could be vital.

McCracken went on to take the post of performance director with Great Britain Boxing and his job was to deliver Olympic medals in London.

Millions of pounds of public money, via UK Sport and the National Lottery, was poured into producing medallists, but still, the job was a tough one.

James DeGale and David Price had turned professional after winning medals at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, along with fellow Olympian Billy-Joe Saunders and world amateur champion Frankie Gavin, leaving McCracken to rebuild.

He clearly saw something in Joshua and set about reshaping him.

'I have always been tall,' said Joshua, 'but my idol at the time was, and still is, Mike Tyson, who is a short guy, stocky. I'm taller, thinner, rangier.'

'I used to think I was Mike Tyson and boxed short, tucked up, and they [the Great Britain coaches] told me,

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“That’s not the way you’re going to win these fights as an amateur. You need a hit-and-don’t-get-hit type of boxing style.”

‘So they completely changed me and put me in with experienced fighters sparring-wise. I got hit hard, I trained, I learnt in the gym, which is the best place to do it.’

McCracken was impressed by Joshua and wanted to see how he would fare in the forthcoming European Championships in Turkey.

After his ban was lifted, Joshua only had ten days to prepare for what was a very different challenge. The ABA Championship was spread over a couple of months, while major internationals, such as the European Championship, were all over within a week or so, meaning boxers could be fighting almost every day.

The idea was to see how Joshua dealt with that, along with the travel and the tougher competition ahead of the World Championship in Azerbaijan later that year.

Joshua dealt well enough with his first two opponents in Ankara, beating Germany’s Eric Brechlin and Cathal McMonagle from Ireland, and his third bout in four days was a quarter-final against Romanian southpaw Mihai Nistor.

Joshua would later admit that by then, he was feeling tired.

Still, he boxed well enough against Nistor, a left-handed version of Mike Tyson according to the excitable Romanian press, to be ahead on points going into the third and last round.

Early in the third, Nistor got outside a slow Joshua right hand and slung a sweeping southpaw left hand that crashed

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on to Joshua's chin and stiffened his legs, forcing the referee to give him an eight count. On the resumption, Nistor went for broke and Joshua tried to hold. Nistor connected again with Joshua's jaw, flinging him into the ropes and after the referee had counted to eight, he waved the fight off.

McCracken was happy enough. 'He boxed three times in four days and you could see the potential was there [to do well],' he said, 'once he had got fit and had a bit of know-how at international level.'

Joshua blamed the loss on being 'knackered' and knuckled down.

'The training [at Great Britain] doesn't suit every boxer,' Woodhall told me at the time. 'You're away from home and it's full-time training.'

'But Anthony loves every minute of it. You couldn't ask for a better pupil.'

Woodhall described Joshua as 'a sponge', explaining, 'He retains every bit of information you give him,' and he worked hard.

The coaches would tell Joshua what he needed to work on and the following day, there would be an improvement.

Joshua would spend his evenings in front of his mirror practising before getting up early for the next day's training.

He would be weighed at around seven o'clock every morning and that was followed by track and strength and conditioning sessions.

The afternoon was spent resting ahead of a three-hour gym session when the boxers would spar and work on their technique.

The coaches saw enough progress in Joshua to send him to the World Championship in Azerbaijan, a decision

described as ‘a gamble’ by Woodhall, and if he reached the semi-finals there, he would qualify for the Olympics.

Given that he was ranked at 47 in the world by the Amateur International Boxing Association [AIBA] and the super-heavyweight division was unusually competitive, that seemed unlikely.

‘He developed at a fast rate,’ remembered McCracken, ‘but did we think he was going to reach the final in Azerbaijan?’

‘Possibly not, no. But we got his temperament right, so he believed in himself.’

That self-belief revealed itself when *Boxing News* interviewed Joshua ahead of the World Championship.

‘History is calling for a great heavyweight right now,’ declared the 47th best amateur in the world, a novice of around 30 bouts.

The confidence was still there when Joshua got to Azerbaijan.

‘You would get boxers,’ said McCracken, ‘who say, “What’s my draw?” and he [Joshua] was different in how he took the draw.’

