

UNGLOVED

MEMORIES FROM THE RING



BENJAMIN CALDER-SMITH
FOREWORD BY RICHARD CLARK

UNGLOVED

MEMORIES FROM THE RING

BENJAMIN CALDER-SMITH
FOREWORD BY RICHARD CLARK



Contents

Acknowledgements.....	8
Foreword by Richard Clark.....	12
Introduction.....	15
1 Rod Douglas.....	19
2 David O'Callaghan.....	31
3 Tony Conquest.....	44
4 Steve Goodwin.....	50
5 James Cook.....	61
6 Herol Graham.....	80
7 Billy Schwer.....	117
8 Wayne Alexander.....	131
9 Colin McMillan.....	151
10 Sammy Reeson.....	176
11 Derek Williams.....	184
12 Jim McDonnell.....	203
13 Horace Notice.....	226
14 Mark Prince.....	239

Introduction

I MENTIONED in my ‘acknowledgements’ a gentleman called John Fulkes. I was heavily influenced by his grasp and portrayal of the English language while taking my exams at school. So much so, in fact, that from this early age, the idea of putting pen to paper to create something imaginary or otherwise strongly appealed to me. I would start absorbing my surroundings, taking in people’s mannerisms and tones, the way people held themselves, the way they looked. I’d look for influences and inspirations to feed my idea of writing. During one particular school holiday, I wrote a story entitled *A Pot of Marmite*. The general crux of the story surrounded a war child from the 1940s who was evacuated from the inner-city and all he had time to take was a pot of yeast extract. He lived on it until he became sick so he stopped having it until he returned home after the war. Finding a pot of the stuff on his doorstep, he opened an accompanying note. It was from a friend who he hadn’t seen since before the outbreak of war. The friendship was rekindled.

I still can’t recall WHY I wrote it or what inspired me to but I love writing and have always taken pride in it. Maybe I find expression easier written than said. Sadly, my Marmite story has been lost over the years. I have since started a number of fiction novels but, unfortunately, the self-doubt in me was strong enough to overcome my self-belief and they were never proceeded with. I was always, and to a degree still am, my own worst critic. I would get disillusioned easily until my love for boxing developed into an all-encompassing passion. I’d found my niche and my self-doubt was going to be blown away by a sudden surge of energy. It was a mismatch, pure and simple. When the bud appeared to start my writing for this book, it blossomed and the urge to see it through got more and more intense.

Working it around my day job, I started to travel around the United Kingdom and meet up with many boxers from this country’s past. A

selection have been chosen for this maiden voyage of mine. Neither preference nor personality were allowed to decide which pieces to include. They were chosen at random and I simply opted for the age-old theory that less really is more. I want these people's stories told and by holding many back for, hopefully, future publication, I hope the reader will be able to better focus on those presented.

My research into this work commenced in October 2012 and it will therefore come as little surprise that a few of the book's principals' circumstances have changed since the final word was scrawled.

Rod Douglas is no longer at the Arches Gym in Bethnal Green, largely due to the unmanageable rates and maintenance costs being demanded. He is still training and I have little doubt that his services and expertise will assist him in making a champion one day.

Dr David O'Callaghan remains as a doctor for the British Boxing Board of Control. I was working at ringside for a recent Steve Goodwin show at Bethnal Green's York Hall where Surrey-based light-middleweight Chas Symonds suffered a shocking knockout loss to Michael Lomax. One huge right hand deposited Symonds on the canvas in the seventh round and when his head hit the floor, his eyes stared in my direction but I was certain, and very worried, that he wasn't seeing anything.

Dr O'Callaghan and his two colleagues were in the ring within seconds and Symonds had been placed into the required recovery position and was hooked up to an oxygen supply almost before the white towel, that Symonds's corner had thrown into the ring, had settled. The speed and professionalism with which crucial first aid was administered was absolutely second to none. With doctors like these, the Board of Control can rest easy, knowing it has the best personnel, resources and facilities available in the event of an emergency. His take on the sport is fascinating and is massively relevant to the past, present and, most importantly, the sport's future.

