

Scott of the anarchic

Written by David Payne

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Scott Harrison, he of the piercing stare and brooding temperament, last night withdrew from Saturday's featherweight title contest against unbeaten Nicky Cook, the headline bout of the ironically tagged 'Last Chance Saloon' promotion. The full stop on a traumatic year the fight represented for the Scotsman immediately becoming a question mark over his entire future as a professional fighter.

Reports revealed not only had Harrison failed a weight check last weekend, he'd been unwilling and unable to make a catch-weight, proposed by Frank Warren, of 132 pounds to preserve the contest. A full six pounds above the original limit.

Few modern day fighters exude the same unflinching sullen demeanour as Harrison. Sightings of a Harrison smile are so rare a wildlife protection order is pending. His icy blue stare often reducing room temperatures by a degree or two, answers usually short and bristling with contempt, body language always aloof, detached.

The cursory press commitments, essential to the health and wealth of this troubled promotion, sat uneasily with his current frame of mind. Public confrontation with Dagenham's Nicky Cook during this week's conference call deepened his mood and revealed an uncommon display of emotion. Harrison is not a man for hollow words, cliché or 'playing the game' and the share of front pages he's appeared on this year does little to warm that outlook. In retrospect, perhaps the heat of Harrison's outburst the latest public distress signal that all was not as it seemed.

In an era of style over substance, surrounded by pampered and preened contemporaries and against a landscape of personal problems, Harrison increasingly looks out of place as an elite sportsman, a curmudgeonly Scottish thistle amongst prettier blooms.

On Saturday night that 'thistle' was meant to enter the ring for the first time in 13 months. Still a world title-holder, thanks only to the patience of the World Boxing Organisation for whom he has twice been champion. The sanctioning body's pragmatism encouraged by their relationship with Harrison's promoter, Frank Warren, who single handily legitimised them in the 1990's. Whatever their motives, the WBO demonstrated uncharacteristic humanity in their treatment of the 29-year-old as he rescinded on mandatory obligations throughout the year -- ultimately allowing a 180-day extension to defend the title. Harrison, acutely aware that this fight was his last chance to maintain custody of the belt within that extension, has now relinquished before he was stripped.

Since his last victory, against Australian Nedal Hussein, Harrison has been besieged by drink related misdemeanours culminating in a five and half-week stay in a Spanish jail for offences reported to include assaulting a police officer. Combined with a catalogue of incidents in his native Scotland, for which he still faces trial, Harrison could have been forgiven for looking forward to the 2006 rendition of Old Langsyne. Sadly, imprisonment in 2007 remains a painful possibility and following this latest withdrawal, his whole boxing career is also in doubt.

Clearly, beyond the dour expression lies a troubled man yet to bottom out on his present downward spiral. This despite earlier public concessions that the demons of drink and depression forced the cancellation of a May defense versus Gary St. Clair and his subsequent refuge at the Priory Clinic. He wasn't a resident long. Alcoholism and depression are accustomed to going the championship rounds.

Long-term manager Frank Maloney found himself ditched and Harrison, charges still circling, began training away from Scotland in a bid to escape the temptation and associations his profile creates. Harrison's weakness for drink stirs self-destructive inclination and lead toward activity and social circles that threaten to impede if not curtail his career. Speaking to The Guardian's excellent Donald McRae, a candid Harrison conceded; "If you're an athlete then drink gets you into places you shouldnae be going, but when you're young and a world champion with money burning in your pocket you can lose track. I first became WBO champion four years ago and it's taken me that long to accept you cannae go out to normal pubs and live a normal life. You can be talking boxing and someone will walk in and make a comment and 10 seconds later you're in the thick of it. I know it's not clever but I've learned the hard way. Prison was the final lesson."

Although far from perfect mental preparation for a bout of this significance, it wasn't hard to surmise a spell of incarceration, far removed from the demons that landed him there, could have proved infinitely preferable to another fall from the wagon. Public introspection, obligated by Harrison's profile and renown rather than a natural desire for self-analysis suggested he agreed; "Prison was ideal in terms of training preparations, but not having the freedom to walk out of the gates at any time was an absolute nightmare," he told BBC Radio. How insincere those words seem now? Despite the Spartan conditions training down to 9 stone is a physiological miracle his body can no longer perform.

Distractions from the punishing training Harrison required to remove the ring rust and as important, squeeze his lightweight frame into the 126-pound limit, could never have been ideal. However, combining the survival of the dark places he found himself this year and weight of experience at this elevated level left the champion in no doubt Cook couldn't possibly defeat him on Saturday. Riled by the lack of respect Cook demonstrated Harrison snarled: "You're just a typical big mouth and you don't bother me at all. I'll shove that phone up your arse. I'll see you on 9th December." That was as recent as this week, believed to be after Frank Warren had been forewarned Harrison wouldn't make the weight.

Despite the adage 'that there is no such thing as bad publicity,' Frank Warren would have been pleased at the demonstration of needle between the two, nothing like old-fashioned bad-feeling to sell tickets, but emerging from the debris is the implied suggestion that conference call was little more than a charade for a fight already likely to be cancelled. Preceded by the loss of the trade fight between Peter Oboh and Tony Oakey and the withdrawal of Matt Skelton the promotion looked increasingly fragile. Was the news suppressed to maintain ticket sales?

Whether Harrison turns the misjudgements and tribulations of this past year to his advantage remains to be seen; for a man of few words he's been forced to talk more than ever recently -- on Saturday he had the opportunity to return to what he does best, get away from the microphone and begin using his fists for the betterment, rather than detriment of his career. An

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opportunity, like the belt, now relinquished.

It seems the denial, precursor to his summer admission of a drink problem, has spilled over into his professional career. From a troubled starting point it seems Harrison was never going to make the weight and, if that is the true, it poses the unfortunate question, how early did the BBBofC, Harrison and promoters Sports Network know that was the case?

ITV, fans and opponent Nicky Cook would presumably love to know the answer.