



# WIPE OUT?

THE JEROME WILSON STORY

BY MARK TURLEY & JEROME WILSON

FOREWORD BY CURTIS WOODHOUSE

# WIPE OUT?

THE JEROME WILSON STORY  
BY MARK TURLEY & JEROME WILSON



# Contents

Special Acknowledgements . . . . .	7
Foreword by Curtis Woodhouse . . . . .	10
Introduction . . . . .	13

## **PART 1**

12 September 2014, Ice Sheffield . . . . .	26
Ryan, Why You? . . . . .	32
The Coldwell Camp . . . . .	37
The Pretty Girl . . . . .	45
The Eye Of The Storm . . . . .	52
So Near But So Far . . . . .	56
Reconciled With Dad . . . . .	63
No Turning Back. . . . .	70
The Best Of Enemies . . . . .	76
Views From Ringside . . . . .	82
Sheffield Teaching Hospitals Scan Results . . . . .	105

## **PART 2**

Resurrection . . . . .	108
Making Amends . . . . .	115
Chinks In The Fabric . . . . .	123
Once Upon A Time.... . . . .	128
The Kiss Of Death . . . . .	138
The Noble Art And Me . . . . .	143
Turning Over . . . . .	153

Showbusiness With Blood . . . . .	162
The Beginning Of The End . . . . .	174
Fan-Friendly Fighting . . . . .	189
Fifteen Minutes Of Fame . . . . .	196
Rematch . . . . .	209
Tying Loose Knots . . . . .	216
Where The Heart Is . . . . .	223
The Value Of Sanity . . . . .	230
Welcome To Cairo . . . . .	235
Looking For Serge . . . . .	240
Reconnection . . . . .	244
Epilogue From The Author. . . . .	251
Further Acknowledgements . . . . .	254

# Introduction

**B**ROKEN bits of information travelled down from the north – British champ Curtis Woodhouse said he was the best he'd trained with. Three time world title challenger Ryan Rhodes called him 'Sheffield's Mayweather'. Highly-respected manager and promoter Dave Coldwell repeatedly said he had world-class speed.

In any field of sports writing I've always felt the most interesting stories come from the experiences of two kinds of athlete. The first are undiscovered or unappreciated talents, blossoms yet to bloom. The second are those who defy stereotype. Jerome Wilson was both.

As a writer, hearing and sharing his story feels how I imagine it is to be a botanist who has discovered a new species of butterfly or a DJ that stumbles across a rare, sought-after piece of vinyl in a huge warehouse. He is an uncommon find among the sweat and snot of the fight game, an introvert – quiet, reflective but physically exceptional. A defensive virtuoso with KO power. Whispers whirred down the wires.

'He's so quick, so sharp, no one can touch him in sparring. He just needs to get his mind right and the world's at his feet. He could go right to the top.'

## Wiped Out? The Jerome Wilson Story

Fame and glory are fickle things. They were not Jerome's destiny. His path led him elsewhere.

It's the stuff cult heroes are made of.

\* \* \* \* \*

I'd never met anyone with such a terrible injury before. It was like a movie special-effect. His head literally had a slice cleaved out of it.

'I'm feeling a bit nervous,' he said.

'Don't worry.' I switched on my dictaphone. 'It'll be fine.'

It was February 2015 and we were sitting upstairs in a house near Bradford. My host was a short, compact, Afro-Caribbean guy who moved around symmetrically on the balls of his feet. Balletic, despite the conspicuous defect up top. On first impression he seemed in pretty good spirits.

As we had introduced ourselves I found it difficult not to stare at the area where surgeons had removed a bone flap – a quarter of his skull, from above and behind his right ear, leaving a mango-sized indentation. The skin there sagged down like a parachute caught between two trees. An angry scar circled the crater.

While he made affable small-talk, making light of his situation, you could actually see his brain undulate below the skin. It was unsettling and fascinating at the same time.

Is that what our brains do when we speak?

His voice was quiet. He mumbled. Sometimes he slurred his words.

## Introduction

The Greek scribe Philo once wrote, 'Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.' Never before had I felt so acutely in the presence of someone who was battling.

It was in every gesture. He wanted to reach out to someone.

'This will be my therapy,' he told me.

At the same time it contradicted everything he stood for to become an object of pity – he still had his fighter's pride. Here was a warrior who could no longer go to war with other men. For the rest of his days he would only fight himself.

'Shall we watch it then?' he said, hovering over the laptop.

I hesitated.