Both Tony Conquest and Steve Goodwin remain plying their trade so while the nature of the book is to explore past fighters from the domestic scene, Tony's story to date provides a measure of calm and offers the reader a piece of light-hearted reading about a genuinely pleasant, upbeat man. The piece was originally used in a programme for a fundraising event for Dagenham's Police and Community Amateur Boxing Club in February 2013. Since completing his chapter, Tony has since gone on to win, and in turn lose, the Commonwealth cruiserweight championship. He is currently fighting his way back up towards title contention once more.

INTRODUCTION

Steve Goodwin gives a brutally honest view of the sport in the current climate and the challenges posed by a relatively new promoter. To this day, both his daughter, Olivia, and son, Josh, are actively involved and with Kevin Campion on board as Goodwin Promotions's matchmaker, the future of British boxing will be hugely complemented. Their shows continue to provide competitive boxing and attract good turnouts across the southern area. With an ever-growing stable of fighters, 'They Never Stop'!

James Cook is carrying on his tremendous work with the local community at the Pedro Club in Hackney. Living a short distance from the club, James reaps enormous satisfaction from the mentoring seeds he sows and the popularity of the club goes from peak to peak.

Herol Graham continues with his boxing training project and has informed me of a few youngsters he is training who he believes are worth marking as potential future champions. An opportunity has also arisen for the Sheffield-nurtured guru to possibly become a trainer at the North London Boxing Club on Wood Green's Truro Road. I can feel nothing but the most driven optimism for those that traverse the four corners of the ring under his guidance.

Billy Schwer goes from strength to strength with his motivational speaking and relating boxing's gospel to individual and corporate ways of life.

Colin McMillan continues his success with his various ventures and can be seen frequently at many shows across the southern area and at many charity fundraising boxing events.

Sammy Reeson continues to travel from Bournemouth to Mitcham, splitting his time between his home on the south coast and looking after his father, Nobby.

Jim McDonnell's domestic star, James DeGale, was shining brightly and ready to dazzle American audiences with his challenge for the vacant IBF super-middleweight title against Andre Dirrell in Massachusetts on 23 May. While narrowly missing out on becoming a world champion, McDonnell could be on the verge of training one.

Horace Notice still exudes the friendly, amiable demeanour he showed when I first met him. We have hooked up since and he still has a highly positive outlook on life despite his heartbreaking exit from the sport in 1988. He takes pride in his role as a London cabbie and is content and happy with life. Being one of British boxing's 'what ifs' no doubt made many potential opponents breathe easy.

Mark Prince has since returned to the ring under the auspices of the Maltese Boxing Commission and has notched up three wins. His

UNGLOVED

last win saw him lift the Maltese international cruiserweight title. His remarkable story goes from strength to strength as does his work with the Kiyon Prince Foundation.

The majority of the photographs used in this book have come from the private albums of the boxers included. It was always my intention to make this book as personal an account of those individuals featured as I could. Their contributions made this book. I therefore wanted their personal touches added.

The times I have spent with these boxers and many other of the sport's personalities, have left me in little doubt that boxing doesn't just develop individuals into champions; it breeds and develops a vast array of personal attributes in people that are to be found sadly lacking in many other walks of life. To instil discipline through boxing is to ingrain in those involved, the possible consequences one faces if short cuts are taken, if the commitment, drive and will to succeed falter. Ironically, it is with taking those well-documented risks that the fighter strives to hold off defeat and live out their personal goals.

Their paths have led them through many varying obstacles and successes but, most importantly, they're still standing. The final bell is still a long way off.

Benjamin Calder-Smith

Rochester

April 2015

1

Rod Douglas

‘YOU go on in mate. I’ve just got to finish off out here,’ the middle-aged, muscularly set man said to me as I introduced myself outside his recently acquired, and appropriately named, boxing establishment – Arches Gym. Situated under Bethnal Green’s railway arches, it sits diagonally across from the main underground crossroads of Bethnal Green from the renowned York Hall, undoubtedly east London’s most famous boxing venue, which not only inhabits an atmosphere of bygone times, but also finds itself steeped in the richest of boxing history and tradition.

