

Micky Duff, Harry Levene and Jarvis Astaire never stood a chance. If a .22 bullet from a Luger pistol wasn't going to stop an upstart British promoter named Frank Warren from rising to the top on his side of the ropes what were they going to do about it?

Sunday the 56-year-old bookmaker's son, who today is the most powerful promoter in British boxing after years of battling his peers for that supremacy, will receive a well-deserved but unexpected honor when he is inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in Canastota, N.Y. alongside one of his favorite fighters, Larry Holmes, as well as Eddie Perkins, rival Danish promoter Mogens Palle and two award-winning journalists, Dave Anderson and Joe Koizumi. It is something Warren never thought a moment about 33 years ago, when he first began promoting unlicensed tough man contests for his second cousin in tiny halls that were dark, dank and no place for a dandy. In those days the only hall he thought about was the one he was in and the only plan he had was the hustle to survive.

Lenny McLean is perhaps the best known unlicensed "boxer" ever to fight in the UK, a reputation he won with his fists but also with the aid of his then 23-year-old cousin, who managed his career. As is so often the case in this sport of raging egos however the two soon fell out and Warren eventually broke with his cousin but never could shake free from boxing, a sport whose addictive quality can be ravenous and often ruinous. While the former proved true for Warren, the latter did not despite the best efforts of Astaire, Duff and even the British Boxing Board of Control.

"I didn't know anything about managing or promoting," Warren said from London. "I did it for nothing but I got bitten by the bug. You get the bug and you can't shake it.

"Certainly it's a commercial thing but it's also competitive pride involved when you guide somebody through the most dangerous of sports and succeed. It's quite a good feeling, really.

"After a few years promoting unlicensed fights in places with low ceilings the British Boxing Board asked me why didn't I take out a license. I decided I would. I felt like I was finally being invited inside the tent."

As he would soon learn, not really.

In those days boxing in Britain was a near monopoly with four promoters controlling most of the dates, the country's two television channels, London's only two boxing venues and, for all intents and purposes, the Boxing Board itself. Warren, being a fighter as well as a promoter, was undaunted by the circumstances he found however.

"Jarvis, Micky and two others were really a cartel," Warren recalled almost fondly. "They had the Boxing Board tied up. The rules said you could only run every 28 days so they divided all the dates and had the two arenas locked up. They had a monopoly on the BBC broadcasts, ITV

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wasn't interested in boxing and the Boxing Board didn't allow live boxing on television. There had to be a 24-hour delay because they said live boxing on TV hurt the gate. That was rubbish but it made it difficult for anyone new to compete. They were really trying to shut me down."

Being 28, chipper and a guy with a gambler's constitution, Warren tried anyway, running his first show on Dec. 1, 1980 in a ballroom at the Bloomsbury hotel in London. His choice of opponents spoke to his promotional nature when he imported two American light heavyweights, Otis Gordon and Jerry Martin, in an attempt to rekindle the memory among British fight fans of a bloody match between Americans Leotis Martin and Thad Spencer at the Royal Albert Hall 12 years earlier that had been the kind of knockdown, drag out brawl fans don't soon forget.

In this case, they did.

"I couldn't get TV and on the night the place was half empty," Warren recalled. "I lost about \$25,000. That was a lot of money at the time. I'd gotten bogged down by the Boxing Board's rules. After that, I became an expert on their rules and regulations. It was an expensive lesson but I didn't do what a lot of guys do. I didn't walk away and I've done fairly well since."

Fairly well? So well that he's handled many of the biggest names to come out of the UK – Nigel Benn, Frank Bruno, Steve Collins, Colin McMillian, Steve Robinson, Prince Naseem Hamed, Ricky Hatton and at the moment Joe Calzaghe and today's hottest British prospect, Olympic silver medalist Amir Khan. He's also promoted or co-promoted some of the sports biggest attractions with George Foreman, Mike Tyson, Marco Antonio Barrera, Kostya Tszyu and Azumah Nelson among them, along the way amassing a fleet of luxury cars, homes in Hertfordshire, Belgravia and Portugal and a consistent stable of fighters that have made him the major name in British boxing and given him a reputation for uncanny and often risk-averse matchmaking.

