JOHN WIGHT



A JOURNEY IN BEAUTIFUL BRUTALITY

BOXING GAME

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Contents

Chapter 1 .		•		•				•		•	•	•				. 11
Chapter 2.																.20
Chapter 3.																. 26
Chapter 4.																. 32
Chapter 5.																. 42
Chapter 6.																. 69
Chapter 7.																.77
Chapter 8.																. 83
Chapter 9.																. 92
Chapter 10																104
Chapter 11																112
Chapter 12																123
Chapter 13																131
Chapter 14																138
Chapter 15																143
Chapter 16																152
Chapter 17																166
Chapter 18																170
Chapter 19																176
Chapter 20																181
Chapter 21																189
Chapter 22																194
Chapter 23																204
Chapter 24																223
Chapter 25																231
Chapter 26																236
Chapter 27																249
Chapter 28																254
Chapter 29																267
Chapter 30													_	_		283



I FIRST met Freddie Roach on a bright sunny morning in a little breakfast place on Hollywood Boulevard.

It was mid-February 1995 on my first day in Los Angeles, having arrived on a transatlantic flight the previous night from London Heathrow. A half-hour drive from the airport along the 405 South and then up to Hollywood via a stopoff at Venice ensured that I was exhausted by the time I booked into the Holiday Inn on Hollywood and Highland, just a short walk from the boulevard. Jet lag rendered sleep impossible and I was up, showered and dressed at six the next morning, before heading up to the top-floor restaurant for breakfast, where I occupied a table by the window. The view comprised an endless expanse of gleaming white architecture, awesome to behold in a part of the world synonymous with movies, fame, celebrity culture, extreme wealth and ostentation, not to mention every kind of weird and wacked-out subculture you could think of. The one

thing that Hollywood was most definitely not synonymous with was professional boxing.

I knew very little about Freddie prior to meeting him. Brad, an up-and-coming fighter I knew from back home in Edinburgh, had relocated to LA to train under Roach's tutelage, adamant he was one of the best trainers in the game. At this juncture let me say that boxing was a sport I admired from afar, possessing no more than a cursory knowledge or understanding of its finer aspects. My motivation for coming out here was not to pursue an interest in either the sport or Freddie Roach, but rather to relax and have a good time for a couple of weeks. LA was a city I was already familiar with, having spent a bit of time here a few years previously, and I was looking forward to returning and getting reacquainted with the place.

There was nothing more to it than that.

I'd learned from a mutual friend back home that Brad was living in an apartment somewhere in Hollywood and training at Roach's Outlaw Boxing Gym located on the corner of Hollywood and Highland. My original intention upon arriving was to locate and book into a hotel in and around Venice Beach, the area of LA I was most familiar with, after which at some point I would drive up to Hollywood in the car I'd rented at LAX to check in on Brad and see how he was doing. However, this initial plan changed after I visited two hotels in Venice with a view to booking a room and encountered cockroaches in both. It was around ten at night by the time I'd finished checking

out the last of those two hotels in Venice without success. I was dog-tired after a 12-hour flight and therefore decided, fuck it, and got back in the car and drove up to Hollywood, determined to find somewhere decent and clean to spend my first night in the city, no matter what the expense, before looking for a cheaper option in the same vicinity the next day. This is how I ended up at the Holiday Inn just up the street from the Outlaw Gym.

With no idea at what time Brad trained, I thought I would pop into the gym first thing the next morning and find out. I could then either wait for him to appear, or, if he wasn't due until later, kill some time wandering around Hollywood before returning.

So with this in mind I left the hotel for the gym around seven, hoping to find it open or just about to open. It was only a five-minute walk down a Highland Avenue that was already busy with traffic heading in both directions. I soon noticed that the only people out walking were me and a sprinkling of homeless people, carting their belongings with them in plastic bags, or, in some instances, pushing them in front of them in shopping trolleys. The scene was a far cry from the image of Hollywood commonly held around the world. The grim reality of cloying decay and ubiquitous poverty and homelessness came as a shock.

Outlaw Gym took up the entire bottom floor of an office block, surrounded by large tinted windows that enabled you to see inside the place from the street. I reached the pedestrian crossing at the junction opposite and waited to cross. From here I could see that the gym was still closed; there were no lights on and the door was shut. But then, just as I started across the road after the light turned green, the door opened and out came a slightly built guy with cropped red hair and glasses, dressed in an Outlaw Gym t-shirt and training shorts. He proceeded to walk round the corner on to Hollywood Boulevard, then a short distance along before disappearing into a cafe. My instincts told me that this was the Freddie Roach I'd heard so much about.

I decided to follow him into the cafe and find out for sure, intending to find out how Brad was getting on and what time he was due at the gym.

He was sitting at a table in the middle of the place giving his order to the waiter as I walked in. Suddenly conscious of the fact he might not appreciate being disturbed by some guy he'd never set eyes on before while having breakfast, I took a seat at a table by the window rather than approach him right away. The waiter came over, I ordered a coffee, and moments later it arrived. After taking a couple of sips, I made my approach.

'Excuse me, I'm sorry to disturb you. Are you Freddie?' He looked up at me, justifiably taken aback. 'Yeah. How you doing?' he said defensively.

We shook hands as I quickly introduced myself in a manner designed to reassure him that he wasn't dealing with a crackpot, explaining I was a friend of Brad's from Scotland. Noticing him visibly relax, I asked about Brad and how he was progressing.

'Scotty's doing okay [Brad was known as Scotty at Outlaw, due obviously to the fact he was Scottish]. He's working well and looking good. We'll know for sure when he fights in March, though.'