The man smiles at me with a wide, beaming grin and, with gardening tool in hand, turns to finish off the uprooting of a stubborn bunch of weeds sprouting through the pathway directly outside his gym’s front entrance. The sense of personal pride in what he does is clear. The strip of Mr T-esque, short, tight, black curls that swept up and over the centre of his head have long gone but the face of Rod Douglas hasn’t changed hugely over the course of time. There is no mistaking the man who started to blaze a trail of serious intent towards the peak of the British middleweight scene in the latter part of the 1980s. It was a trail that came to an abrupt halt on 25 October 1989, five days after his 25th birthday, at London’s Wembley Arena, after a courageous attempt to lift Herol Graham’s British middleweight title ended with Douglas suffering a ninth-round stoppage loss, incurring life-threatening and, ultimately, career-ending injuries in the process.

As I entered the gym, I saw a young lad in the ring at the back of the main training area thwack, thwack, thwacking the sparring mitts held up by Solomon, Rod’s right-hand man. Immediately inside the gym opposite the reception desk was a wall, adorned with press cuttings of

Rod in his fighting prime, both in his amateur and professional days. One picture stood out. At first, it appeared to be that of ‘The Greatest’ himself. Rod had his arm stretched around the shoulders of Rachaman Ali, brother of the former three-time world heavyweight champion and, arguably, the greatest fighter of all time. Rod’s face was contorted with unrestrained emotion and tears were visibly building in his eyes. ‘Incredible, unbelievable,’ Rod exclaimed as he looked at the pictures taken months prior to our meeting, in the build-up to London’s third hosting of the Olympic Games. He grinned with pride as he ushered me through to another training area of similar size through an open doorway next to the ring. This room consisted of an open padded-floor area with speedballs along one end and shower cubicles against the far side. ‘Step into my office,’ Rod said with a sense of jovial humour, pointing to a bench under a window.

It became apparent to me very soon after we sat down to talk, that one of the most prominent chapters in Rod’s fistic sojourns was inflicting the lone loss on Nigel Benn’s amateur boxing résumé.

Towards the latter parts of the two fighters’ amateur careers, Rod and Nigel Benn had grown well accustomed to each other, fighting one another twice with one win each. Before their paths crossed however, Rod had picked up the Junior Amateur Boxing Association light-welterweight title in 1980, the same year that Frank Bruno won the senior ABA title in the heavyweight category. In 1983, Rod was to pick up his first of four senior ABA titles, defeating future fringe professional middleweight contender Johnny Melfah in the final of the light-middleweight class. This feat was repeated in 1984 when beating Neil Nunn in the final. That same year, Rod travelled to Los Angeles to represent Great Britain in the Olympic Games under the tutelage of the national coach, Kevin Hickey. After receiving a bye in the first round, Rod posted comfortable victories over a Kenyan followed by a Japanese fighter in the second and third rounds of the tournament respectively. In the quarter-finals he faced eventual losing finalist and future budding professional Shawn O’Sullivan of Canada and was outpointed 5-0 to curtail his Olympic dream.

It was at Los Angeles that the United States of America had one of their strongest teams on record with fighters such as Tyrell Biggs, Evander Holyfield, Meldrick Taylor, Pernell Whitaker, Virgil Hill, Mark Breland and Frank Tate going on to make a big impact on the professional circuit with all but Biggs lifting a world title. With Rod, however, the temptation to turn to the professional ranks after the Games was one which he found relatively easy to resist.

'I think I was anti-professional at the time. I had a really good Olympics in Los Angeles and gave a really good account of myself. There's always one athlete the media want and it was my turn for boxing. There was a lot of pressure on me and when I came back a lot of people wanted me to turn professional more than I wanted to. The enthusiasm they showed me was a bit scary because I questioned why they wanted me to turn pro. You know, I'm the one taking the punches! I've always been wary of what I call "quick friends". Growing up as a young man, people in the know with experience always warned me of bad managers and those that could rip you off and take the piss. It was drummed into me more and more as I was growing up and my promise started to show. I really wasn't interested in it. It was my decision. Now, though, I look back at the history of boxing of those turning pro with lots of exposure and hand-picked fights and, yeah, I should've gone that route. At the time though, I was treated like royalty after Los Angeles and I wanted to experience it again in four years' time!'

The amateur wheels, therefore, continued to roll on and his hat-trick of ABA light-middleweight gold medals was complete in 1985, defeating Gary Phillips in the final. It was in this competition that Rod inflicted the one blemish to Nigel Benn's amateur record. By this stage Rod was developing and growing and he comfortably grew into the middleweight division the following year.