‘It was completely irrelevant to him. He didn’t mind drawing the Cuban or the Russian first up. Not a problem to him. That still stands out for me and I haven’t really come across that with any other senior boxer.’

If there was a fighter to avoid in the draw in Azerbaijan, it was surely Roberto Cammarelle, a 31-year-old Italian southpaw who had won the previous two World Championships and Olympic gold in Beijing three years earlier. The gulf between Joshua and Cammarelle was such that had Joshua beaten Nistor in the European

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Championships, the Great Britain coaches would have pulled him out rather than let him face Cammarelle in the semi-finals.

They met in the quarter-finals of the World Championship and at stake was a place at the London Olympics.

Cammarelle was a seasoned boxer who had developed a style that won fights at the highest level.

He would stand in front of opponents with his hands low, inviting them to punch him, make them miss with a twist of his body and quickly pounce with counter punches. No counter punch he ever threw was better than the crunching left hand that toppled Chinese giant Zhang Zhilei in the Olympic final in Beijing in 2008.

Though Joshua was a novice by comparison, Great Britain coaches felt that if he stuck to the game plan they had drawn up, it was a fight he could win. The strategy was for Joshua to keep the fight at long range and make Cammarelle come forward and walk on to punches.

Joshua followed the strategy well enough to be in touch at 6-5 behind after the opening round. Cammarelle got on the front foot in the second round and, just as the Great Britain coaches planned it, he ran on to right hands.

Joshua was 11-9 up going into the last round and there was a big drive from Cammarelle in the last three minutes. There wasn't much between them as they slugged it out, but the judges didn't think Cammarelle landed enough punches to overturn the two-point deficit.

Joshua won 15-13, though Cammarelle looked unhappy with the decision.

McIntosh described Joshua's win as 'one of the most significant results by a home nations boxer for years.

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‘There was such a disparity in experience between them. For a novice like Joshua to beat a boxer of that quality really was outstanding.’

The 47th best super-heavyweight was, against all the odds, going to the Olympics and given who he had beaten to get there, he had to have a chance of winning a medal.

‘It [beating Cammarelle] showed me that as long as I stayed amateur, these guys have nothing on me,’ said Joshua later.

‘No fear, I can compete with them. Whether we’re boxing or trading, I can compete with them. He [Cammarelle] is someone I actually looked up to as an amateur and to compete with him and beat him gave me a real boost of confidence.’

Joshua wanted to go to the Olympics as the world champion.

He won his World Championship semi-final inside a round, Germany’s Eric Pfeiffer being ruled out with a broken nose, but had to fight more than his opponent in the final.

Magomedrasul Medzhidov had the Azerbaijan crowd, around 800 soldiers and the country’s president behind him when he fought Joshua.

He could also match Joshua for size and strength. ‘I’d never boxed someone that strong,’ said Joshua after a 22-21 points decision went against him following what *Boxing News* described as ‘a roaring’ contest.

The Great Britain coaches felt that had the fight been held anywhere other than Azerbaijan, the decision would have gone Joshua’s way.

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Joshua wept all the way to his changing room, but when he looked back on it months later, he remembered the thrill of the fight.

‘I really enjoyed that fight in the final,’ he remembered in a *Boxing News* interview with John Dennen.

‘It was a crowd-thrilling fight. It really tested me, my endurance, my heart, my chin, where I’m at technically.

‘There was nowhere to hide in that ring. It was all or nothing.’

* * * * *

THE British press wanted to know all about this 21-year-old from Watford and whether he could be the nation’s next heavyweight hero.

Joshua would admit that at first, he found this interest in him unsettling.

Only Dennen, the amateur editor of trade paper *Boxing News*, had covered him previously and now the national press were quizzing him about his past and becoming experts on his future.

Not only that, for the first time since he started boxing four years earlier, there was real pressure on Joshua.

‘It’s not something people were drilling into my head, “You’re going to be an Olympic champion, you keep on working hard and you’re going to go to the Olympics,”’ he remembered.

‘It was trial and error. “Let’s send him to this tournament and see how he does – oh he’s won it! Let’s send him to this tournament and see how he does. Let’s send him to the World Championships and see how he does.” It was all about trial and error.’

