



CHRISTOPHER EVANS

FEARLESS

FREDDIE

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF FREDDIE MILLS

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Introduction

This is your life

AFTER weeks of meticulous planning, everything was in place. The Irishman lay in wait and there was no way he was going to let his man get away. They were close friends but this was business. The target, former light-heavyweight champion of the world Freddie Mills, had no knowledge of what was about to happen to him.

The ex-boxer had been in the Irishman's sights for years. It would only be minutes before Freddie arrived. Silently, the Irishman watched as Freddie, oblivious to anything untoward, walked past without acknowledging him. Everything was going according to plan.

Earlier in the week, Freddie had received a phone call out of the blue. An old associate had a business proposition for him. It had the potential to make them both very wealthy but he had to keep it secret. Intrigued, Freddie agreed to meet. It was this premise which had brought him to this place.

Taking his opportunity, the Irishman emerged from the shadows. He was now only inches away from Freddie, close enough to tap him on the shoulder. Once the former boxer

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turned around, the Irishman looked him dead in the eye. He enjoyed watching people's faces as he completed his task. He never knew what the reaction would be. Most were surprised, some got angry but only a few had got away.

Usually Freddie would greet his old friend with a smile and hug, but not tonight. His first reaction was to ask what the Irishman was doing there. Then he noticed he was carrying something suspicious under his arm. Freddie knew instinctively he had been set up. At first, he was puzzled, then shocked when it finally dawned on him the purpose of the Irishman's mission.

All Freddie could do was give a resigned look as if to say, 'Ok, you finally got me,' before Eamonn Andrews, in his familiar Irish brogue, announced with a wide grin, 'Freddie Mills, tonight This is Your Life!'

'You're joking, is this on the level?' a stunned Freddie asked before the introduction music began and the studio curtains parted to begin another edition of the popular television show.

For an enjoyable half an hour, Freddie sat as family and friends shared anecdotes. His mother Lottie and brother Charlie recalled how he started boxing while growing up in Bournemouth. His first manager Jack Turner and former fighter Gypsy Daniels related stories of his days on the boxing booths. His wife Chrissie and daughter Susan said Freddie was the same in private as he was in public, full of fun, a real joker.

The man Freddie outpointed for the world championship in 1948, Gus Lesnevich, was flown in especially from New York City to playfully ask his former adversary for a rematch. Freddie reacted by laughing and calling his old foe 'one hell of a fighter'.

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The final guest was one of the top comedians and entertainers of the day, Dickie Henderson, who told a few funny stories about how his mate Freddie, a regular in television, films and theatre, had a habit of letting his nerves get the better of him before a performance and kept forgetting his lines.

Before officially presenting the big red book at the end of the programme, Eamonn Andrews expressed the view that Freddie's ferocity in the ring, matched by his infectious personality, had secured him a place in the nation's hearts. As the audience clapped, Freddie, who had his youngest daughter in his arms, acknowledged their cheers as he had done throughout his ring career.

No one watching the happy scene at home at the beginning of 1961 could have imagined that, just over four years later, Freddie the family man would be found dead at the back of his nightclub, slumped in his car with a gunshot wound to his right eye after apparently blowing his own brains out.

Those who woke up to the news on 25 July 1965 were in shock. They could not believe the happy-go-lucky Mills would do something as awful as leave his wife widowed and their children without a father – least of all those who knew him best, his family.

They never accepted the verdict of the coroner, who ruled Freddie committed suicide in the grip of depression. To them, something sinister was afoot. Chrissie Mills ended her days convinced her husband had been murdered.

This speculation has not helped Freddie's reputation since his passing. Over the years, myths, rumours and salacious gossip about Freddie have been reported as fact. Of the raft of books and news articles which have been written

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about him, very few have focused on what he achieved in the ring.

In the 1940s, there was no bigger star in British boxing than Freddie and long before he fought for world championship he could confidently lay claim to another title – that of people's champion. His all-action style and non-stop punching saw him produce some of the most exciting fights seen in British boxing rings. Just having his name on a poster would almost certainly guarantee a sell-out. He was champion before the plethora of world titles that came later, when it meant he could rightfully call himself the best in the world.

He was also a showbusiness personality. At a time when sportsmen and women in Britain were seen and not heard outside arenas, Freddie was a familiar face in the early days of television, either presenting the pop show, *Six-Five Special*, or appearing as a guest star on various light entertainment shows. From time to time he would pop up in British films of the day, usually playing the tough guy. Others, like Henry Cooper and Frank Bruno, would follow the same path but Freddie got there first.