In a sense, Warren has become his own boxing cartel after beating back and slipping around the man who preceded him at the top, the legendary Micky Duff. Warren not only battled his promotional rivals but also the Boxing Board, who he successfully sued not long after he'd gotten his promoter's license.

Warren claimed their policies were effectively a form of restraint of trade, creating a fistic monopoly that would have made Don King proud. Warren won but didn't stop there. He went after the Board again over the ruling that prevented live TV broadcasts of fights and won again. Soon after he introduced live televised boxing to Britain, convincing ITV to partner with him.

At one point Warren did 42 TV dates in one year on ITV and later would do the country's first pay-per-view fight on SKY television. With those shows a new era was born in British boxing and Frank Warren was on the cutting edge of it.

He's rightly proud of having survived for so long because it hasn't been easy. Rival promoters (including his one-time partner Don King, who he lost \$9 million trying to sue when their dealings went sour), the Boxing Board's arcane rules, near bankruptcy and the shifting tide of television's interest in boxing were not his only obstacles. Once there was even a serious case

of lead poisoning...of a sort.

On Nov. 30, 1989, as Warren came out of a car on his way to the theatre, he was shot in the chest at point blank range by a still unknown masked gunman. The bullet barely missed his heart and while the surgeons were saving his life they also discovered a small tumor and removed it as well. Frank Warren got lucky even when he got shot.

Warren's first world champion, Terry Marsh, was accused of the murder attempt, the claim being he had fallen out with Warren over money Marsh claims he was owed. Marsh was acquitted and life went on, literally and figuratively, but the shooting cost Warren the financing for a deal he'd been working on to resurrect the London Arena, which he finally sold in 1996.

As his reputation grew, Warren began to land bigger name fighters and staged some of the most memorable matches in recent British boxing history. Among them were epic battles between Benn, Chris Eubank and Steve Collins as well as the night Bruno because one of the few Brits to win the heavyweight title. But with those glorious moments also came tragedy as well when Benn battered Gerald McClellan into a near-vegetative state. Today Benn is a preacher, McClellan is blind and locked in a wheel chair back home in Illinois and Frank Warren is still promoting, despite the ups and downs.

He encountered both sides of them in one man when he got involved with Mike Tyson eight years ago, twice bringing him to the UK. The first time was both a fistic and financial success when Tyson bombed out Julius Francis in Manchester's M.E.N. Arena. The second, against Lou Savarese in Glasgow, was a nightmare.

"When I brought Tyson over the first time it was all good," Warren recalled. "The second time it was like Jekyll and Hyde. I picked him up at the airport and his eyes were on fire. I remember him sitting in the corner of the car and he seemed like a cornered animal. The whole deal was a disaster."

Disaster has many faces of course and Warren saw most of them that month. Tyson threatened to leave the country several times, causing the fight to be cancelled and then re-scheduled, leaving the 40,000 tickets Warren had on sale in limbo. Worse, the British tabloids wrote Tyson and Warren had gotten into an argument that escalated into either a fist fight that resulted in a broken jaw and broken ribs for Warren or ended with a threat from Tyson that he was going to throw Warren out a hotel window.

A day later a meek Tyson was asked by a reporter if he'd hit Warren. He replied, "No, sir. I like Frank Warren."

He was then asked if he'd threatened to throw him out a window.

"No, sir," Tyson said.

When he was asked "Why not?" Tyson replied cryptically, "Because there's a long line ahead of him."

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Whatever happened, Warren recalled that Tyson had gone on a shopping spree in which he'd bought "around \$2 million to \$3 million worth of jewelry and he thought I should pay for it.

"I told him, 'Why would I buy you jewelry? I don't want to sleep with you,'" Warren recalled with a laugh. "He's nuts but he's very, very cunning. He plays it like he's misunderstood. He knows what he's doing. He's a professional victim."

