

## The First Fight, April 2002

Written by Peter M. Carvill

Tuesday, 28 November 2006 19:00

---

I have a special place for Tony Dodson, the Liverpool super-middleweight who lost to Carl Froch. That place is the Everton Sports Park Centre, April 13, 2002.

Back then, I was new to boxing. A lot of eating and even more drinking during my first year at university had caused me to go over two hundred pounds; for perspective, nine months earlier, when I had first arrived as an undergraduate, I weighed, at most, one-sixty. But easy access to bad foods and cheap beer coupled with being away from home for the first time had led to a growth spurt in my width and, unfortunately, not in my height.

It was at this time, the end of my first year at university, that I met my first proper girlfriend, G. I'd started running every day around the local streets and doing some weight training on a self-assembled workout bench. But self-discipline was a problem and my weight yo-yoed as periods of disciplined exercise and wasteful sloth followed one another. With some direction from my then-girlfriend, I even joined a gym but managed, in three months, to go only a handful of times.

That Christmas, which was 2001, I made the decision to get into shape. I gave up alcohol and junk food. I went back to the gym, picked up my personal exercise program again and began this time to stick to it. This took up three days of the week but I still wanted something else. I'd thought about boxing on and off for a few years so I rang the A.B.A. to get the number of All Saint's Boxing Club in York. All Saint's told me that there were open adult sessions every Tues and Thurs from 7:00 to 8:30. I went and although it was hard, I stuck to it.

At first I was every word in the thesaurus under 'bad.' I had no stamina and didn't know how to throw a punch. My power and strength, despite the weight-training, was dismissible. I quickly became the gym's barometer of awfulness. I froze every time I sparred, unable to throw punches or even move around the ring due to my nervousness. I felt like I was dying during every run and after every exercise. Being a southpaw made things worse. I was both well-known and anonymous at the same time – so anonymous in fact that one of the trainers, Jack, for two years called me "Harry." Eventually, I got used to the name and answered to it; I was too polite to ever correct him.

Over time I managed to improve although, in honesty, improvement is relative. With the time spent at the gym plus the boxing, I went down quickly to one-seventy; the weight loss was so rapid that I developed stretch marks. I became able in every session to do twelve rounds on the heavy bags, twenty-five minutes of various muscle-breaking exercises and four rounds of sparring. I learned the punches – jab, cross, hook, uppercut – and developed a sweet southpaw jab that disguised my poor stamina. The jab was hard, fast, fired repeatedly and covered my other deficiencies (of which there were many) well. I learned to box orthodox although I always felt more comfortable leading with my right hand.

I wasn't perfect, not even good by a long chalk: the weightlifting ended up causing my elbow to

## The First Fight, April 2002

Written by Peter M. Carvill

Tuesday, 28 November 2006 19:00

---

hang permanently three inches away from the sides of my body and this, coupled with the fact that body shots would put me out of action, made me susceptible to... well, everyone. There's also no shame in admitting that I lack the mentality for fighting; I enjoyed the sport of it too much.

G. didn't understand my new obsession with boxing as she thought it was a stupid sport, a relentlessly and unforgivably damaging vocation to its participants. She worried about me when I sparred; she had a point.

It was while I was still improving that I went to watch live boxing in my pseudo-hometown of Liverpool. I say 'pseudo' because I was actually born outside Liverpool and have never lived within the boundaries of Merseyside which makes me, in scouse terms, a "woollyback." But when people, especially abroad, ask where I come from I always tell them that I'm from Liverpool because the correct answer requires a lot more explanation. This approach has its benefits: in Tokyo, a group of Japanese guys started chanting "Gerrard" on a subway train and supplied me and my friend with beer until our station.

At the time we bought the tickets, I had no idea who was to fight that night as back then, I didn't check the boxing news anywhere near as obsessively as I do now. In the days leading up to the fight, we learned something of the fights and the fighters.

Originally, Brian Magee had been scheduled to face Brian Barbosa but had withdrawn in the week leading up to fight and was replaced by Tony Dodson. Dodson, at the time, was 12-1-1 while Barbosa was 29-5. In the days before, the American was predicted a swift victory and the Englishman a painful defeat.

The fights were to be held in the Everton Sports Park Centre, a walk of some fifteen minutes from the city's central Lime Street Station. We sat a few rows up on the left of the sports hall and, as is usual with British boxing events, security was tight; we observed the scores of tough-looking men dressed in uniform canary-yellow who were stood in clusters around the ring, the entrances and exits to the main hall and the ringside area. To our left, at the far end of the hall, Sky Sports had set up their cameras and presenters for the evening.

In one of the first fights, Luke Simpkin (4-16-2) upset the applecart by outpointing Fola Okesola (2-0) over four rounds. Okesola, an Olympian at heavyweight in the 1996 Olympics (he was beaten by Nate Jones, one of the bronze medal winners in the second round of fights), had just one more fight after that night, seemingly retiring with a professional record of 3-1. Simpkin, apparently trained by his brother, fights on, having gone 4-8-2 since then, bringing his record to 9-24-3.