'Do you think you'll be all right?' I asked. 'Are you going to burst into tears on me or something?'

He inhaled deeply.

'I don't think so, but if I do...'

He clicked play and together we began to watch the recording of his final fight, just the two of us. It was five months on from that tragic evening and his first viewing, too. He had waited to see it with me, an ignoble honour. Although I knew how the contest ended, I wasn't sure what to expect.

Mostly he sat in silence. Here and there he sighed. Sometimes he criticised his own performance.

'Look, I wasn't sharp enough with the jab.'

'He was wide open, I should have nailed him.'

'Shouldn't have got caught with that one.'

When the awful end came and his on-screen self lay stricken, the skin under his eyes wrinkled. He traced

## Wiped Out? The Jerome Wilson Story

his scar absent-mindedly with one finger. I felt he had expended a ton of emotional energy.

‘It’s like watching somebody else,’ he whispered at last, head rippling. ‘Madness.’

I needed space, suggested a break. He agreed. Outside the house I walked, breathed some Yorkshire air. Nearby I found a sunlit hill, which I scaled until the village of Shipley spread below me like a map. A faint smell of bonfires hung in the wind. A couple of kids ran past, chasing a dog.

I sat there and thought long and hard about this sport we call boxing.

There is irony in the fact that ‘Wipeout’ Wilson’s story is only made extraordinary through great misfortune. And that irony is gruesome. In the frantic final minute of his 11th professional fight, he all-but died. Knocked out, then carried out, his survival chances were haphazard and delicate, like dust on a breeze. Somehow, he pulled through.

The life he had known for so long, the fighter’s life, training, dieting, pushing his boundaries, was finished in an instant by a right hand.

His momentum moved him on to the punch, doubling the impact. In boxing speak, it ‘switched his lights off’.

Immediately unconscious, Jerome toppled like a chain-sawed tree. As he made his descent, neck loose, he was caught again with a left. The back of his head bounced off the boards. There was an almost imperceptible twitch in his legs. Then stillness, complete stillness.

Cue panic.



## Introduction

After frantic attempts to revive him and with his attendant family in hysterics, Jerome had to be stretched away. He did not open his eyes to start his new life for ten days. While in that prolonged limbo, neither alive nor dead, he underwent something profound.

\* \* \* \* \*

‘Subdural haematoma’ – whisper those words around fighters. They are like a voodoo curse. While most claim to accept the knowledge that death or debilitating injury can come at any time, it is not, for obvious reasons, something much discussed in gyms and training camps. Like the fight game’s spectre at the window, the chance of fatal or near-fatal damage hovers with invisible menace whenever two competitors climb into a ring. Of the various forms of brain damage that can be sustained through a career of regular bouts and daily sparring, it is the most common life-threatening affliction.

Tunny Hunsacker, a former Golden Gloves winner who became a trial-horse American pro and boxed Muhammad Ali on his debut, was thus afflicted in 1962, spent nine days in a coma and was never the same again, deteriorating so rapidly in middle age that from his mid-50s he required full-time care in a nursing home. In the UK’s recent history, Charlie Payton (2015), Jerome Wilson (2014), Michael Norgrove (2013), Kieran Farrell (2012) and JonJo Finnegan (2012) have all had careers cut short and lives affected by it. Going further back, Michael Watson,

## Wiped Out? The Jerome Wilson Story

Paul Ingle, Spencer Oliver and many others were similarly struck down. A complete list of names would stretch for pages.

In the worst cases, such as that of James Murray, a Scottish bantamweight knocked out by Drew Docherty in 1995, or East Londoner Bradley Stone, who challenged Richie Wenton for the British super-bantamweight title in 1994, death follows shortly after. Zambia-born Londoner Norgrove survived for nine days after collapsing in the ring, before his injuries proved fatal.

In others, where surgery is more successful, mobility, vision and cognitive functions are usually drastically impaired. The most-remembered example of this is the 'G-Man', Gerald McLellan, from Illinois USA who went down blinking in the tenth round of a titanic battle with Britain's Nigel Benn in 1995, never to recover. To this day and until his last, McLellan, a lithe, mantis-like puncher at his peak, remains near deaf, wheelchair bound and blind. While boys in gyms the world over fantasise of world championship glory, sports cars and piles of money, the G-Man's destiny, perhaps in some ways worse than death, represents every fighter's unspoken nightmare.