'I moved up to middleweight in 1986 and my first opponent? Nigel Benn!' A smile spread across his face as he geared up to address a fight which he contests to this day. 'That year, he beat me. I beat him in 1985 in the ABAs but I couldn't make the weight no more.' Rod pulls in the hollows of his cheeks and widens his eyes to illustrate what effect the light-middleweight limit had on him. 'I had a bit of a break and came back at middleweight and had a really close fight with Nigel Benn. I still dispute the decision to this day but anyway, I had to prove myself at middleweight and show I could still win the ABAs. You have to remember, I'd won three ABAs on the trot so you had all these old codgers, ABA officials and so on. They want to see some new blood come in. These new guys are a couple of years younger than me and just coming into the ABAs. Then there's me! Nigel Benn gave me a good fight but like I said, I still question the decision. I give him 100 per cent for effort. He trained to beat Rod Douglas. He deserved it.'

'When Buster Douglas beat Mike Tyson, he did it because he TRAINED to BEAT him. Nigel Benn TRAINED to BEAT me. At that time, I was unbeatable, untouchable so Benn had it in his head, "I'm training to beat Rod Douglas." I was his hurdle. I dispute it but

he beat me and to be honest, it was a great relief that I lost the fight. I hadn't lost a fight for five or six years so it got to the point where everybody was expecting me to win. You miss a day, it starts playing on your mind. You question yourself. Am I fit enough? Am I good enough to go the distance? When the ref raised Nigel's hand at the end, he let out a "YAYYYYYY!" Funny story though. Nigel was a kickboxer too. It was at the York Hall and afterwards I come out and as I was coming to the top of the steps, Nigel Benn was at the bottom talking to three or four guys and I was shouting, "Oi you, you c**t!", just humorously as I just got beaten and I'm unbeatable right?!! I run down the steps towards him and as I get closer, you see his feet take on the stance of a kickboxer! He's ready to kick me or punch me!

I went right up to him and said, "Nigel, well done. You done really, really well. I hope you go all the way." He's gone on to greater things and good luck to him. He then got thrown out of the English boxing team for the Commonwealth Games in '86 because he'd done something wrong outside the sport or whatever so they put me in the middleweights and it was cool. I went and won the gold medal! Benn's upset at this. When I get back from those Games in Edinburgh the national papers are all saying that Benn will fight me anywhere, anytime and that he'd put up 50 per cent of the gate money. He wanted to fight me as I'd supposedly taken his gold medal at the Games. The ABA got involved and said there's no way they'd allow this fight to take place as it was too professional-orientated and the amateur board weren't having it.'

Rod defeated Australia's future two-time WBC light-heavyweight champion, Jeff Harding, in the final and the occasion isn't lost on him. 'After our fight, I was in the dressing-room under the ring and I was looking in the mirror for any marks or scuffs. I sensed this person standing next to me and I turned and saw Harding there. I genuinely felt as if he had hurt me more than I'd hurt him so I was still pumped up. I looked at him and shouted, "WHAT?" I was pumped up and ready to go again there and then!'

It was around this time too that Rod Douglas fought and defeated another middleweight who would go on to have a highly successful professional career, including two wins over the aforementioned Nigel Benn. 'I fought Steve Collins over in Ireland and won it on points. He obviously wasn't well known back then but I remember it being a tough, tough fight!'

While missing out on a place in England's team for Edinburgh, Nigel Benn turned to the ABAs and won the middleweight gold himself, defeating Johnny Melfah in the final. At the start of 1987,

Nigel Benn turned professional and embarked on a blistering trail of devastating knockouts that ultimately earned him the moniker 'The Dark Destroyer'. Witnessing Benn's early promise in the professional ranks proved thought-provoking for Rod. 'He turns pro. Knockout, knockout, knockout,' he said, slamming his left fist into his right palm while emphasising 'knockout'. 'I was still amateur and I was thinking to myself, "I'm twice better than him. Why don't I just turn pro?"'