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The British boxing team was strong in London. Thomas Stalker captained a team that also included Andrew Selby, Luke Campbell, Josh Taylor, Fred Evans, Anthony Ogogo and Joshua.

The fighter they were all talking about was Joshua. By now, he had studied enough boxing to understand both what he called the public's 'fascination' with heavyweights and the division's history.

He told *Boxing Monthly* ahead of the Olympics, 'I hope to be one of those people that everyone looks up to and says, "Remember Joshua and what he done."

'I think about Lennox [Lewis] and [Muhammad] Ali and I want people to think of me like that.'

Joshua was keen to connect with his public, personally replying to good-luck messages from fans on social media in the build-up to the Olympics, and Woodhall said, "Josh" always has time for people and can be a massive star like Frank Bruno.

'But he has to forget about how famous he can be. He has to stay focused on winning that gold and he has the tools to do it. "Josh" is a good mid-to-long-range boxer and when he finds his rhythm he's very hard to beat. He's got power and sticks to the game plan. He doesn't get involved when he doesn't need to.'

His draw in London was tough.

Erislandy Savon was a 6ft 5in Cuban who was mobile and had boxing in his DNA.

His uncle, Felix, won heavyweight gold at three Olympics, between 1992 and 2000, and along with Savon, Joshua also had to deal with the pressure of the occasion.

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The Olympic boxing was held at the ExCel Arena in London's Docklands and Joshua would later admit that when he fought Savon, he thought rather too much about shutting out the crowd, tightened up and struggled to let his hands go.

He got away with it – just.

The judges had Joshua winning 17-16, a decision not popular with everyone who saw the fight, but the system of scoring fights was as reliable as it ever had been.

Three of the five judges sitting at ringside had to register a punch 'instantaneously' for it to register.

'I put my hands up,' said Joshua a year or so later, 'it wasn't my best performance.'

That set up a quarter-final against Zhang Zhilei, the giant Chinese southpaw who had won silver behind Cammarelle in Beijing four years earlier.

Joshua says he 'found his mojo' during a 15-11 points win. 'I got my groove back from my first fight,' he said, 'and I was on a roll.'

'But I didn't let it get to me, I didn't get too overwhelmed. I still wasn't happy because I had a long way to go. I still had some tough fighters in my draw.'

The win meant Joshua was guaranteed to win a medal and if he beat Ivan Dychko in the semi-final, it would be either silver or gold.

Dychko was a towering 6ft 9in boxer from Kazakhstan who Joshua knew well.

He had sparred him shortly after joining the Great Britain squad a couple of years earlier and found it tough.

He remembered Dychko as 'a really slick boxer, really rangy.'

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‘But I was so determined to beat him. I did not stop applying that pressure.’

The pressure earned him a 13-11 points win and a place in the Olympic final.

‘The job’s not done yet,’ Joshua said ahead of his 43rd amateur bout. ‘I want that gold medal.’

To get it, he would have to beat Cammarelle again.

The tactics were the same as they had been in Azerbaijan ten months earlier.

Joshua stood off, moved to his left and looked to walk Cammarelle on to right hands. Until the final 30 seconds of the round, it worked. Joshua found himself pinned in a corner towards the end of the session and took enough punches for the judges to have Cammarelle 6-5 ahead after the first round.

‘JOSH-U-A!’ chanted the London crowd during a cagey second round of mostly feints and jabs and at the bell, Cammarelle had stretched his lead to three points at 13-10.

‘The coaches told me, “Josh’ you’re three points down!” he remembered.

‘I said, “Come on, I’m not three points down.” Because sometimes they tell you these things when you’re doing well and they don’t want you to get too ahead of yourself.

‘So I was like, “Are you being serious? I’m three points down?”

‘Before the bell went [for the last round] my legs were burning and I said to myself, “This is the last fight I’m going to have as an amateur if I decide to turn professional, why not put everything on the line?”

‘I didn’t want to go out and make it a war and end up getting caught myself, so I thought, “Still box, keep it clever,

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but back up Cammarelle and give him something that he has never had before.”

‘So we were trading shots, we’re boxing, we’re moving and I came back to the corner after a tough three minutes and the judges said, “We have seen this as a draw.”’

