Boxing; the sport, the business, the promotion – all come naturally to British and Commonwealth super-middleweight champion Carl Froch. Relaxed and confident in conversation, the loquacious Nottingham puncher afforded me some time ahead of a clash with British-based South African Ruben Groenewald on December 2nd.

Froch's confidence inside the ring – from the low-slung left to the all-action offence – is matched only by a waspish tongue outside it. In tandem with promoter Mick Hennessy, and the imagination of his copywriters, a marketable persona has been finely tuned. Almost five thousand bought tickets to see his victory over slippery British contemporary Matthew Barney, so the message sells. But is it real?

Eventually, the talk, the confidence, the press releases have to be substantiated and whilst 2005 has been a good year for Froch, compiling victories over Henry Porras, Barney and the presumed success against Groenewald, if all goes according to plan it will serve only as a pretext for the assault on European and world titles in 2006.

Super-middleweight, where Froch operates, has been home to a selection of Britain's finest fighters of the past generation; from the division's first world champion Murray Sutherland to Nigel Benn, Michael Watson, Chris Eubank, Steve Collins, Robin Reid and of course, Joe Calzaghe. On the subject of Calzaghe, Froch is on familiar territory.

"*I've been trying to get a fight with Calzaghe for about eight months, maybe longer, and he's had opportunities when he could have boxed me but..."* Froch pauses, forlornly shaking his head. Had offers simply been press talk or had 'the call' actually been made ? *"This fight was always going to be difficult to make because of the politics, but I tried to cut through all that by antagonising Calzaghe. If he had responded and shown that he was interested in the fight we could have then made it happen, but he remained deadly silent. Then his dad (Enzo Calzaghe) publicly priced him out. He asked for a million quid, which is ridiculous because he doesn't get that for a normal defence, and if he thinks I'm a novice and he things he can beat me easily, why ask for a million quid?"*

A plausible enough question; in Calzaghe's defence, tackling Froch while the Nottingham puncher was still on the professional learning curve would have attracted its share of dissenters too. Froch does make a solid case for himself though; after all, Calzaghe's recent dance card hasn't been a who's who of world-class fighters.

"I've sort of given up on Calzaghe now. Just not interested in him to be honest. If he was gonna fight me he would have done by now. He's had opportunity to fight, defend against me for his title in voluntaries, and he boxed people like that Kenyan (Evans Ashira) *in his last fight, who's ranked way below me."*
Froch delivers these judgements as fact, unflinching and pointed; it's familiar ground for the unbeaten contender and, as most boxing fans know, defending Calzaghe's level of opposition is

an onerous undertaking.
"Until Ashira suddenly appeared in the WBO's super middleweight rankings one place above me just before he fought Calzaghe, he hadn't even been rated at super middleweight. So I was a much better fight for him, I'm 8th with the WBC, but he didn't have it, so I've given up on him."

With a leap to world title class appearing at least six to twelve months away, despite Hennessy Sports record for negotiating the rankings minefield better than most, Froch is determined to stick to the traditional route through British, Commonwealth and European titles. *"In the New Year I'm looking for European Vitali Tsypko, big tall strong Ukrainian, southpaw, get him over here and bang him out.*
That's the idea."

The big, tall Ukrainian Froch refers to won't be across the ring should he succeed in earning a shot at the prestigious European title any time soon – Frenchman Jackson Chanet outpointed Tsypko last weekend – but the confidence and direction Froch demonstrates is infectious. Naming targets is an easy occupation for any fighter, but time in Froch's company serves to undermine the seriousness of his intent. These are more than loose quotes and soundbites ahead of a routine spar.

Should Froch dispatch Groenewald as widely predicted, the most likely next opponent will be Irishman Brian Magee – his mandated challenger for the British championship. Two more defences would secure Froch the British Lonsdale belt, a key milestone for any aspiring young fighter. Froch's real challenge will be finding two valid opponents. With former champion Tony Dodson only just returning from a catalogue of misfortune, Barney already vanquished and Calzaghe operating at a more elite level, is the 168 lb. cupboard all but bare?