One boxer who Rod fought three times as an amateur was Alec Mullen, who now runs the Irvine Vineburgh Boxing Club in Scotland. They fought a number of times with Alec winning once in a BBC1 televised Scotland v England International in Dundee in January 1986. He recalls Rod's fighting style clearly, 'Rod was a machine. He had a non-stop punching, come-forward style. An always-in-your-face type of fighter. His footwork was also impressive with a very muscular physique. The guy was relentless.'

Rod remained in the amateur ranks for a further eight months after Benn switched and managed to win the gold medal in the ABAs once again, only this time at middleweight. It was something of a milestone in the sense that it was the 100th ABA tournament and such a landmark in amateur boxing history may have seemed a fitting way to wave farewell to the amateurs and step into the professional arena. One last opportunity arose prior to turning to the professional ranks. In June 1987, Rod stepped into the ring at the Lonsdale Gym in London with another budding British middleweight prospect who had just returned from the United States of America where he notched up five four-round points wins to start his own professional career. The prospect's name was Chris Eubank and the sparring session they had was so intense that, had it not been for the training vests and headguards, it could have passed as a genuine crowd-pleasing professional scrap. A couple of years after the fight with Herol Graham, Rod attended a garden party at Buckingham Palace. Chris Eubank was also present and Rod thinks back to a brief conversation the two fighters and Rod's wife had that day.

'I went up to Chris and said, "Chris, tell my wife how our sparring went."' Rod then put on an impressive impersonation of Chris Eubank's now defunct lisp. 'Eubank said to my wife, "It was very difficult and I thought to myself, no, I don't need this kind of sparring!" A couple of weeks ago my son bumped into Chris Eubank in Oxford Street and Chris had a long chat with him and spoke to him in detail about our sparring and complimented me!'

On 30 September 1987, Rod Douglas began his assault on the professional circuit with a first-round knockout of Dave Heaver, a

veteran of 46 fights, and by the end of the year he had racked up four quick knockouts to kickstart this new episode in his career. In 1988 he was stretched to the distance in two eight-round bouts, the latter of which took him to the shores of Atlantic City, New Jersey. Both these fights, against Jake Torrance and Lester Yarborough, proved highly beneficial in his development and both opponents were deemed to be valuable gatekeepers for promising up-and-coming prospects at the time and thereafter. Closing out the year with a first-round knockout over John Keys back in London, he began what would prove to be his final year as a fighter full of confidence. In January 1989, Rod looked sensational when blasting out Ralph Smiley in little over one round at the Elephant and Castle. Showing excellent speed and power, Rod utilised a ramrod left jab to whip repeatedly into Smiley's face in order to set up the finishing blows.

'My aim at this point was still a fight with Nigel Benn. This was the time when Ambrose Mendy was his manager. We tried to get a match through him for about 18 months but they weren't having it. I was a better all-round boxer than Nigel Benn but as a puncher, yeah, he could hit really hard but they knew I could take a punch and probably outpoint him. Why ruin what they've got? They could build him up so why risk me? So we set about fighting his last opponents!'

The sole opponent in common that Rod Douglas and Nigel Benn fought was Reggie Miller. In February 1989, Miller was stopped in seven rounds by Rod, the same round in which Nigel Benn had finished him in December 1987. After three more fights, including a one-round knockout over Paul Wesley who would also prove to be something of a measuring stick for the top domestic level of fighters for many years after, the call came for Rod to challenge Herol Graham for the British middleweight title in October.

Prior to his title shot, Rod Douglas sparred with, amongst others, the dangerous and awesome-punching John 'The Beast' Mugabi. Famed for his frightening punching power which had left many an opponent literally lying in his wake, Mugabi posed a serious test for the pending British title challenger, even in sparring. 'I had to stay on the outside to spar with him because, let me tell you, he had some SERIOUS power in those fists. You would touch his arms and it was like tapping a brick wall! He was that solid.' I asked him which punch, in particular, was the hardest in Mugabi's arsenal of weapons to which Douglas's eyes widened in surprise. 'Which punch?!' he asked me back in surprise. 'WHICH punch? EVERY punch! It didn't matter what he hit you with. I was staying well back because I did NOT want to get hit by THEM!'

Herol Graham was participating in his first fight since an unsuccessful attempt that April in resting the vacant WBA middleweight title against the famed 'Bodysnatcher' – Mike McCallum.