Although most sufferers lose large parts of themselves, others have fared somewhat better. Former undisputed world middleweight champion Jermain Taylor, from Arkansas, USA, was stricken with a minor form of the injury after being knocked out in the 12th by Arthur Abraham in 2009.

On the surface he made a full recovery, although warning signs were still noted. Taylor began to exhibit

## Introduction

mood swings and persistent short-term memory loss, often completely forgetting what had been said to him moments before.

Despite this the state of Nevada went against precedent and accepted his application for relicensing in 2011. Amid cries that he was unfit to box and would be seriously hurt, Taylor proved his doubters wrong and managed to recapture the IBF version of the world title in August 2014.

Yet alarm bells continued to ring. In the months following his title win, his behaviour became increasingly erratic. A series of bizarre incidents were reported involving firearms, violence and threatening behaviour to women and children. He was arrested late in 2014, at which point his attorney Hubert Alexander explained, 'Everyone is saying this isn't the Jermain Taylor they know. We're trying to figure out who the heck it is.' Taylor was subsequently referred to a mental hospital in January 2015 for full evaluation and assessment.

As shown by Taylor's case, any discussion of serious boxing injuries taps into deeper, universal issues. What does it mean to damage the brain? Why does it change who we are? How does the brain shape our identity and reality? These things are not fully understood.

Even now, in the 21st century medical science has more questions than answers regarding our most important organ. It remains a thing of mystery. For those who hold some kind of religious belief it is probably in that pulsating soft, pink tissue that our link to God can be found. For others, it is the core of our humanity.

## Wiped Out? The Jerome Wilson Story

There are more neurones in the human nervous system than there are stars in the galaxy. The brain sits atop all that, conducting the orchestra enigmatically. It filters our entire experience of being alive. To all extents, it is the person. When it sustains damage everything we take for granted is affected.

An SDH, as it is known in medical circles, can be either acute (sudden) or chronic (gradual) and occurs when blood vessels rupture in the space between the skull and the brain, known as the subdural cavity. More often than not this is caused by rapid rotational force through heavy impact. Although this can occur in many sports and circumstances, a meaty punch landing on the jaw at an angle, such as a well-timed hook or uppercut creates the perfect conditions for it.

The tearing of these tiny veins and capillaries causes bleeding, then clotting. This exerts internal pressure, the amount of which depends on the size of the bleed. There have been cases reported where the pressure was so great, that upon reaching the operating theatre and having an incision made to gain access, blood has fountained from the wound, travelling several feet through the air and spattering the walls.

When Jerome was struck by an SDH on 12 September 2014, I knew his name, but did not know him. Like many others I saw the media coverage and was dismayed to observe that his opponent, in a moment of wild elation at the win, knelt down and kissed his head, then jumped up, making a throat-cutting gesture at the audience. All while Jerome lay motionless.

This macabre scene, like something from an ancient coliseum, seemed so out of kilter with 21st

## Introduction

century morality. The sight of a young man on the cusp of death, his opponent gloating and the audience in uproar made me question whether it was all worth it. How could it be?

Wilson was taken to hospital. While ambulance crewmen scrambled to keep him alive, sirens blaring, speeding across the city, back in the arena the show continued. Contestants for the next bout prepared to make entrances, cheered on by platoons of raucous supporters. Nearly flat-lining, Jerome had been whisked away – out of sight and mind.

Like everyone else connected to the sport I hoped for a speedy recovery. These sorts of incidents are reminders of the moral tightrope we tip-toe on with our involvement in boxing. Yes, there is discipline and honour among the blood, the sport can save young men from the streets, but the brutal reality of competing in the ring can and frequently does ruin lives. We have to be honest about that, don't we?

Initial signs did not look good. Upon reaching hospital Jerome had a seizure, like an epileptic fit. They operated, did all they could, but if the pressure continued to build in the wrong direction he would die. He was placed on a ventilator in a medically induced coma. His family, including long-term girlfriend Michelle and three-year-old daughter Serenity, both of whom had been at ringside were told to prepare for the worst. Doctors thought it unlikely he would last the night.

Various crises were averted over the following 72 hours. A week and a half later he defied predictions and began to regain consciousness. Showing great

## Wiped Out? The Jerome Wilson Story

compassion and camaraderie, Wilson's boxing 'family' rallied round and his former training partners Ryan Rhodes and Curtis Woodhouse organised a fundraiser at which Woodhouse boxed an exhibition with Hull's Tommy Coyle. TV and newspapers carried the story.

