

The Boxing Manager

Written by Jonathan Rendall
Tuesday, 12 October 2004 18:00

He stood there cupping the phone receiver in his tiny rented flat off Edgware Road: Eddie Cross, a boxing manager, a wiry, good-looking man of medium build who would stand out in a snooker club, but one you would still expect to find there. That was part of the image he was trying to project. He was more intelligent than that.

Eddie could not believe what he was hearing. Gus Logan was back on to him. After three years. Asking him to take him back. Gus, the kid he had thought was the one, had nurtured and would have done anything for, had protected like his son and got to No.3 in the WBC welterweight ratings, and who had walked out on him, just like that – well, Eddie had humiliated himself over it really. He was now 44 years old, just knowing that he had really got his shit together again after what Gus had done to him, and here Gus was on the phone, acting as if nothing had happened. He listened to Gus's voice, the voice he knew so well. It sounded older and deeper now. What must he be - 27? 28? No, he knew his exact birth-date. He had written it on innumerable press releases, most doomed to be immediately binned, in the early days, when no one wanted to know. It was only Eddie who had seen his potential. And now Gus was nothing again. That was why he was ringing. He'd lost his last two fights. He hadn't even fought for a year. And he must have remembered. How Eddie was the one person in his life he could ever trust. Eddie listened disbelievingly to Gus's voice.

"We all make mistakes, Eddie, and that's what I'm saying," Gus said. But his voice was cocky – Eddie could tell he wasn't really cocky any more, and that he was vulnerable and weak and had probably just got back into shape for a fortnight, but still...to put it on. Gus had no idea what Eddie had been through. The shock and the sense of betrayal had all but killed him. Really.

"Listen, Eddie, the truth is, you've always been my man."

Eddie realized he hated him. It shocked him anew to think this. He had loved this kid so much. Standing there, he remembered the first time he had seen him – the Albert Hall, on some undercard fight. And Gus lost it on points, but that didn't matter. It was Gus's pro debut, plus he had no amateur experience. He hardly knew the basics. He'd been thrown in against some prospect, Kelly. Gus was then managed by this bloke in the Midlands, Ned, a right idiot, who peddled losers around. And he'd got his contract off him for 500 quid. That was all it took. Not that it was easy getting it together at that time...

But he'd seen it, do you see...This kid was like a miniature Mike Tyson. He could see the whole thing unfolding. He would put him with Slide, his trainer, and within a couple of months it would start to happen, knocking the rough edges off for starters, and then they would be on it, like he always said...the road. So few people ever got on it.

People said he got too close to Gus. That was a bullshit boxing cliché anyway: "Never fall in love with your fighter." Not sexually, obviously. Several people said that to him. But they were fight-game people. Ruthless bastards. He was not one of them.

The Boxing Manager

Written by Jonathan Rendall
Tuesday, 12 October 2004 18:00

“Eddie? Ed? Are you there or what?” he heard Gus saying through the receiver.

“I’m here. It’s just..”

“Come on, man! You know it makes sense. Forget the past. We’ve got to be positive Eddie!”

Christ, how he hated that ‘positive’ athlete shit. What’s wrong with being wise, negatives and all?

“You better come over,” Eddie said finally.

Gus said he’d be there in an hour. Eddie could tell Gus thought it was already a done deal. He paced around the flat, and poured a large vodka, neat, downing it in one. Christ, this shit was supposed to be over – daytime drinking again. The first time for a year. Well, sometimes you need it. He tried to evaluate the whole situation, but a poisonous plan was forming in his mind. He had to evacuate it, now. He poured another vodka and tried to remember.

How he was known, for one thing. A small-time manager, but people who said that could go to hell. He had never relied on boxing for his money, such as it was. Presently it was cabbing that made it. Previously it had been catering but that was just...too bad. He had learnt never to rely on anyone but always to be able to survive. It had taken him too long to learn it but he had.

He had been getting back to where he was before Gus left him: Eddie Cross, his own man. Sorry to use an unfashionable word, but, yes, a gentleman. That was important, for Christ’s sake. Admittedly he had not been very gentlemanly with women in the past, but he had never promised anything. They had come after him. Gus was the only one he had gone after.