The scores were 18-18 after a strong finish from Joshua and the bout would be decided by countback.

That meant the number of button presses by all five judges were counted up and the highest and lowest scores would be discounted.

Joshua was ahead 56-53 and the gold medal was his.

The Italians protested, but the decision stood and Britain had a new boxing hero.

Joshua was awarded the MBE and a post box on Watford High Street was painted gold to commemorate his achievement.

‘I could have been a stereotype,’ said Joshua, ‘a young kid getting into trouble. It just shows you can achieve anything and you can really change your life. I feel honoured to be involved in boxing.’

* * * * *

‘I’M the champ, what’s next?’ thought Joshua. ‘I’ve got to climb to the top of another mountain now.

‘I’ve got to put everything that I have achieved over the last three years as an amateur behind me. What is next? Am I going to turn professional? If I turn professional, what type of fights am I going to be in? Should I stay on as an amateur and gain valuable experience? Keep on honing my skills under the radar, potentially compete in

the Commonwealth [Games], the Worlds [Championship], Europeans, 2016 [Olympics]?

‘What should I do next?’

‘I went around, I searched high and low, travelled to different countries and met different people, exchanged e-mail with people all over the world, Ukraine and Russia, went to Jamaica, LA [Los Angeles] to just really get some advice and I met [former world cruiserweight and heavyweight champion] David Haye, spoke to Rob McCracken and all the GB team individually before I made my final decision.’

The rumour was, once he had recovered from a foot operation, Joshua would turn professional with Los Angeles-based Golden Boy Promotions, headed by Oscar De La Hoya, the brilliant former six-weight world champion.

But on the advice of McCracken, he agreed a three-year deal with Matchroom instead.

‘They match their fighters tough, they give all their challengers about ten weeks’ notice so they can prepare to the best of their capability and they have got Sky behind them which is a great platform,’ he explained.

‘They have got so many dates so I can just keep on perfecting my skills, keep on boxing.’

Joshua trusted Matchroom – ‘They are straight up,’ he said – and liked their boxing chief, Eddie Hearn.

Hearn was an engaging character who, like Joshua, always thought big.

Hearn fell for boxing when, aged eight, he sat ringside at his father’s first boxing promotion.

On the advice of his mother, Barry Hearn became a chartered accountant – ‘I’ve never seen a poor one,’ she told

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her son after returning from a day's work cleaning houses – and on the advice of his accountant, he invested the money he made in a chain of snooker clubs.

‘Six months after I bought the billiard halls, the BBC started showing lots of snooker on television,’ remembered Hearn. ‘I was very lucky – and I’ve always said it’s better to be born lucky than be born good looking.’

The player who dominated snooker during its boom years in the 1980s also happened to be a Hearn discovery.

‘I met Steve Davis when he was 18 years old,’ remembered Hearn. ‘He didn’t have any personality, but he had a steely-eyed determination.’

‘Steve was a total machine.’

He would dominate snooker during the 1980s, hoovering up six world titles, and Hearn moved on to boxing.

His first show was a co-promotion with Terry Lawless and was an impressive statement of intent. There were 40,000 fans at White Hart Lane in October 1987 to watch a fight between Frank Bruno and Joe Bugner that, with the help of the tabloid press, sold rather better than it might have done.

Bruno was a national treasure, a strong but vulnerable fighter whose dashed-hopes story chimed with millions, and though Bugner had been the distance with Muhammad Ali (twice) and Joe Frazier, he remained a villain in the eyes of the British public for sending Henry Cooper into retirement with a controversial points win in March 1971.

‘What happened to me after that fight was worse than being crucified,’ remembered Bugner. ‘I was blamed for something I had no control over and one moronic Labour MP even called for me to be stripped of my title,

stripped of my assets and sent back to wherever I came from.’

Bugner went on to emigrate, reinvented himself as ‘Aussie Joe’, and to the fury of the British public, he returned at the age of 37 with the intention of beating Bruno, 12 years his junior.

Predictably enough, Bruno won convincingly in eight rounds and there watching every punch at ringside was Eddie Hearn.

‘After that, I was always around the gym,’ said Hearn, who showed promise as a cricketer in his teens. ‘I would get the bus to Romford after school and see people like Herbie Hide and Eamonn Loughran training.’