On Halloween, he was discharged. His recovery was something of a miracle, it was said. He was talking and walking and more-or-less fully functioning. Pictures appeared of him smiling and giving thumbs-up at cameras.

On the same day I received a message from a Sheffield-based ex-fighter called Daniel Thorpe. Daniel had trained with Jerome for many years and said he was going to visit him. I sent a copy of my last book, *Journeymen*, in the post for Thorpe to give him as a present.

After that I continued to follow reports of Jerome's progress. By early January he had reconnected with the world and was noting thoughts and feelings down as a diary. Clearly he was having quite a tough time and struggling with his new reality. He floated the prospect of doing a book and asked for help on the internet. Following the usual series of comments, shares and retweets, his request ended up in my inbox.

I listened to Jerome speak and read some things he had written. Everything he once had been had gone. He was lost. He questioned his own sanity. I had a feeling this was something I should do. You are holding the result.

It is not and never will be my aim to attack boxing. I have been connected to it in one way or another all my life and always will be, even if just as a spectator.

## Introduction

For various reasons, boxing is a part of me that I cannot let go.

But I also strongly believe that we should be able to discuss its dangers with openness. Most importantly, young people entering the sport should be made aware of the risks they are taking. No one should walk towards the sound of the guns blindfolded.

Jerome's personal reactions to massive brain trauma can make for challenging reading, but through the process of jotting them down he was able to regain some sense of self. Be clear on one thing before you start – opening up his experiences and innermost thoughts to the public, during such a difficult and doubt-ridden period of his life shows great courage.

Jerome is not stupid. There are no guarantees with SDH and he knows he faces an uncertain future. It was my privilege to help him take his first steps into it by collaborating with him to write this book. I hope it helps him begin his post-boxing journey and serves as a reminder to all readers that the sport has two sides.

Wipeout Wilson loved boxing. It was everything to him. But now he knows better than most that after that last bell has rung, the world can be a dark and inhospitable place.

**Mark Turley, May 2015**

*'As you know Calvin I'm in a very dangerous fight tomorrow night. If anything was to happen to me, promise me that you will do your best to help out with the house, your mum and the kids. I do love you like you were my own child, I may be hard on you at times, it is because I want you to do well in life and not be a lazy bum, not that I'm picking on you, I just see you can do more. Cool?'*

*'Life is not always easy; you must make sacrifices and do what you can to support yourself and your family. So shout loud for me and I will see you after the fight.'*

**Message written by Jerome Wilson to his stepson Calvin, 11 September 2014**



# Part One – Old Life

*‘All that we see, or seem,  
is but a dream within a dream.’*

Edgar Allan Poe



# 12 September 2014, Ice Sheffield

**I** SAW him the night before the weigh-in. I'd finished in the gym a little while before. Just a light session to keep me loose, winding down. You don't want to expend too much energy so close to a fight. But there he was, pounding the pavement on Sheffield Road, sauna suit on, hood up. He was really going for it. I got a little knot in my stomach. It gave me a lift.

'I don't believe what I'm seeing!' I shouted, pointing through the windscreen. 'He must be crashing the weight!' He'd had those kind of problems in the past. Marvin and I shared a laugh.

But when I saw him on the scales at the Grosvenor Casino he didn't look drained. He looked big. He looked mean. He's a heavy framed guy, like his skeleton is constructed with steel girders. He's got a huge head. When we went face to face for the customary stare-down, his eyes were sunk into his skull like some sort

## 12 September 2014, Ice Sheffield

of monster. His cheekbones looked like they'd been laid with angle-beads.

He's such an ugly bastard! We'd all laughed about it. Mum joked that he couldn't have been born from a human woman. He must have been created in some kind of experiment. We had a chuckle about that, but Mum didn't have to fight him. She didn't want me to either.

She begged me not to go through with it, over and over. She kept going on. I got fed up of hearing it. We argued. In the end I walked away and told her to shut up. Other people's negativity can get to you, can stick in your head and eat away at your confidence. I didn't need that. Not for any fight. And definitely not for this one.

We both made weight. He made it comfortably in the end, a pound lighter than me. God knows how he managed that. I wondered if the scales were broken, but that was it, it was on. There was no talking, there didn't need to be. But that couldn't hide a genuine spark of hatred, lit by what had happened between us.

To strike hard and strike true, Bruce Lee said fighters should never be angry, but should have 'emotional content'. We definitely had that, me and him.

Among the masses in attendance were three old ladies, I don't know what they were doing at a boxing weigh-in. I guess they were playing the one-arm bandits and wandered over out of curiosity. They came up to me when I was getting dressed.