He was also an entrepreneur who used his ring and television earnings to become a successful businessman long after he retired. In the decade after his career ended, he ran one of the very first Chinese restaurants in London, enjoyed the proceeds of a buy-to-let property empire before turning his hand to running a nightclub. By the time tennis player David Lloyd had set up his successful leisure club chain or Manchester City's Francis Lee had launched his recycling business, Freddie had already been there and done it years before.

Above all, Mills was a trailblazer. It was during the darkness and gloom of the post-war years that he became a

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superstar, illuminating the lives of millions of Britons as they tried to piece together a country still coming to terms with the aftermath of the Second World War. In him they invested their hopes and dreams. This is his story.

A pair of roller skates

THE tall headmaster who held himself ramrod straight, giving a hint to the military man he once had been, cast his eye over the crowded classroom at St Michael's Primary School in Bournemouth. He knew exactly who he was looking for and his stern glare fixed itself on the boy at the back. Pointing his finger directly at the lad with a mop of dark, curly hair and cherubic features, Mr Bryan left none of the children in any doubt who he wanted to speak to.

'Mills! You boy, come with me. I want a word with you!' the headmaster yelled. The short, stocky lad obediently stood up and followed him out of the classroom. As they both left, the children, who had been frightened into silence by the presence of their headmaster, whispered to themselves, 'What has Freddie done this time?'

To the schoolchildren and those who lived near him, Freddie Mills had a reputation. It was not a good one. Other children knew better than to cross him. Do as he said or you ran the risk of being set upon after school. Young Freddie was not averse to using his fists to get his own way. Not that he used them much anyway. A threat usually did the trick.

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The neighbours in Terrace Road, where Freddie was born and grew up, knew better than to leave anything valuable lying around. They used to say if it wasn't nailed down then Mills was bound to nick it. Anything which did come into his possession he usually sold to buy cigarettes.

As Freddie followed the headmaster, he had an inkling of what he wanted to speak to him about. The day before he had had a run-in with a copper, who asked him if he knew anything about a pair of stolen roller skates which the police officer held in his hands.

'I don't know nothing about any roller skates, never seen them before in my life,' said Freddie.

'Then why was I given your name by someone who was found with them?' Freddie shrugged his shoulders and walked away. He thought that was the end of it until Mr Bryan pointed to him in class that morning.

Once inside the headmaster's study, Freddie was met by the same policeman and another boy. 'This boy has given me your name. He says you sold him the roller skates after breaking into a derelict house.' Again Freddie lied. He and the other boy had indeed broken into the house. They found nothing except the roller skates. The first time he gave them a go, he fell flat on his face and grazed his arm. He then offloaded them to the other boy in the study.

Despite repeated warnings that he was in serious trouble, Freddie was steadfast in his refusal to admit anything. He hoped the copper would give in before he would. It did not work. He left school that morning with a note for his mother informing her he was summonsed along with his accomplice to appear before the magistrate court at 10am sharp the following day.

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Ever since Freddie, the youngest of four children, was born on 19 June 1919, his mother Lottie and father Tom, a rag-and-bone man, had found life tough. Money was tight and the last thing they needed was to pay a court fine should their son be found guilty.

‘Oh, Freddie what is to become of you?’ his mother despaired. Even though Bournemouth was seen as a desirable place to live for the affluent, it still had a dark underbelly. There were very few opportunities for working class boys anyway, let alone someone who had acquired a criminal record before he reached working age.

A constant reminder of the harshness of life was a mission found at the bottom of their street, where a hot meal or bed for the night was offered to anyone who had fallen on hard times. Both Tom and Lottie used to threaten Freddie that unless he pulled his socks up, he would end up there with the deadbeats and down-and-outs. Freddie would simply laugh. He was cocky enough to think he was too clever for that.

Despite being offered several opportunities to confess, the two boys who stood in the dock remained silent. Freddie believed he would win the battle of wills with the judge while his co-accused was too afraid of Freddie, and the retribution he might mete out, to say anything which would incriminate them both.

It was midday before the magistrate grew tired of the boys’ act. Splitting them up, Freddie was taken to another room away from his friend, who remained in the court. Upon his return, he was told the other boy had burst into tears, admitted everything and said he had been bullied into it. Left with no choice, Freddie confessed, was fined a pound and placed on probation for two years.