His father found his biggest success with Chris Eubank.

Eubank was an eccentric showman who wore a monocle, talked eloquently on many subjects and was hard to his core.

He was a WBO middleweight and super-middleweight champion and most of his 24 world title fights, a record for a British boxer, were under Barry Hearn’s Matchroom banner on ITV.

In his teens, Eddie Hearn – or rather ‘Eddie Hills’ – fought himself, as an amateur with Billericay Amateur Boxing Club.

‘They introduced me as “Eddie Hills” and I was devastated,’ said Hearn.

‘I told my dad and I found out it was all his idea. He thought if they knew who I was, they would really put it on me and take liberties.

‘I had some skills, I fancied myself a bit, I thought I was Sugar Ray Leonard, but you can’t be a fighter if you grow up in a nice house and go to public school.

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‘The other lads were much tougher than me.’

Hearn – or Hills – still won all three bouts before a sparring session convinced him his future lay elsewhere.

‘When I was 15, they put me in to spar a lad of 18 or 19 and he gave me a pasting,’ he said. ‘I was miles behind him – and he wasn’t a world beater. I don’t think I went back after that.’

‘I left school and went to work for a sports management and marketing company in the West End.’

‘I was representing golfers on the US and PGA Tour. I did that for six or seven years.’

‘I decided to work at Matchroom and started on golf and went on to online gaming, producing online poker tournaments.’

‘I was at the World Series of Poker in Las Vegas and Audley Harrison was at my table. He asked me to get him a six rounder, but I talked him into “Prizefighter”.’

‘Prizefighter’ was an eight-man tournament that offered fighters at opposite ends of their careers the chance to move forward with three wins on the same night. ‘Prizefighter’ offered exposure to prospects on the way up and a possible way back for older fighters like Harrison, a 2000 Olympic super-heavyweight champion who had fallen disappointingly short of the lofty expectations he had from himself.

‘I told him if he won “Prizefighter” then he could fight Albert Sosnowski for the European title and David Haye for the world title,’ said Hearn.

‘I just made it up, but everything I promised I delivered and I learned a lot along the way. I didn’t really know what I was doing.’

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‘The Haye–Harrison fight didn’t really deliver [Harrison barely landed a punch before being beaten in three rounds] and I took the flak.

‘I was in a sandwich shop and I remember everyone looking at me as if to say, “We want our money back.”

‘After the Haye fight I thought, “That’s me done.” I didn’t have any ambitions to be a boxing promoter. I just wanted to have fun and make a few quid.

‘But a couple of weeks later, [coach] Tony Sims contacted me and said, “Do you want to look after Darren Barker?”

‘Then I met Kell Brook at a “Prizefighter” in Liverpool and he said his contract with Frank Warren was coming to an end. We met him and signed a contract.

‘A couple of weeks later Rob McCracken rang and asked if I wanted to work with Carl Froch.

‘It really did happen that quickly.

‘In the space of a couple of months we signed up Barker, Brook and Froch and then other fighters wanted to get on board.’

This put Hearn in a strong position – and it became stronger after he convinced Sky Sports that they should only screen Matchroom shows.

Four promoters – Matchroom, Frank Warren, Frank Maloney and Ricky Hatton – shared 40 shows on Sky Sports between them every year.

The shows were on Friday nights and were topped by a fight for a major title, British, Commonwealth, European or world, and lasted for two hours.

Frank Warren broke away to set up his own subscription channel, Box Nation, in 2011, Mick Hennessy had a handful of TV dates with Channel Five and, unhappy with the

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ratings for many of their boxing shows, Sky Sports had a rethink.

They were thinking of having fewer shows and investing more in them.

Hearn made his move.

He says the turning point was the Kell Brook–Matthew Hatton fight at the Sheffield Arena in March 2012.

‘Nobody had done an arena fight for a while and we sold 9,000 tickets,’ he said.

‘That fight was the turning point.

‘I think promoters had become lazy and thought, “Sky will put up with a Commonwealth title fight topping the bill and an eight-round chief support.” That fight showed there was a market for big shows. Sky looked at boxing and thought, “This could work.”