Anyway, he was finished with womanising. It was empty, and the sex caused too much revenge. For two years he had slept with no one. What was the point, just to have a warm body beside you? It was childish. You might as well be sucking your thumb. He would wait for the right one to come along and if she didn’t, she didn’t. It was the same with boxers. He had taken no one on since Gus. He just still had Delroy. Eddie smiled. Ah Delroy. If Delroy wasn’t in and out of prison so much he could have probably taken him to a British title fight, about seven grand. But no further, in all honesty. Delroy could punch in a fashion but he was no natural like Gus.

He just liked Delroy, and that was why he was continuing with it. He liked the way Delroy wore a fur coat – ridiculous – and talked the talk and was so obsessive about his nickname of ‘The Pirate’, coming into the ring wearing a skull-and-crossbones bandanna. Delroy was up for living, even if he was bloody lucky not to be dead. Despite being born in Peckham, he had embraced the Jamaican Yardie lifestyle like an evangelist, guns and all. Christ, and as for women, as if Eddie had to worry....Ok, the real reason he perservered with Delroy was that, for all Delroy’s chaotic faults, he knew that Delroy would always be loyal to him and it was a way of weening himself off Gus.

And it was working. He had a sight of himself again, the way he always imagined he would be.

The Boxing Manager

Written by Jonathan Rendall
Tuesday, 12 October 2004 18:00

People say they don't but they always take bits of people and base themselves on them. With him it was a guy no one even remembered: Robbie Box, a character from an 80s TV series. That was who he thought of when he entered a room and it looked bad. Think what Robbie Box would do. He was a gambler, Robbie, but straight. And also it was the sensibility of certain people: of Ian Dury and some early Madness songs, the Suggs ones, and the Specials and Otis Redding and Marvin Gaye. Basically, the vulnerable ones. With a large dash of Bob Dylan put in: the genius. And that did not mean Dylanologists. They didn't understand. He did. And making sure you dressed alright. Maybe that was an echo of the Mod thing, not that he'd been around first time. But he was 44. Christ, did it matter? No. So, in all, very London. A certain type of London that seemed almost lost. Streetwise, but honourable.

And people in boxing could eff off. The wise-crackers and the one-liner merchants and their self-mythologising. It was all shit. He was not of them or with them or any part of them and they could lump it. He was Eddie.

The drink made him remember too much. That was why he had all but given it up – finally. Until now. He remembered how he had met Tanya the first time, after Gus started going out with her. That was really the beginning of it. That fucking bitch. Sorry, but she was. And within weeks she was carrying around a briefcase. Actually carrying one. His 'business manager'. What, recently qualified from the university of Ilford hair-dressing? I mean, you couldn't make it up.

But he had humiliated himself. Yes he had. When she put Gus together with those goons from North London, who wrecked all he had built. Eighteen fights unbeaten – all wrecked, almost instantaneously, with bad match-making. Fucking idiots. No one is going to say Tyson was a bad fighter, but he was well-managed. Perfect. Tyson never fought anyone on the way up. But then Eddie had stayed in there, just to be there, yes he had, like a...fucking bag-carrier.

It was not as if he didn't know what Gus's weaknesses were. He may have been a natural but he did have flaws, and Eddie had protected him, He couldn't fight southpaws – he just couldn't work them out, and Slide said he never would - and he wasn't the best in the chin department. There was this other kid called Barrantes who'd come up at the same time as Gus, and Eddie had avoided him. He was a southpaw puncher from Colombia. Christ knows what he was doing living in London, but he was.

In fact Barrantes was coming back too, but that was entirely different to Gus. He was with Eddie North, Mr Big Shot Promoter. Do you know it killed him they had the same Christian name? So Barrantes would be fed dead bodies, and plus he was known to live clean, which couldn't be said of Gus...

And, thinking back, what Gus had told him, when he finally ended it, in that restaurant in the West End: "Listen Eddie, you're one of the good guys, but we just no longer feel your salary is commensurate with what you do for us." 'Commensurate'. That summed it up. He didn't even know the fucking word. Someone had told him. It should never have come to that. He must have been a masochist. Slide had actually said that to him once. "There's a masochistic streak in you, Eddie. Sometimes you've got to draw the line and front people up."

The Boxing Manager

Written by Jonathan Rendall
Tuesday, 12 October 2004 18:00

And the nights of dead time and sleeplessness, and knocking back whole bottles of vodka just for something to do and chaining as many fags as he could get down, waiting for the phone to ring, hoping it would be Gus. Madness.

And what Slide had also said, one day at the gym. That was true. He'd been moaning about Gus – which admittedly he did do – and Slide said: "I don't want to know, Eddie. It's between you and him. I'm not saying you're gay or nothing, but you're in love with this kid. Why don't you admit it?"