"I don't know if there are two opponents; we've got Magee that counts as British, and then there also is Robin Reid, but I don't know if he's prepared to drop down to domestic titles. Reid's quality and history don't appear to phase Froch, swiftly moving to assess what the proud Runcorn man has left following a crushing defeat to Jeff Lacy earlier this year. "
I don't think he really wants it, he just wants to earn a few more quid and the turn it in, I don't think he really wants to fight. He's not the man he was when he fought Calzaghe. I thought he beat Calzaghe."

The spectre of the longstanding and oft-maligned WBO champion is never far from the conversation. For all Froch claims he's looking past the Welshman to the new hotshot Jeff Lacy, Calzaghe clearly casts a perpetual shadow over Froch's otherwise sunny disposition. *"That's Calzaghe's traits, showing himself again. Split decision*
(against Reid)
and yet no rematch."
Comfortable assessing rivals, every line delivered with purpose and without hesitation, Froch maintains a healthy respect for his contemporaries. Countering that despite his critics Calzaghe remains a terrific fighter, Froch willingly agrees.
"Great fighter. Tough, strong, stays in there. Fast hands. Bags of heart

;
he's got up a few times."

In a career course astutely plotted to capitalise on the value and integrity of the three classic regional belts – British, Commonwealth and European – Froch is determined to secure defining fights, something he suspects may already have escaped Calzaghe. *"I don't think he will, he's past it now, he's not past it past it as in gone, but he's not what he was, so he's not got giving himself the best chance."*
Now in full flow, Froch lamented on Calzaghe's career to date.
"Took the easy route. When he sits on his rocking chair when he's seventy, smoking his pipe, is he going to be happy with himself? Because I wouldn't be. I'd rather get beat trying than not [bleeping] try at all. Get a big fight, I want to fight Lacy now, badly want to fight Lacy."

Fighting the division's elite may be on Froch's wish list, but in the short-term he tackles game South African Groenewald, who's career highlights include two shared decisions with the now retired Anthony Farnell at 160lbs. Given the lofty aspirations Froch imparts, boxing's observers could be forgiven for questioning Groenewald's credentials; after all, he's far removed from the Lacy, Calzaghe and Kessler class. Despite a supreme confidence in the outcome, Froch is bullish about the match. *"Tough South African, comes to win, he's had plenty of notice, so he'll be super-fit, never been stopped. It's a great fight, he's had seven weeks, seven weeks, minimum, he's had had plenty of time. Good. I'm glad. I don't want him having any excuses when he's finished getting bludgeoned."* Froch adjusts his tone, effortlessly promoting the opponent ahead of the clash when he needs to.

Although relatively inactive over the past three years, Groenewald has pursued profile matches throughout and Froch himself is only just punching again following summer surgery on his right hand. "*Had the hand fixed, knuckle still swells up a bit but not like it was before, it was a nightmare before the op. Not really nervous about it, not at all. I'm hitting the bag full on and I only have a tiny pad on, but I'm still not able to hit someone full on the chin with a 10oz Reyes glove. I'll find out in this fight wont I? But I'm not worried about it."* The puncher's curse of hand trouble doesn't dim Froch's enthusiasm or self-belief. On the evidence of the sparring and bag work undertaken following the interview there appears little reluctance to employ the right. Something he wishes he could have done versus Barney; he elected to take the fight ahead of surgery and in the knowledge the hand was almost redundant.
"I had one hand in that fight anyway. Got him out of the way and shut him up. He's probably back in Canada now laying tarmac where he [bleeping] belongs. I don't have to listen to his shit now for the next five years, [saying I] swerved him or skipped him. I boxed him with one hand, beat him one-handed, and he disgraced himself running and holding."

Froch's natural ability and fighting style has already attracted attention stateside, Oscar De La Hoya's Golden Boy Promotions is now a productive affiliate in the States. The partnership could prove its value next year if Froch is successful in reaching world title level. In the sport and business of boxing, the age-old adage of 'it's not what you know, but who you know' was never more pertinent. *"The link up with Golden Boy gives me the opportunity to gain exposure and top level experience in America. It will also make it easier for Mick Hennessy to land the superfights down the line for me."* Dreams of American superfights are one thing, but

Froch's bond with the people of Nottingham is a strong one.
"Ideally, I want to fight in Nottingham. I mean look at Hatton and the MEN Arena; that's why he's making so much money. You need the backing of the fans. It's not a massive town but hopefully the arena won't be big enough; it holds 10,000. When I'm defending world titles I expect to be able to fill it."
Froch's fixed eye contact stresses the seriousness of his plan.