McCallum had previously reigned as the WBA light-middleweight champion with impressive and unexpectedly short knockouts over Julian 'The Hawk' Jackson and Donald 'The Cobra' Curry among his title defences. In his first attempt at winning the middleweight title he lost a decision to the underrated yet technically excellent Sumbu Kalambay. His second chance against Herol Graham swung in his favour and he defeated 'Bomber' by split decision.

When Rod stepped into the ring at Wembley to challenge for the title, there was a feeling among various sections of the boxing fraternity that, while he may not be guaranteed to dethrone the champion, he had what it took to stretch Graham to his limits and perhaps be in the right place at the right time to catch a champion many deemed to be on the downslide after the defeat by McCallum. Tim Mo of *Boxing News* wrote in his preview of the fight, 'Douglas is essentially a pressure fighter, though a classy one, and he is a solid puncher with either hand. He has plenty in the other departments as well.'

After a fairly positive first round where Douglas landed a brace of left hooks followed by a heavy right hand which backed Graham up, the champion slowly took over and used his superior defensive skills to leave Douglas swiping at the air while shipping a continuous repertoire of combination punching. The contest was finally terminated in round nine when referee Billy Rafferty led the courageous challenger back to his corner after being floored twice.

Events took a sinister turn a few hours after the fight when Rod collapsed and was rushed, first to Mile End Hospital, and then to the Royal London in Whitechapel where surgery was undertaken to remove a blood clot from his brain. Incidentally, he was operated on by Dr Peter Hamlyn, who just short of two years later would be carrying out a similar operation on Michael Watson after his fateful rematch with Chris Eubank at White Hart Lane.

'I remember a few months after my fight with Herol Graham, when I was still in a bad situation not being able to walk properly, co-ordination not quite there, memory pretty terrible, speech still slurred, I remember going out of my house. I was walking down the road and I heard this "beep beep" and when I looked round, I saw this white Porsche and when I looked closer I saw Nigel Benn!

'I hated him so much I thought we were going to fight! He asked if I was going down the road and said "jump in". We were talking

and he turned to me and said, “Rod, all those things I said, I didn’t mean it.”

Bad blood and animosity between rivals plays an almost tangible part in the sport. A chance meeting between two rivals in a hotel, a confrontation at a press conference, a weigh-in or ringside at a fight where either both are spectators or where one may be in the ring, can frequently become out of hand and need the assistance of others to prevent a full-scale melee from erupting. The atmosphere can become prickly and very tense, leading bystanders to anticipate the possibility of impending chaos. A lot of rivalries are also, however, coated in a healthy swathe of irony. Rivalries increase spectator interest and subsequently heighten the demand for tickets at the fights and subscription/pay-per-view fees for live TV. In turn, this generates money in the pockets of the participants.

‘It was just publicity and exposure between us. There was no animosity really. It’s a business. Of course it helps further our careers.’

With his professional career cut brutally short just as he seemed to be poised on the brink of championship level, Rod found the desire that most fighters harbour, was still very much alive inside him.

‘I finished boxing and it took me about 18 months to get over it with the injuries and the recovery. I always had that drive and ambition in me to achieve my aims. It didn’t happen with the boxing but I started to practise and participate in kickboxing. I’m in my 30s at this time. I ended up training the kickboxers to use their hands. Within about 18 months, I ended up with about four world champion kickboxers! I was sitting in a bar one day and I noticed this bloke staring at me. He came over and introduced himself. His name was Bill Judd and he had a gym on Globe Road, Bethnal Green called the KO. I started training once or twice a week. He was really well known on the kickboxing scene.’

Indeed he was. Bill Judd won world championships in kickboxing and Muay Thai and earned black-belt status in other forms of martial arts such as karate, wu shu kwan and judo. The Globe Road site is just one branch of the KO gym and it stretches to foreign countries too. Thirty-four world champions in Muay Thai and kickboxing fell under his tutelage and his expertise has been utilised by such international stars as Madonna and Pink.