There were two other bouts of note that night before the two main events. The first, a fight between Michael Jones (14-0) and Mark Richards (7-2-2), was notable for events after the bell rather than anything that happened in the minute or so that it lasted. Jones, the future British light-middleweight champion, separated Richards from the parts of himself holding the rest of his body up within what appeared to be the first minute of the first round. Richards went down, stayed there and was counted out, remaining on the floor for a minute or two after the fight was

## The First Fight, April 2002

Written by Peter M. Carvill

Tuesday, 28 November 2006 19:00

---

declared over before regaining his feet and leaving the ring with the assistance of others. Richards, apart from allowing his face to connect with a Jones punch, had made an earlier mistake that night, although its consequences occurred as Richards left the ring. That night, the beaten man had opted for a pair of pink and purple trunks. They were neither overly flamboyant or ridiculously designed but they still caused one spectator close to me to remark as Richards left the ring, "He looks like a Teletubby!" This first remark went unheeded but its follow-up was delivered in a moment when the entire hall and its occupants had simultaneously fallen deathly silent.

"Nice one, Tinky-Winky!"

Richards stared into the crowd with dagger eyes, towards the direction of the cat-caller.

The voice sang out again. "Oh s\*\*\*! Don't you just hate it when that happens?"

The other fight of note on the undercard was a brutal, high-velocity fight between two featherweights who I believe were Jamie McKeever and Barry Hawthorne. It went far beyond just being a tough six-rounder as the two fighters battered the living daylights out of each other. There were no knockdowns in the fight and every round ebbed and flowed as the two fighters battled for control of the fight. Such was the effort of McKeever and Hawthorne that every non-partisan fan in the crowd wished for a draw. McKeever got the decision though. Later, one of them came and sat close to me. He was wearing sunglasses. When he turned his head and I saw him in profile, I saw that the swelling around his eyes touched the black plastic frames.

There were two main events on the card – Dodson-Barbosa and Moon-O'Malley. Alex Moon, a Liverpool taxi driver, was defending his Commonwealth Super-Featherweight title against the Australian Mick O'Malley. The fight was set for twelve rounds; Dodson-Barbosa, a non-title contest, was scheduled for eight.

I'd never heard of Dodson before that night but I heard plenty about him in the hall in the run-up to the main event from listening to the voices around me in the crowd. Dodson, I overheard, was a local celebrity whose tough choice of sport lay in contrast with his kind nature. According to the voices around me, he visited a lot of sick children in hospital.

I can't remember for Dodson-Barbosa which of the fighters came out first but it's no word of a lie that the reception meted out to Dodson's entrance far outstripped that of Barbosa's. Barbosa looked mean on his way out, surprisingly bulky for the weight division he was fighting in and he had the look on his face of a man who just wanted to throw the one big punch that would end it, pick up his money and get on a plane as soon as he could. If Magee had upset Barbosa by pulling out, Barbosa made no secret of it in his expression. Whether it was Magee or not, Barbosa looked pissed off.

Not that it bothered Dodson much.

Five years later, the fight to me is now a blur. I remember few specifics apart from the fact that Dodson fought the best fight of his life on that card in Liverpool. Barbosa looked as if he was

## The First Fight, April 2002

Written by Peter M. Carvill

Tuesday, 28 November 2006 19:00

---

going to be felled throughout the second half of the fight. Barbosa landed a low blow at one point and Dodson was forced to crouch, waiting for the pain to subside, in a neutral corner. The crowd further turned against the American who looked so lost that he looked as if might have soon stumbled across a gingerbread house. As it was, the rest also benefited Barbosa who held on until the end, heard the decision go against him and then left the hall while Dodson celebrated the night he could have licked any man in the house.

We watched a few rounds of the Moon-O'Malley fight, had a drink away from the main hall and then, like everyone else, made out way out into the Liverpool night. Moon won by TKO in the eighth but I wasn't there; I heard the result much, much later.

When I got back to G. a day or so later, she asked me what it was like and I described it all to her. She looked at me, smiled and said, "I want to go to a boxing match now."

After that, both Dodson and Barbosa vanished from my radar. Barbosa returned to the US where he had a quick victory over Ronald Boddie but failed the post-fight drugs test and the result was changed to a No Contest. He has not fought since.

Dodson remained off my radar despite him winning the British Super-Middleweight title. I became aware of him again when Carl Froch appeared on TV and a showdown between the two seemed inevitable. With the form Dodson showed at the Everton Park, it was a close match but a spate of injuries and a car crash to Dodson forced the fight to be cancelled three times.

I've seen Dodson fight in the flesh once more since that night in Liverpool. This time, it was in Manchester on the undercard of Jamie Moore-David Walker. Dodson struggled to outpoint Varuzhan Davtyan, a journeyman he'd already won and lost to, a journeyman who had taken the fight on the same day after the original opponent fell through. Dodson looked fortunate to win the four-rounder.

When the Froch-Dodson fight was made, I knew instinctively and logically that Froch would end it quickly with Dodson gone in five rounds or less. The injuries, the time out of the ring and the struggle in Manchester convinced me that the improving Froch would now be too much for the Liverpool Warrior.

I was right. But I still have the Everton Sports Park Centre, 13th April 2002. Tony Dodson was the Liverpool Warrior, king of all he surveyed that night and I was there.