Recent developments in boxing coverage in the UK: BBC no longer covers professional bouts; SKY now cherry picks shows and are aligned with no specific promoter; and ITV's return almost exclusively supplied by Frank Warren's Sport Network stable, create additional obstacles in plotting a fighter's career. Froch has remained loyal to Hennessy Sports, despite fluctuating relationships with the television networks, and whilst the idea that the TV factor could hinder his progression resonates with Froch, he remains confident that ultimately results and performances will ensure his career unfolds as planned. *"I'm 28, but I don't worry about my age. Ultimately, I want to be top level in America.My ultimate goal is to fight Lacy, Kessler and the top champions and unify the division or at least fight them, that sort of level. If I do, I'll be on Showtime, HBO and SKY; that's where I wanna be, where the big money is. Regardless of whether it's Sky, ITV or BBC - which I've been on loads - I'm still getting shown and I'll get to where I wanna be eventually: beating the right fighters, at the right time. Mick's (Hennessy) got a good relationship with Golden Boy and once I've got this European title I'll be up there and I can say 'I wanna fight Grant or Sheika, Beyer or Kessler.' It's up to me then. Unification with Lacy, or whoever else has got the belt at the time. I mean Calzaghe might grow a set of bollacks and fight me!"*

Self-belief is a quintessential quality for any fighter, regardless of their horizons. Stepping between the ropes is no place for the timid or fainthearted, but self-belief can soon give way to arrogance in the wrong hands. Whilst there are those who feel Froch's demeanour and ring style suggests a proximity to that pitfall, the fighter himself explains that his style of boxing is about entertainment and despite his success he's still seeking to improve. "*Improvements? I'm learning and improving all the time. I mean someone who is a fan of mine or wanted to be critical of me – What about Carl Froch?" they'd say – "Oh he's got no defence" – so I'm working on my defence all the time in sparring; ducking and diving, blocking, slipping and countering."*

Suddenly aware of the implied weakness, Froch is swift to clarify the point. *"I've never needed to use my defence the way I can. I've always been on top, been in front, always found the game easy. I'm offensive. I'm letting the shots go and I get clipped with the odd shot. I take risks; I want to get my opponent out of there. I don't want to win on points over twelve rounds, bore the crowd and not entertain. I want to entertain and that means getting caught with a right hand off Henry Porras or walking into a couple of silly shots from Matthew Barney, you know what I mean?"*

With the incessant drum of a nearby skipping rope making conversation hard and with hand wraping complete, it's time to close the conversation; I explained that the underlying discovery I'd sought was whether the man behind the quotes and the "Cobra" moniker was real. When he spoke publicly of beating Calzaghe, Lacy et al and being the greatest sportsman in England, did

he believe it or was it simply a bid to garner attention? My conclusion was an unequivocal yes, he does. Every quip, comment and judgement is said without hesitation; this is what Froch believes – the confidence is genuine and deeply held but where does it originate?

"Yeah, I'm super confident. I train hard. I don't cut corners. The wins I've had are great wins and I was a top amateur. So when I'm talking It's not just I'm this or I'm that, I actually believe what I'm doing. As an amateur I was learning, but as a professional I'm confident. Six weeks with Howard Eastman in Miami; now whatever you say about Eastman he's a top fighter. I know he got beat by Hopkins, but he's probably a little bit past his best but when you're standing in front of Eastman, trading off with him. Anyone in the world is gonna struggle but I've had hundred of rounds with him and I handle him every time. I'm not being bigheaded; I know when I've won a fight or when I've lost a round. I just float around with him and do what I want."

It all comes natural to Carl Froch.

(My thanks to Jason Frost at Hennessy Sports and Robert McCracken for their help in arranging this interview .)