



THE MAN WHO PUT A CURSE ON
MUHAMMAD
ALI

The Downright Crazy Story of
Richard Dunn's World Title Challenge

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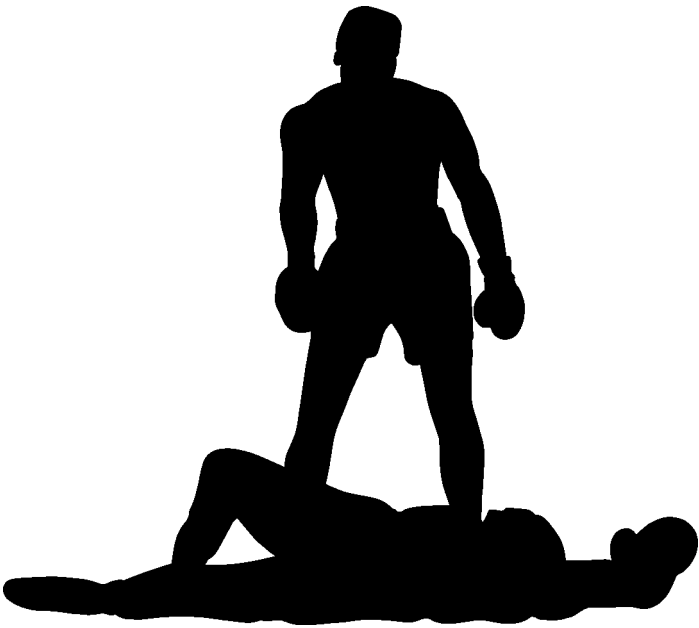
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PART ONE



Seconds Out

Setting the scene for Muhammad Ali's strangest and funniest fight night

THIS WAS the fight that was never supposed to happen; Muhammad Ali against Yorkshireman Richard Dunn for the heavyweight championship of the world at the Olympiahalle in Munich on 24 May 1976. I was ringside in my role as publicist for a contest that bankrupted the promoters and lost more money than almost any other title fight in history.

Six weeks earlier, British and Commonwealth champion Dunn had battled with much-hailed German kaiser Bernd August at London's Royal Albert Hall for the European title vacated by Joe Bugner. The winner would meet Muhammad Ali for the world crown.

The Ali fight had already been confirmed for Munich, with the undefeated August expected with some certainty to be the opponent. There was no way, so the experts predicted, that he could lose to Dunn, whose career had largely followed the Baron de Coubertin principle of the importance of taking part rather than winning.

Dunn threw a spanner – no, a pickaxe – in the works with a two-fisted, swinging attack that staggered and then separated the shambling August from his senses, the referee having to rescue the 6ft 7in Berlin giant as he stumbled semi-conscious around the ring in the third round. Poor old August was one of life's losers – just a few years later he was killed in Australia when his motorbike collided with a kangaroo.

As the referee raised Dunn's hand in astonishing, unexpected victory, Philadelphian entrepreneur Butch Lewis jumped into the ring with a jewelled crown meant for August and jammed it lop-sided on the head of 'King Richard', who looked suitably bemused.

A handsome but very short black man, Lewis had to reach up to perform the coronation and did not quite get the placement right, leaving Richard looking a complete plonker. The renowned BBC commentator Harry Carpenter was overheard to say off camera, 'What a circus. Send in the clowns ... don't bother, they're here,' from Stephen Sondheim's *A Little Night Music* which had just arrived in town from Broadway.

Lewis had the fairly odd fashion quirkiness of wearing a flashy, silk floral tie knotted around his neck, but no shirt. The fight had been staged during the IRA bombing campaign on London and the ringside security men were frightened, uh, shirtless as Lewis dived into the ring.

None of us involved in the show at the British end had any idea that he planned the crowning of the new champion. It might just about have worked if August had won, but it was condemned by the British press as a gimmick too far. Richard summed it up beautifully in true Yorkshire fashion when he told me privately, 'Ell's bells, I felt a reet pillock.'

I was at the Albert Hall as publicist for joint promoters Mike Barrett and Mickey Duff, and as I watched the pantomime of the crowning ceremony I got a strange premonition that I was about to become involved in one of the weirdest fight promotions in history. The feeling was akin to sensing that the inmates were taking over the asylum and I had been cast as one of the patients.