‘There were four promoters battling each other and it was a mess.

‘I told Sky they should give us all the boxing shows, but there should be fewer shows and they should spend more money on them.

‘You can’t put on quality boxing every week like they were trying to, it just doesn’t work.

‘Sky had a good relationship with Matchroom through the darts and other sports and eventually they agreed and gave us a two-year deal.

‘The deal was 20 shows plus four pay-per-views and that meant we could grow the team.’

There were now only two major promoters in Britain, Hearn and Warren, and Joshua chose Hearn.

Given the chance to create a boxer, Hearn would have created Joshua.

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Here was a charismatic heavyweight who was already a national hero after winning Olympic gold in London.

Joshua could appeal to an audience beyond hardcore boxing fans – and that was the audience Hearn was chasing.

That Olympic gold was no guarantee of success in the professional ring, as Harrison had proved, but it gave Joshua a good grounding to build on with his trainer, Tony Sims.

Best known for working as Carl Froch's cuts man and steering Darren Barker to the IBF middleweight championship, Sims, whose own boxing ambitions were effectively ended when he became a father at 18, was most proud of his association with Lee Purdy.

Purdy turned professional with only a handful of unlicensed fights behind him and with Sims in his corner, he won the British welterweight title and fought in Atlantic City.

Nick Halling remembers Joshua meeting the press at Sims's gym in Essex, shortly after he signed with Matchroom.

Halling described the gym as 'a really grotty, spit and sawdust place, not the sort of place you want to take your grandmother', and was there to talk to Barker and John Ryder as research for his job as boxing commentator with Sky Sports.

'I heard Joshua was coming, so I thought I would hang around and introduce myself,' said Halling.

Joshua kept him hanging around.

'On this occasion he was only half an hour late and as I found out later, that was quite good for him,' said Halling.

'If Anthony is supposed to be somewhere at two o'clock, he will be there closer to four.'

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Halling remembered that when Joshua did turn up, he made an instant impression.

‘He had a real aura about him,’ said Halling. ‘He was a big specimen with a big, warm smile and he made a point of going around the gym, shaking everyone’s hand.’

‘He didn’t know who I was, I might have been the cleaner for all he knew, but he still made a point of shaking my hand and saying, “Hi, I’m Anthony, nice to meet you.”’

Everyone who met Joshua seemed to be impressed.

Sky Sports proudly unveiled him on their weekly *Ringside* magazine show and Bob Mee, boxing historian and author, sat next to him. ‘He didn’t seem consumed by his ego,’ said Mee.

‘He seemed grounded or as grounded as it’s possible to be when you’re the Olympic champion and people are throwing lots of money at you.’

‘He accepted that he was a novice, that he had a lot of developing to do. His attitude seemed to be, “I won the Olympics, but so what? That’s in the past.”’

‘He knew where he was.’

‘He seemed to like people as well. He wanted to connect.’

* * * * *

Anthony Joshua didn’t let me down.

The choice was to either bring this book out before he fought Joseph Parker – or afterwards.

I chose afterwards, knowing victory for Parker would undo years of my work.

Not many were predicting that outcome, certainly not the bookmakers, but there were those who felt Joshua

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may have to come through a crisis or two to beat the New Zealander.

Parker was also an undefeated world champion – he held the WBO belt – and was known as a fearless, quick-fisted fighter who could box and punch.

Frazer Clarke was well placed to pick a winner of the first heavyweight unification fight between unbeaten champions seen in Britain. He sparred around 70 rounds with Joshua in the build-up to the fight and further back, he lost a points decision to Parker.

Clarke, preparing for the Commonwealth Games, reckoned this would be a tactical fight – and Joshua would win. Joshua said much the same.

He wrote in his *London Evening Standard* column on the eve of the fight of being ‘a 12-round fighter’ and rather than predicting an explosive confrontation, he wrote about the virtues of footwork, timing and counter-punching.

Both were light at the weigh-in. Joshua scaled 17st 4¼lbs, his lightest since he beat Michael Sprott in November 2014, and Parker was 16st 12½lbs.

Joshua was also a couple of inches taller, had a longer reach and that, said his coach Robert McCracken, would be decisive. He revealed the game plan was to ‘use the reach to dominate’ – and though not everyone in the crowd enjoyed watching it, that’s what Joshua did.