‘I went down to Bill’s gym on Globe Road and trained there for about five years. For about four of those years, I did two boxing classes a week. Just simple stuff but it got really, really popular and the gym got really packed on those days. I never ever took a penny for it. I did it because I love boxing. It wasn’t for the money. It did get to the stage

where it got a bit harder and age is no longer on your side. One day, Bill called and said, "Rod, come and see me. I've got something to show you." He brought me down here to this site. All it was, was an empty shell. He said to me, "I reckon you could do a lot with this." We had a look around and I was kind of agreeing with what he was saying. We came out, shut the door and he turns to me and says, "Here you are, that's yours!" He put the keys in my hand! I was in shock. Just as I was about to smile and show some appreciation, he says to me, "I've got cancer." I was dumbfounded. Speechless.'

Rod's voice slowed down to illustrate the proverbial rollercoaster ride of emotions that charged through him on hearing this piece of news. 'Anyway, a couple of days later, I came in with a broom, marigolds and paintbrushes. On the Tuesday the ring came. On the Thursday, the bags came with the brackets and for about six weeks, I was here every day. Hammer, saw, drill, paintbrush. On my own. All day and all night. I built this. Sorry, I'm gonna have tears in my eyes now...'

Rod's voice trailed off as his eyes started to well. The feeling of achievement and what this meant to him after all the years since his near-fatal encounter with Herol Graham was crystal-clear. The more I got to converse with him, the more I encountered human achievement and what it means to the individual at its most raw and untinged. Rod continued to talk but only through a cracked voice, heavily charged with emotion.

'Day and night, night and day. I'd get up in the early hours and I'd get home about ten o'clock at night. All the floors I put down, the bags, the ring took me a whole day and I did it on my own. It was brilliant. At the time I was doing some security work too for about two months and I remember, I finished work the morning the gym opened on a Friday and had to get back for about eight o'clock, got all the kids out, got them done. I went to the gym and on the first day, the gym wasn't big enough. There were so many kids.'

Rod jumped up at this point and paced around in front of me, unable to contain the feeling of joy he experienced. It was a feeling he was reliving in front of me now. Rod threw punches at invisible opponents. The eyes narrowed and his lips tensed as he demolished the space between us. I sat there on the wooden bench not uttering a sound. To have done so would have been to fracture one man's moment of unblemished intimacy with his past. Rod had been taken back to his fighting days and he was relishing it. I let the mood take him. It would return him when it was good and ready and it was incredibly moving to witness. The double jab, the hook, the uppercut, the cross, the feint,

the head movement. For 30 seconds, I travelled back almost 30 years. As the combinations slowed and the eyes focused back on the present day, they appeared watery. The beast never dies; it simply lies dormant. 'I went home later that day, sat down and just cried. I've done it! I've done it! Such a great feeling.'

Of all the achievements Rod had in his amateur career along with the name he was quickly making for himself in the pros, one got the feeling that, at the very least, this achievement ranked up there with them. 'It SURPASSED that. Surpassed it. That feeling of seeing people coming off the street from scratch, don't know nothing about boxing. You become a social worker. You see people making progress. They win fights. It is so rewarding. Can you believe this, the Olympic Games this year, I get a message that Muhammad Ali is coming to my gym! I'm running around shouting, "Muhammad Ali's coming to my gym! Muhammad Ali's coming to my gym!" People are looking at me strangely! After a while I stop telling people in case I end up looking stupid. He then got ill and I get a message from him. He said he's sorry he couldn't make it. He's sending his brother.'

His voice faltered again. 'It's hard. The rent here is very expensive and the bills are big. I'm still not making any money but I'm sure it'll get better in time. It's a lot of work but I'm in it for the love. It's been brilliant and I pride myself on ANYBODY can come into my gym. They are all nice people and they come from all walks of life.' His willingness to speak and help anybody would appear to be a common trait with most boxers. Being enshrouded in agents and handlers and others who exist to simply boost the individual's public image is certainly not in Rod's make-up.

'That's why I love boxing. Most boxers are really nice people. They're not arrogant at all. They will go up to anybody.'

I mentioned the reaction of the local residents in the vicinity of the Royal Albert Hall, the site for Douglas's challenge to Herol Graham, on London's affluent Kensington Gore, who were displeased with news that the sport was attempting to return to the venue. The locals claimed they did not wish to have 'such people' on their doorstep. Rod's reaction was blunt. 'These people don't know what they're talking about. There are big football grounds there so why not ban football?! Boxing people are some of the nicest people you could meet.'