A beaming Butch Lewis, blissfully unaware of the panic his crowning stunt had caused, told the American

TV audience: 'Richard Dunn has now become Emperor of Europe. The question is, can he take the world crown from mighty Muhammad Ali? Watch this TV space.'

I was later given the crown that had been plonked on Richard's head and was instructed to return it to the Palladium theatre props department. The panto season was still with us.

It was a \$3m final punch from Dunn that wrecked the unfortunate August. That is how much it cost the German promoters when they stubbornly and stupidly went ahead and put on Ali's title defence in an after-midnight fight in Munich. Translated into 2023 money that was around \$23m down the drain.

I try to hide it on my CV that I worked on this event as a publicist for a promotion that haemorrhaged money like no other before or since. The German public had no enthusiasm for watching a virtually unknown Brit, even though the legend that was Ali provided the opposition. To be honest, Richard was hardly a household name in his own country until his shock victory over August suddenly catapulted him into the headlines.

On fight night the ultra-modern, 14,000-seat Olympiahalle, sitting at the heart of the sprawling 1972 Olympic Park, was barely half full, populated by hundreds of British boxing fans who had flown in from Yorkshire and the thousands of American soldiers enjoying a complimentary night out. They were given fistfuls of free tickets by Ali as he toured the local United States Army military camps drumming up last-minute publicity for a contest that carried little interest for German boxing fans.

The fight should instantly have been switched to the UK the moment that sandy-haired southpaw Dunn detonated his right fist on August's lantern jaw, but the German

promoters were locked into the ego trip of being involved in a Muhammad Ali world title defence.

An Ali fight was not just a boxing match, it was an occasion. The German boxing fraternity, however, was too sceptical to fall for handing over their hard-earned Deutsche Marks to watch a Brit they had never heard of challenge the most famous boxer in history.

The local promotion syndicate ignored the sage, cut-your-losses advice of their vastly experienced American partner Bob Arum and insisted on keeping the fight in Munich. This meant putting up thousands of dollars in purse guarantees, local taxes, stadium rent and hotel bills.

They had been spoilt and sated with full houses for the Olympics and football World Cup finals in the previous four years, and were convinced the legend of Muhammad Ali would guarantee *penner auf den sitzen* – bums on seats. Ja, to watch Bernd August against Ali. But Richard Dunn? Neun, neun, neun; that could have been an emergency call for their bank accounts.

Ali was into the wind-down period of his career after his sensational ‘Rumble in the Jungle’ and ‘Thrilla in Manila’ championship victories over George Foreman and Joe Frazier. He had given many of the millions of dollars he had earned to charities, ex-wives and his Islam-inspired management team; now he was just fighting for the cash to look after himself and his family in retirement.

He was on a guaranteed \$1.65m to defend his title against modern Cinderella Man Dunn, whose \$100,000 (£52,000) purse was almost as much as he had earned in all his previous 43 fights, nine of which he had lost.

A scaffolder when he was not scrapping, 31-year-old Richard was like a man who had won the lottery but would have to go to hell and back to collect his prize money.

Luckily he had a head for heights, because he was about to be lifted to the heavens and then dumped unceremoniously on the canvas in the ring in Munich. But not before landing some telling blows on the man who justifiably described himself as *The Greatest*.

So that's the scene for what has to go down in the history books as Muhammad Ali's strangest and funniest fight night. Now I invite you to take a ringside seat for the championship contest and a build-up that could have come out of the script of a *Carry On* film. You could not make it up.

Seconds out; here comes our hidden 'hero', an English gentleman – I almost said con artist – known as Romark.

Round One

Of Romark, Crystal Palace and Elvis

RONALD MARKHAM, stage name Romark, a self-styled hypnotist, mentalist, illusionist and mind-reader, sat confidently behind the wheel of his canary-yellow Renault. The black velvet blindfold covering his eyes had been checked by a neutral judge to ensure he could not see through it. He was now ready to drive solo and sightless through the busy Ilford highway on the edge of Greater London, using just his instincts and impulses. What could possibly go wrong?

A pack of paparazzi photographers and reporters prepared to follow him as he slipped the car into first gear and set off on his unseeing way along Ilford Broadway. To make other motorists more considerate of him he was steering a vehicle with a huge learner-driver logo on the roof.