The night before the fight Tyson fled to the airport, threatening to fly home. He didn't, instead knocking out Savarese in 38 seconds, flattening referee John Coyne in the process and then uttering scandalous post-fight remarks that will probably follow him to his grave when he threatened then heavyweight champion Lennox Lewis by saying he would "rip out his heart and feed it to him" and "eat his children."

This was all too much even for Warren, who like most boxing promoters had by then developed a well-practiced ability to overlook a fighter's indiscretions and rival promoters' dirty dealings if there was money to be made by ignoring them. A promoter who ends up in the Hall of Fame may get there for many reasons but they all come with the same accoutrement – skin as thick as a rhino's. Yet Mike Tyson was simply not worth Frank Warren's time any more.

"I said at the time, 'Contrary to what people think, money isn't everything,'" Warren recalled.

He never promoted Tyson again and claims the story of his being assaulted was tabloid fantasy, a point he says he tried to make clear publicly by entering the ring after the fight chewing gum and blowing bubbles as a way to show the fitness of his jaw. Yet while he has strong feelings about Tyson he has darker ones for Tyson's manager, Shelly Finkel.

"Finkel deserves a lot of the blame for what happened to Tyson," Warren said. "The amount of problems he caused when I was promoting Tyson was unbelievable. He told him only what he wanted to hear. It was despicable.

"I sued Don King and lost \$9 million doing it and he lost a friend in me over Hamed but we've done business since. People fall out in all walks of life, not just boxing, and still do business. But if there is one person I hope never to do business with again it's Shelly Finkel."

Over the years, Warren has had long-term television deals with SKY, ITV and now Setanta, a new cable company he lured into a three-year deal on the strength of Calzaghe's drawing power and young Khan's potential. While some have criticized his seeming obsession with safety-first matchmaking, most of the time things have worked out for Warren and for his fighters.

Because of that, Warren bristles at the charge he is feint-of-heart when it comes to matching his fighters, pointing out that his way of doing business turned Hamed, Calzaghe and Hatton all into international phenomenons and many of his other fighters into well-paid world champions. In the end, isn't that the idea?

"People say I'm a bit careful with them but I try to make the right matches at the right time,"

## Frank Warren, Hall of Famer

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Warren said. "I think I've developed a good eye for talent and know how to bring it along. Overall, I think I'm good at that."

As often happens, after the hard work of developing that talent was done Benn, Hamed and Hatton, among others, left him, the latter seeming to have wounded him deeply with his going because Warren felt he did a particularly masterful job in luring Kostya Tszyu, then the biggest name in the 140-pound division, to Hatton's home town of Manchester three years ago to stage one of the biggest fights in British history.

That fight made Hatton a cult hero and Warren a lot of money. But it was also the beginning of the end of their long relationship.

"Micky Duff used to say if you want loyalty buy a dog," Warren recalled. "I should have remembered that. I walked away from Hamed when I could have stayed because I didn't like some of what I was seeing with him not training but Ricky was different. He left a bad taste in my mouth because I did a good job with him.

"I think what happened, like with so many things in boxing, he started to listen to a lot of people. (Rival promoter) Dennis Hobson promised him the world. He started saying he only got \$2.4 million to challenge Kostya Tszyu. He forgot I paid Kostya \$7 million to leave his country and come to his hometown to fight.

"That was very disappointing. I'd never had a single cross word with Ricky. Now he's working on his fourth promoter in four years. Maybe I wasn't so bad. But that's life, isn't it?"

Certainly it's a promoter's life. In the case of Frank Warren, a Hall of Fame promoter who turned out to be as much of a fighter as the men he's represented.

"It's nice to get some recognition for something other than being a bastard," Warren said. "It means a lot to be in there with Don King and Bob Arum, who have staged so many brilliant shows. I'm quite pleased to have played a part in the careers of so many great fighters.

"You have your disappointments in this business. You have your difficult moments. But if there were no down moments you wouldn't be able to appreciate the good. The thing is, even if you're broke, you must never let them know you're skinned. Life is all about ups and downs, isn't it?"