For most of the 12 rounds, Joshua was able to impose himself on Parker and keep him on the outside with his jab. Parker flicked out flurries of fast jabs in the opening few rounds, but mostly they hit Joshua’s arms and gloves or fell short and when Joshua jabbed, he usually landed and his feet kept the New Zealander under pressure.

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Joshua was careful because, with his head movement and hand speed, Parker was always dangerous on the counter should he miss and in the fifth and sixth, the New Zealander got on the front foot and took a few more chances.

Joshua was untroubled by his rushing attacks, but still, there was some concern in his corner ahead of the eighth.

He responded by racing to the centre of the ring at the start of the round and putting Parker back where he wanted him, on the perimeter of the ring where he could hit Parker and the New Zealander couldn't hit him back.

There was some drama in the tenth when Joshua caught Parker with his elbow during a tangle on the ropes and sliced open a cut on his left eye, but Joshua stuck to the game plan and jabbed his way to victory.

Sections of the crowd booed – they had come to see a knockout – but McCracken rated Joshua's performance 'nine out of ten'.

Twenty-one fights into his career, Joshua had the WBA Super, IBF and WBO heavyweight belts – and that left only WBC champion Deontay Wilder to beat ...

Fight No 1

Emanuele Leo

At: The O2 Arena, Greenwich, London

On: Saturday, 5 October 2013

Opponent's record: Fights 8 Wins 8 Losses 0

Joshua's weight: 16st 6.75lb

Opponent's weight: 16st 6.5lb

Scheduled for: 6 Rounds

Result: Joshua won by first-round stoppage

JOSHUA WAS going to start his professional career against Paul Butlin at the O2 Arena – but Emma Bainbridge would not have stood for that.

Saturday, 5 October happened to be the day she was going to become Mrs Paul Butlin and the offer to fight Joshua was politely declined.

Eddie Hearn and his team had to look elsewhere for an opponent and it wasn't an easy job. 'We couldn't just bring in some fat Hungarian,' said Matchroom's then head of boxing, John Wischhusen. 'Joshua was an Olympic champion and the opponents had to look the part early on.'

Matchroom weren't looking for another Mike Middleton, the part-time private investigator with the losing record thrown to Audley Harrison on his professional debut after he won super-heavyweight gold at the 2000 Sydney Olympics.

Wischhusen found someone who Hearn would later describe as 'the perfect opponent'.

Emanuele Leo was a 32-year-old from Italy known as 'The Colossus of Cupertino' and had won all eight of his professional fights, three of them inside the opening round.

Pitting a debutant against an 8-0 prospect appeared to be a huge risk, but what looked a tough fight for Joshua was really a tough fight for Leo.

The whisper was, even those close to the Italian weren't that excited about his future after watching him build his record against novices and journeymen, while Joshua was shining in the gym.

'I've seen a lot of heavyweights come and go,' said Wischhusen, 'and Joshua wasn't big and lumbering, like lots of them are.'

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‘He was an athlete, quick and he punched very, very hard.’

Leo was unbeaten, so would come with ambition, take chances and, given the likely gulf in class between them, the likelihood was, he would get knocked out.

Perfect for Joshua’s debut.

Looking ahead to his professional career, Joshua told *Boxing News*, ‘First year, they can match me with any opponent. I’ve just got to take it as a learning stage.’

‘I’ve got to remember I’m not competing with Wladimir Klitschko or no one like that yet, you know what I mean?’

‘I can’t put myself under too much pressure because I’m not competing for my Olympic title just yet. Definitely I want to take it serious, but I’m not going to put too much pressure on myself because I know that [the opposition] is not the best in the world just yet.’

‘When I signed up to my first fight, I was looking at it maybe as a four-year period, an apprenticeship, before I try to compete for my [new] Olympic medal, a professional title. But who knows?’

‘I don’t want to keep talking world titles just yet, but do you see, it is kind of like the same procedure.’

‘If fame comes I’m going to be okay with it. I don’t want to be hyped up and made out to be something I’m not. The Olympics didn’t satisfy me. I have a lot more to achieve.’