He had gone all of 20 yards on the perilous journey when he smashed into the back of a parked vehicle, which just happened to be a police transit van, commonly known back then as a Black Maria.

I promise it is close to verbatim when I quote the startled policeman sitting at the wheel of his vehicle as saying, 'Hello, hello, hello, what's going on here then?'

He got out of his van and walked with some indignation towards the driver of the car that had whacked into him, and he was fairly surprised to find him sitting at the steering wheel wearing a blindfold. During a brief interview, he elicited from the flustered Romark that he was a hypnotist and mind-reader who was trying to prove he could drive blind towards London. 'If you're a mind reader,' opined the veteran and cynical police sergeant, 'you will know what I am about to say next; you're nicked.'

Romark was not prepared to admit guilt. 'But,' he protested, 'my thought processes did not allow for an illegally parked vehicle. You should not have been there. Ilford Broadway is a public thoroughfare that should be kept clear of any obstructions.' As we will learn later in our story, he always had an answer or an excuse for everything.

This was the same Romark who had just the previous year – so he claimed – given Crystal Palace Football Club a promotion push by hypnotising their key players. When manager Malcolm Allison refused to pay him a previously agreed fee, Romark put a curse on Palace that he insisted cost them victory in an FA Cup semi-final against Southampton on 3 April 1976.

I called on Southampton manager Lawrie McMenemy for his take on the myth and he told me, 'It's true that this strange man offered to help us beat Palace. I thought I would listen to him just in case, so to speak, he had a trick up his sleeve. He tried to convince me he had psychic powers by getting one of our apprentices to levitate in my office. It was mind-blowing stuff but our trainer George Horsfall, who had been born in India, performed the same feat and said he had learned it from one of those guys who do the Indian rope trick. Romark later claimed credit for our win

over Palace, but I prefer to think our players and my tactics had more to do with it!

Now here he was back in the spotlight with the car stunt that went hilariously wrong. He made nationwide news as the motorist who tried to drive blind across London. I stored all this away in the recesses of my publicist's mind, wondering how I could use his gift for generating headlines.

Meantime, I had been given the job of publicising the upcoming Muhammad Ali–Richard Dunn world heavyweight title fight in Munich. I was hired by the millionaire businessman Jarvis Astaire, who had launched a trend-setting closed-circuit theatre company called ViewSport.

Jarvis and I were fellow East Enders and had known each other since I served my writing apprenticeship on the trade paper *Boxing News* in the 1950s. I was freelancing after ten years as chief football reporter for the *Daily Express*, which in those days sold 4.2 million copies a day. Back then, Jarvis was a shadowy figure who got a full-page apology from *Boxing News* after it suggested that he was the mystery 'Mr X' running a syndicate with the aim of unseating Jack Solomons as the tsar of British boxing promoters.

By the 1970s, imaginative impresario Jarvis had become one of the wealthiest men in the country (and pretty rich in the town, too) after marrying into the fabulously wealthy Oppenheim family. He was a visionary who had his fingers in many promotional pies and was at various times a property developer, movie star Dustin Hoffman's manager, theatre and film producer, Lester Piggott's racehorse owner, deputy chairman of Wembley, chairman of the Greyhound Racing Association, the hidden force behind professional wrestling promotions, a generous charity fund-raiser and a close friend

and confidant of Tony Blair. The epitome of a 'Champagne Socialist'.

I remember him telling me how he had once tried to bring Elvis Presley to Europe for his only concert outside the United States. 'I negotiated with his manager, "Colonel" Tom Parker,' he said, 'and offered £2m for a one-off concert at Wembley Stadium. That was a colossal amount at the time. The Colonel responded, "That's very generous of you, Jarvis. Now then, what about the boy?"'

His ViewSport company set the pioneering pace for what was later to become satellite television, and my brief was to place stories in newspapers to help put bums on seats at British cinemas for a contest that was not scheduled to start until 3am GMT. We publicised it as an 'after-midnight' fight, knowing that the main event was delayed until three o'clock – four o'clock in Munich – to allow for it to be shown 'live' by NBC at peak time in the United States.

With the Munich box office as lively as a cemetery, it was television and closed-circuit TV money that was keeping the fight alive. There were just five weeks to go to the show when I was appointed as ViewSport's PR, and ticket sales could be counted on the fingers of a one-armed bandit.