The outpouring of emotion shown by Rod, while talking about the creation and success of the Arches Gym and his recovery from his ring injuries, was soon replaced by a more melancholic bout of reflection. Being born and bred in Bow and having grown up within the close local

vicinity, he had been surrounded by the strong boxing culture of the East End and was a proven fighter of impressive standard when at school.

'I was the best fighter in my school. I wasn't a bully but every year I was the best fighter. I was a sportsman. I was always competitive. I was about 13. I was out running the 100 metres one day and I dipped to get in front of the line. I was neck and neck with this guy. I dipped just a little bit too much and I bent over and crashed on to my shoulder. I broke my collar bone and a bone in my back where it joins so I was in hospital for about six weeks. Part of my physio was to give me a punchbag. That's how I started. It was in my first season that I won the Junior ABAs in 1980.'

For a fighter whose boxing career was instigated and ended by varying degrees of injury, Rod Douglas achieved a commendable amount and has a healthy number of amateur accomplishments to show for his blood, sweat and tears. In the professionals, he was making a serious name for himself. Had the defeat, or indeed the fight, against Herol Graham not occurred, there would have been a number of alternative options for Rod to choose from. The European title-holder was Francesco Dell Aquila from Italy and Britain's own Michael Watson held reign over the Commonwealth title, courtesy of his thrilling six-round war with Nigel Benn in May 1989. At world level, the Panamanian legend Roberto Duran held the WBC title, Michael Nunn held the IBF title, Doug DeWitt held the WBO title while Mike McCallum (after whom Rod's youngest son, Callum, is named) held the WBA title. It's a fantastical 'what-if' but what would have happened in the future was clear to Rod.

'Listen, listen, there is no doubt in my mind that I would have been at least British champion. Most of the guys I went to the Olympic trials with won British titles. Me and Watson couldn't fight because we had the same manager, Eubank had just come on the scene and we'd had that two-day sparring and Benn was avoiding me. None of the top fighters wanted to fight Herol Graham because he was boring and not a crowd-puller so they'd have a hard fight and not make any money from it. It was the only fight open for me. As for the world champions, I reckon I could have outpointed most of them if not knocked them out. None of them I looked up to. At the time, I tried to model myself on being "Sugar" Ray Leonard. I used to watch him on television and watch his jab and I tried to get my jab faster than his jab but I didn't really look up to anybody in my weight division at that time who could have beaten me. Nowadays, I don't really follow the sport much.'

While the current batch of top middleweights battle it out to see whose head breaks the surface of the ever-increasing murkiness of the

infamous alphabet soup, Rod is not overly familiar with the likes of the current crop of 'world' champions. You detect very strong vibes that the former four-time ABA champion was extremely proud of his accomplishments as a fighter and could have achieved much more had the hands of fate dealt slightly differently.

As we stood up to end our chat, Rod led me back through the main training hall. As we passed the ring, Solomon was tutoring a young lad in the basic art of maintaining your defence with one hand as the other shoots out a jab. As we passed them, Rod suddenly lurched over towards the student with a tense expression, clenched fists and pumped-out chest and barked, 'Keep those hands up. DON'T drop them.'

For those few seconds, the relentless nature of the man which Alec Mullen had referred to resurfaced but as quickly as he tore into the student, he came back to my side, his eyes and mouth smiling once more. Something on the wall caught my eye. A long board overlooked the gym. It was entitled 'Arches Combos'. In four separate sections, lines of numbers were scrawled to denote a particular combination. One section for three-punch combinations, one for four, one for five and one for six.

'They remind me of Kevin Rooney and Mike Tyson,' I said to Rod as we stood in the immaculately weeded pathway outside. The images of Kevin Rooney bending down to Mike Tyson between rounds during 'Iron' Mike's heyday in the mid-late-80s, bellowing numerical sequences into his ear that would be transformed into combinations created with a frightening combination of speed and power, were iconic. Rod didn't say anything. He looked at me and smiled. A smile that had an air of expectation about it. As he turned and walked back inside his gym, I walked off unable to shake the belief that, were Rod to fill the role of mentor and find a prodigy who would go on to achieve great things in the ring like the aforementioned Rooney-Tyson partnership, it would be nothing short of what he would deserve.