The aim, Joshua said upon turning professional, was to become a millionaire through boxing.

‘I think the hunger for success came from a young age,’ he explained. ‘I really looked up to my dad growing up. They call him “Big Josh”, “Big Guy”. I’ve seen him with big gold chains, owning properties and motorbikes.’

‘I’ve seen all this growing up and what you see growing up is what you want to do as you get older.’

Joshua told the *London Evening Standard* ahead of his debut that he was reading a book called *Think and Grow Rich* and playing chess.

He liked the moves and the counter moves on the chess board. ‘A boxing match can be a bit like chess,’ he said.

Joshua, as all fighters do when they make the switch from amateur to professional boxing, told the press and himself that the paid code suited him rather better.

He liked the feel of the smaller, tighter gloves worn by professionals, weighing 10oz rather than 12oz.

‘I tried on some 10oz gloves,’ Joshua said days before his debut. ‘You could break down a brick wall with those.’

The atmosphere in the changing room at the O2 Arena he shared with his cousin Ben Ileyemi, also making his debut on the show, was relaxed.

‘Considering all the pressure he’s under, he was really calm,’ said Tony Sims, ‘as calm as you have ever seen a fighter.’

Joshua would later admit there were nerves ‘because I wanted to perform at my best. The nerves were flowing, the butterflies were tingling. I had been out of the ring for a while and wanted to capture a knockout.’

Sky Sports built the expectation, introducing a show that included Bury’s honest Scott Quigg defending his WBA super-bantamweight championship against Cuban Yoandris Salinas as ‘launch night for Olympic gold medallist Anthony Joshua’, and there was a feverish excitement around the arena when the crowd got their first glimpse of him.

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Joshua acknowledged as many supporters as possible on the way to the ring, smiling, bumping fists and waving. He was, according to master of ceremonies John McDonald, 'the future people's champion'.

Once the fight got under way, early impressions of Joshua were impressive. He was good on his feet, half stepping in and out of range, and his punches were fast, while by comparison, Leo looked very much a novice. The guard was wide, his chin was high and he squared his feet up when he rushed in.

Joshua caught him, not quite flush because his timing wasn't quite there after so long out of the ring, on the way in with a right hand, but didn't follow up. There was no hurry. Joshua sensed there would be more openings soon and when he spotted one midway through the round and put his punches together, Leo grabbed.

As referee, and former good professional, Ian John-Lewis moved in to disentangle them, Leo shaped to throw a right hand. 'I just saw him flinch,' remembered Joshua, 'and I just wanted to make sure before he landed anything on me I was going to attack him. The referee was in the way.'

Joshua grazed the referee's face with a left hook and John-Lewis wagged a finger at him briefly before letting the fight continue. 'I was worried for a moment or two that I might get disqualified,' Joshua said later.

Shortly after the fight resumed, Joshua walked Leo on to a left-right that made him stumble. The Italian tried to rally, tried to fight his way through the mental fog, but couldn't dent Joshua and found himself being drilled around the ring by thumping left-rights. Ringsiders got to their feet

and screamed. The end of the fight looked to be only a clean punch or two away.

Joshua forced Leo to the ropes, landed a jab, slipped a countering jab and then smacked him on the jaw with a right hand that made his eyes roll. Joshua sensed he should go for the knockout and quickly jumped up through the gears, hammering the Italian with left-right after left-right until he crashed to the floor, a final scything right hand sending him semi-conscious to the canvas just as the referee moved in to stop the fight after just two minutes and 49 seconds of the opening round.

‘It felt like the real deal,’ said Joshua of professional boxing, ‘two guys with their heart on their sleeve, trading.’

Hearn gushed afterwards, ‘Big “Josh” is going all the way. This is just the start of a phenomenal journey.’

Earlier that day, in Moscow, there was a fight that showed where Joshua’s journey might take him.

The top two heavyweights in the world had split a purse of \$23m and Wladimir Klitschko had demonstrated there was a good-sized gulf between himself and his nearest rival, Alexander Povetkin, by winning a sometimes ugly fight unanimously on the judges’ scorecards.

Joshua was asked how soon he might be fighting at that level.

‘I’m not saying anything yet,’ he answered.