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Apart from having to pay a fine the family could ill afford, Freddie was met with more shame that night as his father Tom had left the evening paper open on the kitchen table. The page told all of Bournemouth that his son had appeared in court that day and confessed to burglary and handling stolen goods. Now it was official. Freddie was a thief.

After Freddie went to bed that night, Tom and Lottie talked about their son's future. 'The boy needs discipline. He will have to learn to box. What was good for our Charlie will be good for our Freddie,' they decided.

Boxing ran in the family. Freddie's brother Charlie was a useful boxer who had earned extra money on the boxing booths and held a four-fight professional record. Having grown increasingly worried by Freddie's wild ways, Lottie reached the end of her tether with her youngest son and reluctantly agreed to allow Tom and Charlie to teach Freddie to box. The day after his court appearance, Freddie laced on a pair of Charlie's old scuffed, oversized gloves in the back yard. Taking on his older brother with his father acting as referee, Freddie imagined he was Jack 'Kid' Berg, the Whitechapel Windmill, and tore into Charlie, but found only thin air.

With his father shouting encouragement, Freddie tried and tried to land a punch on his sibling but failed. After a few minutes chasing without much luck, an exhausted Freddie collapsed on the floor gasping for breath.

Rather than being despondent, Freddie was fascinated by how Charlie had managed to evade his best punches. Besides, he did not like being made a fool of. He was determined to master this boxing game. Holding up the palms of his hands and inviting Freddie to punch, Charlie taught his brother how to stand properly, throw a jab and land an uppercut.

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His training continued at the local youth club. With no other boys to spar with, Freddie would regularly share the ring with a man with a wooden leg, who showed him how to sidestep an attack and move his head to avoid an incoming punch. Immediately, Freddie fell in love with boxing. Each week, he was always the first to arrive and the last to leave.

By the time his 11th birthday came around, there was only one thing on Freddie's wish list – a pair of boxing gloves. Despite meeting with resistance from his mother, who had recently witnessed a beating her elder son suffered in the boxing booths, he received his very own pair.

Underneath the street lamp, Freddie and his friends would re-enact all the famous fights of the day. One day he would pretend to be Jack Dempsey while another boy would play Gene Tunney. With no ring, these bouts would go on late into the night, starting at one end of the street only to finish at the other.

Lying in bed at night, all Freddie thought about was boxing. He dreamt of headlining the Winter Gardens in Bournemouth for the world heavyweight title. He closed his eyes and visualised knocking out Len Harvey, who had just become British middleweight champion, or facing off against Harvey's great rival Jock McAvoy.

Every waking hour was consumed by boxing. Even when doing the odd jobs he carried out to earn some extra money, Freddie always had boxing in mind.

Carrying potato sacks for the local greengrocers in the early morning strengthened his shoulders. Riding out on a bicycle to the countryside and digging for worms, which he sold to fishermen, developed his legs. Even when he helped his brother-in-law on his milk round, he would carry his boxing gloves in the hope of impromptu bouts with some of the boys.

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The physical training was not the only reason Freddie took on these jobs. He had not grown up in the Mills household without knowing there was little money to go around. Lottie was a housewife and the nature of Tom's business meant there were days when it was a struggle to put food on the table.

Paying Freddie's fine meant the family would have to go without for a few weeks. Ever since that day in court, Freddie had been consumed with guilt. He had to pay his mother back.

The proudest moment of Freddie's young life came one night over the dinner table. Handing over a crisp pound note to his mother, Freddie beamed, 'Here you go mum, here's that pound I owe you for my fine. Don't worry, I've been saving my money from my odd jobs for it.'

Moved to tears, Lottie looked at her youngest son. Perhaps he really was turning a corner at long last. His father winked and nodded. Freddie had done the right thing.

The proceeds from these business ventures gave Freddie some ready money. Some of it was put towards buying clothes while most went on converting the garden shed into a homemade gymnasium, complete with a punch bag and speed ball. It was not long before the back yard coaching sessions, on Sundays after church, with Charlie and Tom became full-blooded fights, with Lottie having to sew and mend ripped shirts and trousers, such was the ferocity between the brothers.

Despite the new-found discipline which boxing brought to Freddie's life, he still managed to get into scrapes. One such incident would inadvertently set him on a career path that would see him go from facing off against his brother, with his father as the only spectator, to being cheered by thousands in some of the biggest sporting arenas in the country.