Brad, just so you understand, was a young guy who was in possession of more self-belief than the Red Army on its approach to Berlin. His was the archetypal tale of the bad boy making good, the kind that litters boxing and has done so since time immemorial. After winning the ABA lightweight title – at the time the UK equivalent of the Golden Gloves – he turned pro. A southpaw, he was a slick boxer/puncher with an abundance of charisma, and he was a regular fixture on the back pages of the local and national press, this even though he'd only had six or seven fights as a pro. Filled with the ambition to train with the best, under his own steam he'd made the move Stateside. And so thus here he was, living and training in Hollywood with Freddie Roach.

I quickly warmed to Freddie. He was friendly, open and as real as they come. I would learn that such humility was a rare quality in boxing. At this point he was still some years away from the mammoth success that would see him attain worldwide fame – his picture on the cover of national magazines, being featured in national newspapers, and the subject of TV documentaries – with his services as a trainer in demand by a who's who of the sport's elite fighters. The days of million dollar-plus fees for training Manny Pacquiao were a world away from training the clutch of mainly mid-

level guys he was working with when I met him. Freddie was living in two rooms in the back of the gym and was a man of very simple and basic needs. In this respect at least, he never really changed after becoming successful; or at least certainly not in a way you could describe as reflective of that success.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

During that initial conversation, I recall asking him how he liked living in Hollywood, after he'd asked me how things were in Scotland.

'I don't,' he replied. 'I can't stand cold weather, though. I could never live back in Boston. I used to live in Vegas. I may move back there some day. I only moved out here to work with Mickey.'

Mickey was the actor and movie star Mickey Rourke. Freddie trained him when he decided to give up acting and become a professional fighter, which he did for two or three years. He fought eight times in countries as far afield as Spain and Japan. Rourke had originally been involved in setting up the Outlaw Gym with Freddie, which Freddie subsequently took over with new partners after Rourke decided to move on.

Freddie's friendly persona, combined with a professorial demeanour, was hard to reconcile with a ring career during which he was known as a fighter who never took a backward step, regardless of the opposition. As would become common knowledge, he had Parkinson's. Though he never once voiced regret about acquiring the condition in my presence,

he did attribute it to boxing, specifically to fighting past the point when he should have retired. From a fighting family of three siblings, his old man was a martinet who pressured his sons to box or else face hell from an early age. After a solid amateur career in his teens, he turned pro in 1978. His aggressive come-forward style meant that most of his fights were slugfests, responsible for him becoming one of the most popular fighters on the East Coast before moving to Vegas to train under the legendary Eddie Futch, trainer of Joe Frazier among others.

Roach's ring name when fighting was 'The Choir Boy'. His pale Irish skin and flaming red hair meant that he stood out among the Mexicans and Latinos who dominated the lighter divisions at that time. Though he never managed to win a world title, he spent a few years in and around the top ten of the division and in his prime was considered a live contender. He had 53 fights, winning 40 and losing 13. Significantly there are no draws on his record, evidence of the style described. Retiring in 1986, he spent a few years drifting until he discovered a talent for training fighters when Futch took him on as an assistant. In this role, he forged a particularly close relationship with lightheavyweight and former Olympic silver medallist Virgil Hill, who was destined to become his first world champion after he parted company with Futch to train fighters in his own right.

A young guy appeared while we were chatting and joined us. He was one of Freddie's fighters and after being

introduced, I decided to take my leave. Freddie told me to come by the gym around 11am, as this was when Brad trained. We shook hands and I left. By now my body was demanding sleep and so from there I headed back to the hotel to get my head down.

Arriving at Outlaw a few hours later, I was confronted by a carnival of noise and activity, to the point where it felt like the walls were about to crack with the energy. On your immediate right when you walked in was the ring. Two fighters were in it sparring as if their lives depended on it, which in a way they did given the stiff competition they were up against for the few opportunities to make anything approaching a decent living in this, the cruellest and most unforgiving of sports. Freddie was standing on the ring apron watching the action, issuing the odd instruction in a calm but assertive voice. This wasn't the time to approach him, so instead I turned my attention to the rest of the place, taking in the guys who were working out on the heavy bags, speed balls, and floor-to-ceiling balls (referred to in the US as double end bags).

Then, looking over to where three or four fighters were skipping (jumping rope) in front of a large wall mirror, my eyes landed on Brad. He stopped as soon as he spotted me in the mirror and we exchanged a warm greeting, one compatible with two guys from the same city and country meeting on the other side of the world. When I told him I'd spent the previous night at the Holiday Inn up the street, he immediately invited me to stay at his place.

Two hours later he was helping me carry a brand new mattress, purchased from a bed shop not far from the gym, into the elevator and up to his large studio apartment on Sycamore Avenue, a few blocks along Hollywood Boulevard. It was a street lined with palm trees and different-sized apartment blocks. As with the rest of Hollywood, at one time the street had been home to aspiring movie stars, directors, producers and all sorts of other movie people. But this was way back in Hollywood's halcyon days. Now Sycamore Avenue, like the rest of Hollywood, was home to an eclectic community of down-at-heel has-beens, aspiring wannabes, ageing rockers and a liberal sprinkling of crack addicts. At night it was not a place for anyone of a sensitive disposition to be walking the streets – this despite the constant presence of a police chopper overhead scouring the streets below with its massive spotlight. Here you could find almost anything you wanted, be it sex, drugs, religion, despair, and destitution alongside fame and fortune. What you would never expect to find in Hollywood was an entree into the rarefied world of prizefighting.

Looking back, there was no better place to start.