The doorbell rang. Seeing Gus's silhouette enter down the stairs he could hardly believe it. Gus bounded up, lifting his T-shirt to show Eddie his stomach muscles. He must have planned this entrance on the bloody bus.

"Look at that Eddie!" Gus said. "Six-pack city! I told you I was in shape. I'm ready to roll, man. I'm ready for the road!" Gus hopped around the room striking boxing poses. Eddie noticed that his frame was thicker and slower. He noticed that Gus's hairline was now receding, and gazed at the bare patch with...contempt.

They talked, and Eddie was aware that he was doing a plausible impression of his old self. Gus didn't realize. He was no brain surgeon. He heard Gus saying: "I made a lot of mistakes, Eddie. Like with Tanya. She was bad for me, man."

"I could have told you that," Eddie said. Just like the old Eddie. Laconic. But he was not. There was something new in him.

He let Gus out, and was conscious of him walking jauntily off. He could not bring himself to look at that familiar walk. And then these words went through his mind: "You little black bastard." Jesus shit. That was not him at all. In Eddie North's office his nickname had been "nigger-lover". He was known for taking on black fighters no one else would touch. Like Delroy, for instance.

He went back up the stairs and, to try and get the old Eddie back, rang Slide, to tell him about Gus's visit. "I'll take a look at him, Eddie," Slide said. "But to be honest, from what I've heard, I'm not hopeful." It was no good. It was still in him.

Eddie changed into his trainers to go for a run. He would go to Hyde Park, at a nice easy pace. He had been a good runner. He did not even change into his other running gear, keeping his street clothes on. He just had to get this poison out of him. But he didn't even get to Marble Arch. It was like running through treacle. He walked back to the flat and, without pausing, rang Eddie North.

"Ah, the other Eddie," North said in his piss-arrogant manner.

"Do you still need an opponent for Barrantes on Saturday?" Eddie said.

"Who?"

The Boxing Manager

Written by Jonathan Rendall
Tuesday, 12 October 2004 18:00

“Gus Logan.”

“You’re joking aren’t you? I don’t want an accident. How much?”

He didn’t tell them about it. He said it would be a selected opponent, to bring Gus back nice and easy. The first Gus knew about it was when Barrantes came down the aisle at the Albert Hall. He didn’t flinch. He was brave as well as stupid. Eddie had walked there across the park. It was a lovely moonlit night. Then Eddie was standing by the corner, and Slide paused to look at him, holding his Q-tips and his white towel.

“Did you make this match, Eddie?” Slide said. That was when Eddie came out of it. But it was too late. He stood there, unable to say anything. Slide shook his head. Just before the first bell Gus winked at Eddie.

Eddie sat down, and looked up at the domed ceiling. All his life he had tried to avoid being like them, but now he had succumbed. It was a ghostly opera. It was just his ghost there.

He watched Barrantes coming out for the first. That kid was a hell of a fighter. The perfect build: thin waist, big shoulders. A natural mover as well. Almost like Robinson. If he hadn’t been Colombian they could have built the crowds up and he would have been a shoe-in for the title.

The ref wouldn’t stop it, and there was no three-knockdown rule. Five times Gus went down, and the last time was bad, his head bouncing off the canvas. There was panic in the ring, Slide crouching over Gus, and all sorts of idiots crowding round, but Gus wouldn’t come to. Eddie knew what it was, just from the darkness of the blood: a blood-clot on the brain; either death or severe brain damage.

He didn’t know whether to join them in the ring or not, but he couldn’t just sit there, and found himself standing up, tears rolling down his cheeks. He remembered the Dylan song ‘Who Killed Davey Moore’ and the refrain

*Not me, said the man whose fists/
Put him down in a cloud of mist*

but was appalled that his intellect had intruded at such a time. How the fuck had it come to this? My kid.

Dumbly he followed them out to the ambulance at the back entrance. Slide was already inside, holding Gus’s hand. Slide noticed Eddie and looked at him both imploringly and angrily.

“Are you coming or what?” Slide said.

After a pause Eddie shook his head. Instead he took a cab, going via south London, and did what he considered the only honourable thing left to him. He went back to the flat, sat down and, taking the revolver he had got from Delroy, blew his brains out.

Jonathan Rendall is the author of [This Bloody Mary: Is the Last Thing I Own](#)