

The Re-Match

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WHEN WE CLOCKED on that morning we had asked Mike if we could stop for our lunch break at 1PM on Wednesday, rather than midday, as was the general custom and practice. We let him know we were all keen to sit around and listen to the radio broadcast of the fight live from Lewiston, Maine in the USA. Mike didn't have a problem with that. He said he and Frankie would try to sneak in from the shop and hear it too.

We'd been talking amongst ourselves about their first fight back in February 1964 when Cassius Clay surprised the world. That fight famously ended with Sonny sitting on his stool and failing to come out for the seventh round.

As we ran our blades over the stones we tossed around the various theories that had been put forward: that the fight was fixed; that the Mob were in on it. We all knew Liston had learned to box when he did a stretch in the Missouri State Penitentiary for armed robbery. And we'd heard that his contract had been owned for much of his career by a one-time Mob hitman who ran boxing interests for the Mafia. This re-match, set for Wednesday 26 May 1965, was being talked up as a walk-over for Liston. The bookies had Ali as a seven to one underdog and most of the leading sportswriters picked Liston to knock him out within two rounds.

We were all discussing who'd be prepared to put money on the fight when we heard the knocking of the diesel engine of the abattoir truck reversing up to the back door.

We took the lambs first, followed by the mutton, pushing short metal rods with turned up ends through the tendons of their hind legs, hanging them on sliding hooks, then pushing them along the main overhead rail towards the shopfront. The lambs were then lifted off and carried into the cool-room and re-hung. My job then kept me alongside the main rail where I stripped the mutton off the frames, trimmed and diced it, then packed it into a tub ready to go onto trays for presentation in the shop window. After I'd done that I had to use a handsaw and cut the necks off the frames as they sold well as pet food. The rest of the frames would get picked up by the blood and bone truck later that afternoon.

While I was taking care of the mutton and lambs, Dick and Johnny were breaking up the beef. Dick was in his early twenties and not long out of his apprenticeship. He was a big-boned lad and handled the beef easily. Johnny was in his early thirties and highly skilled. He kept his eagle eye on both of us, setting us on the right track if we looked like making a blue.

We kept talking about the fight as we worked on, and as I was always up for a bit of fun, I took my knife pouch off and shaped up to one of the hindquarters of beef that Dick was just about to start on. I was showing the boys what Max Hall had taught me at his boxing gym, doubling a left jab, throwing a right cross then coming back with a left hook. I was slamming solid punches into the firm rump of the hindquarter, explaining that by finishing off with a left hook, it allowed your hands to be up high, protecting your head, and positioning you to block anything likely to come back from your opponent.

I don't know whether Mike heard the thud of the punches landing into the hindquarter but he came through from the shop and caught me midway through another combination.

'Oi,' he called. 'If I catch you doing that again I'll kick y'r arse from one side of the shop to the other. And I'll have you working through the fight on Wednesday. D'you understand me?'

'Sure,' I replied, fully flushed, dropping my eyes and reaching for my knife pouch from the bench top.

While I was buckling the belt I happened to look up and caught Mike winking at Johnny. 'If he looks like throwing another punch

you've got my full permission to knock him out. Now get back to work and stop playing games.'

All day Tuesday we talked about the fight. We'd been reading various newspaper articles and were convinced that Sonny would be far too experienced to let this young loudmouth get away with him again. We knew that Ali was a couple of inches taller, ten years younger, and unbeaten as a pro. But he'd only had twenty pro fights, whereas Sonny had thirty-five under his belt and had knocked out more men than Ali had ever fought. If it had been possible to get a bet placed, we all would have put our wages on Sonny by an early knockout.

Come Wednesday we were still full of fight talk and shadow-boxing around the back of the butcher shop in Mike's absence, throwing combinations into the air. The morning dragged by slowly as we anticipated listening to a truly bruising encounter between these two big men at 1PM. Work was a poor distraction.

At 12.30PM we took off our white plastic aprons, washed our hands and tuned the radio to the ABC. We had no sooner settled ourselves around the work bench and unwrapped our sandwiches when the commentator announced that the boxers were making their way down to the ring. It was then I was given my instructions. Each of the other four men had dug a silver coin out of their fob pocket and I was being told to race into the deli next door and grab bottles of Coke.

'I don't wanna miss the fight,' I whined.

There was a chorus of get in and get the bloody drinks pronto or you will miss it. As a sixteen-year-old boy in a room full of men, I had no other option. I slipped quickly through the front of the shop and into the adjoining deli. I grabbed the five Cokes, moved up to the counter but then had to wait a minute or so for the person in front of me to finish being served.

By the time I got back into the butcher shop, the blokes were laughing their heads off.

'You've missed it . . . it's over,' Johnny said.

'Unbelievable,' said Frankie.

Dick stood there shaking his head, speechless.

The radio was still blaring. The commentator stated that if listeners were to stand by they would repeat the broadcast in a few minutes when the confusion in the ring was sorted out.

‘What happened?’ I asked.

Mike said, ‘You’ve just missed Muhammad Ali knocking out Sonny Liston halfway through the first round. It didn’t go for much more than a minute. I’m sorry mate, I really am. You’ll just have to cop it on the chin and listen to the replay.’

When it finally did get replayed, some minutes later, we could hear Ali screaming, ‘Get up and fight, sucker.’

I just couldn’t help thinking there was more than one sucker on that particular Wednesday.