'You're too cute to be a boxer,' the first said, admiring the crucifix I had on a silver chain around

## Wiped Out? The Jerome Wilson Story

my neck. 'You shouldn't be fighting love, you seem far too nice,' offered the second. The third gazed at me curiously.

'I'm sure there are big things in your future,' she smiled.

I thanked them and we had a little chat.

Once the weigh-in was over and I got away from the crowds, mentally I began to slip into fight mode. It was always the same. In those long hours of slow torture before first bell I always knew what I was going to do.

They were such charged moments, so emotional. I only feared losing. I didn't fear fighting. I enjoyed it. I got butterflies and nervous tension, but no fear. I wouldn't call it fear. Definitely not fear.

It was the biggest night of my career. I knew that. Everyone around me knew it too. I'd had a make-or-break fight before, against the 'Isle of Wight Assassin', Jay Morris, in 2011. There'd been a lot riding on that one and I'd blown it. My head hadn't been right. I hadn't trained well. This was my second chance, a massive local grudge match. I had to make it count. Two Sheffield boxers with everything on the line. There had even been whispers of a contract to fight on Channel 5 if things went well. That was big stuff for a kid off a council estate like me. You rarely get second chances in boxing.

I sold most of my allotted tickets, which made a nice change. Everyone wanted to see this one. I dropped the last of them off that night. It was pleasing to know I'd done my bit. Eddie Hearn was going to be there, the country's top promoter.

## 12 September 2014, Ice Sheffield

I chilled out at home, had some food and an early night, slept well and awoke buzzing. The next day I sat in the garden, talking to myself, turning things over, an old habit. I read about it in a book. Self-realisation, they call it.

'You *are* good enough. You *can* do this,' I murmured, eyes shut. 'If you want to be a champion you have to show it. Think like a champion. Move like a champion. Don't be tense, stay relaxed. Now this is what you're going to do – box him, use your feet, side to side. Open the door before you walk through it. After this one you'll be looked after, get the right fights. Everything will change. It will all come from here.'

When I arrived at the venue, my manager Dave Coldwell wasn't there yet, but I saw his business partner, Spencer Fearn. I went up to the office and handed over the money from tickets with the few spares I had left. Spencer seemed pleased.

'You've done all right,' he said. He gave me some words of encouragement. I nodded and walked down to the dressing room.

My entrance music CD was in my kitbag – 'Fix Up, Look Sharp' by Dizzee Rascal. I grabbed it then spent ten minutes walking around trying to find the DJ. I caught up with him outside one of the venue bars. We spoke briefly. I made sure he understood how to cue it up. He was all smiles and back-slaps. Business time approached.

I was about to get changed when my girlfriend, Michelle arrived. We've been together eight years. She's my rock. She seemed tense though, like Mum. She wasn't happy about this one.

## Wiped Out? The Jerome Wilson Story

She's into psychics, clairvoyants and all that stuff. She believes funny things about the mind. She had a dream that I got injured, that I ended up in hospital in a coma. You don't need to hear that sort of stuff before you get in the ring.

Michelle had our three-year-old daughter Serenity with her. It was Serenity's first fight night. I'd wanted her there. I wanted her to see Daddy do well, to share my moment. I picked her up and walked around, talking to her, making her feel at home. She didn't have a clue what was happening. My 16-year-old stepson Calvin was by Michelle's side too. He's a good kid, that one.

Nobody else knew but Michelle was two and a half months pregnant. It was our little secret. I put my hand on her belly and gave her a kiss. They all wished me luck and I left, back to my changing room, back to my zone. I had to get ready for take-off. A family is like a base. They gave me a platform to launch myself from.

Soon I was tuning up, throwing shots at the pads, really letting them go. My trainer Ian was in pain, I was hitting so hard.

'What are you doing?' he said. 'Save it for the fight! You need to make sure you hit him like that. Make him even uglier!' We kept at it until my forehead moistened with sweat the muscles in my upper back spread and loosened.

'You're ready,' he said.

I nodded slowly, walked away, speaking to myself again, geeing myself up.

'Come on, you've got this, he's not quick enough, his feet aren't good enough, you can school him, in

**12 September 2014, Ice Sheffield**

and out, keep moving, the fists can't hit what the eyes  
can't see.'

It was nearly time. I sat in a chair in the corner, legs  
stretched, eyes shut, headphones on.

Waiting.