Royal Albert Hall promoter Mike Barrett told me from behind his trademark heavy-framed, horn-rimmed spectacles, 'If they'd let us switch it to England we could guarantee a full house at either Headingley [the Test cricket ground] or Elland Road [Leeds United's football stadium]. Richard has become the hero of Yorkshire. But the Germans are going to go ahead with the fight in Munich where it'll be a hard sell, even with Muhammad Ali in the opposite corner. Let's not forget he stank the place out in his last fight.'

A sluggish, weary-looking Ali had laboured to a points victory over Jimmy Young in Maryland on 30 April 1976,

weighing a career-heaviest 230lb (16st 4lb) and for one of the few times in his career he was booed and jeered by many in the crowd.

Wearing my publicist's hat, I latched on to the plodding Ali performance against Young and started spreading the word that he was ready for the taking. Did I believe it? Of course not, because I was an Aliphile who truly believed his mantra, 'I am The Greatest.'

I had become a spin doctor, trying to pump life into my patient that was the Ali-Dunn fight. It was in critical condition. There were worrying reports coming from Munich that the German promoters were squabbling among themselves as to whether they should go ahead with the show and this negative news was leaking into the British newspapers. I was a poacher turned gamekeeper and found myself lying to old colleagues as I assured them the fight was going ahead. Not my finest hour. I had sold my soul.

In desperation, I tried to get my old friend Henry Cooper on to the Dunn bandwagon, but he was not going to play the lying game. 'He is not in the same class as Ali,' said the man whose 'ammer of a left hook once put the then Cassius Clay on to the seat of his pants. That was back in 1963. The great man was now 13 years older, slower and showing the signs of his ring wars. But he was still the legend that was Muhammad Ali.

The best I could get Henry to agree to was to release a story quoting him as saying, 'Dunn has got a puncher's chance.' Privately, he told me that Ali would 'eat him alive'.

My strength as a publicist was that I was on friendly conversation terms with all the major Fleet Street sportswriters, many of whom I had shared press boxes, trips to overseas events and adventures and escapades with during the previous ten years in my life as a reporter. But I don't

think anything had quite prepared me for the challenge of trying to attract people to watch a fight that should never have been.

* * *

The first thing I did to generate publicity was prepare a Richard Dunn fact file that I faxed to every major newspaper and magazine sports desk in the land.

Yes, that's right, faxed. This was long before Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web in 1989. Just as an aside so that you appreciate the era in which we were operating, in the very week that the fight was staged Queen Elizabeth II sent the first electronic message from a head of state. I recall that my first email account with BT was normangiller@telecomgold.com. Trouble is very few people were registered, so I was talking to myself. But back to the story of the build-up to the world championship contest.

This is how my faxed fact file read, typed on my faithful old Remington portable typewriter that had accompanied me to sports events around the world:

RICHARD DUNN FACT FILE
Submitted by Norman Giller
For VIEWSPORT

Born Halifax, West Riding of Yorkshire

Birthdate: 19 January 1945

Grew up in Leeds, now lives in Bradford.

British, European and Commonwealth
heavyweight champion 6ft 4in tall,
weighs around 15st.

Southpaw stance. Likes to lead with his
right jab from long range and follow up
with left hooks that carry knockout power.

Known to his building site workmates as Dick, or Dickie.

Fights: 42; wins 33 (16 inside the distance).

Married to Janet, daughter of his trainer Jimmy 'Pop' Devanney. Three children, Rocky, Karen and Gillian. Ten siblings.

Was semi-pro rugby league player before switching full time to boxing in 1969.

Continues to work as a part-time scaffolder.

Managed since 1974 by Leicester-based George Biddles.

Turned his career round after three successive stoppage defeats in 1974, when he contemplated retirement.

Is a soldier in the Territorial Army, attached to the 4th Battalion Parachute Regiment, rank sergeant. He has made 67 parachute drops.

Note to sports editor: I shall be in Munich with Richard and his entourage two weeks before the fight and will be filing fee-free stories every day. ViewSport will be screening live coverage of the fight and all the supporting contests to selected theatres and cinemas, with ringside commentary by Reg Gutteridge.

Free tickets available for competition prizes. Please contact me for full details.

* * *

Now all we needed was a fight.