

Something was wrong. He saw the right hand coming, but didn't see it leave. The punch just grazed the side of his head, but it left a lasting impression on Darren Sutherland.

It was supposed to be a routine amateur contest against a visiting boxer from a Russian 'B' team, but boxing isn't a habitual sport. It transpired that the Russian's thumb sunk into Sutherland's left eye, violently pushing back the eyeball and breaking the bone behind the optic.

The Irishman was immediately rushed to the nearest hospital in Dublin, deep in the throes of agony.

Darren Sutherland was never one for routines. Born in Dublin, he spent the first seven years of his life in London and the next four in his father's native homeland of St. Vincent in the Caribbean, before moving back to Ireland. But soon after, Darren was setting off on a new voyage.

Sutherland grew up watching the middleweight wars between Chris Eubank, Nigel Benn and Michael Watson, and at 15 began training at his local club in Blanchardstown, Dublin.

Having ventured to the set of a minor movie featuring Brendan Ingle, Sutherland approached the Sheffield-based trainer and was ultimately talked into moving to England to pursue boxing.

Sutherland's charismatic personality and observable confidence convinced Ingle that the teenager had the necessary attitude to become a prizefighter.

"I just wanted to tell Brendan about how much I liked Naseem Hamed [who Ingle was training at the time]. But even before he saw my skills, he saw the potential in me," recalls Sutherland. "He loved the whole idea of me being a black Irishman."

After spending a week at the gym, Sutherland was certain that he could do the sport full-time and made the permanent move to Sheffield, where he was immersed in boxing, training twice a day, six days a week. Ingle continually told Sutherland that he could win a world championship with ease and wanted Darren to forego an extensive amateur career in favor of a swift transition to the paid ranks.

But the more time Sutherland spent around the sport, the more he realized the seriousness of the endeavour. Ingle's gym was buzzing when Sutherland first joined, but three years later Hamed had departed and his heralded replacement, Ryan Rhodes, was brutally knocked out by an obscure journeyman.

TSS Prospect Watch: Darren Sutherland

Written by Ronan Keenan
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Sutherland has no qualms admitting that the beating he saw inflicted on his gym-mate dulled his own desire for the sport.

“I ended up hating boxing,” he reveals with frankness. “I remember seeing Ryan Rhodes get knocked out and thinking: ‘What makes me any different?’”

While Ingle was working on Sutherland’s pro debut, the teenager grew homesick and returned to Ireland, disillusioned with the sport and questioning his self-confidence that once seemed so resolute.

“I was due to turn pro and I got cold feet,” he says. “I would have come back earlier, but I didn’t want to come back a failure. I was embarrassed.”

On arriving back in Dublin, Sutherland tried to enrol in his former high school, but the principal refused to admit the 20-year-old, claiming the school’s reputation would be damaged if it welcomed back a failed boxer.

Left with a broken dream and without a diploma, Sutherland was forced to probe his character and eventually summoned remnants of his old self-assurance. He returned to amateur boxing and managed to convince the principal of a faraway school to accept him as a student.

“Me and my mother went over to the school and the principal was very hesitant at first,” recounts Sutherland. “But when he saw that I wanted to go, he was open to the idea. He said if I wanted to go back to school I wasn’t going to be treated any different.”

Even though some of Sutherland’s classmates were 15, the Dubliner brushed off the detractors and got on with his studies. To pay for a car, Sutherland got a job as a doorman at a bar, but an aversion to fighting outside the ring soon saw him adopt less intense employment: working as a dancer in a nightclub.

After completing high school, Sutherland then secured a place on a sports science course at Dublin City University. While his studies were progressing, Sutherland’s exploits inside the ring became more enjoyable; his attitude to the sport devoid of the pressure that dominated his teenage years.

But the smooth nature of his new life was drastically derailed in the summer of 2006 when the glancing punch from a Russian boxer severed through the muscles in his left eye. Not only were his boxing ambitions seemingly in jeopardy, but also his vision.

“I was taken straight to hospital where they saw that the muscle that moves the eye upwards was damaged so I couldn’t move the eye. The hospital put like a plate in it and it’s still there - it’s not made of metal, but another substance to keep the eye strong,” he reveals. “It was an awful time for me. And never mind boxing, the doctors weren’t sure if the injury would ever clear up.

“I couldn’t leave the house because of the double vision and I was embarrassed as it looked as if I was now cross-eyed.”

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As his sight gradually recovered over a six-month period, a highly-skilled boxer called Darren O'Neill took Sutherland's place on the Irish team and enjoyed considerable success at international tournaments. A disheartened Sutherland deemed himself unable to reclaim his former status and contemplated abandoning the sport for good.

"The turning point came when I went for a run on Christmas Eve, with all these demons in my head. I just thought: 'Screw this, let's have it! I owe nobody anything. I do this for myself.' From that point on, I had no doubts. I knew I'd beat him and I knew I'd get to [the 2008 Olympics in] Beijing."

Ultimately Sutherland made it to China and captured a bronze medal in the middleweight division. His aggressive, power-punching style wasn't always conducive with the amateur computerized system, but winning gold at the Olympics was never his major ambition.

Before jetting off for Beijing, Sutherland admitted: "To be honest the Olympics wasn't part of my dream. I was attracted to boxing for the professional game. And my dream still is to be the first black Irishman to become world champion."

That aspiration came a small step closer last Thursday when he made his pro debut, demolishing Georgi Iliev in less than a round in the familiar surroundings of the sports arena at Dublin City University.

Now under the guidance of Frank Maloney, Sutherland will be fighting in the UK and Ireland on the Sky Sports network, and the British promoter claims he hasn't been this excited about a fighter since a young Lennox Lewis came knocking on his door.

"I know I have invested wisely in Darren," says Maloney of his middleweight charge. "I have managed four world champions including Lennox Lewis and this guy has a jab like Lewis."

On Thursday, the muscular Sutherland demonstrated unusual composure for a debutant, weathering an initial onslaught from Iliev before finding the range with his heavy jab. A series of hard lefts opened a nasty cut below Iliev's left eye and busted his nose, while methodical combinations of hard hooks to body and head sapped the will from the Bulgarian.

After 2:44 of the opening frame the referee wisely called a halt to the one-sided beating.

As always, Sutherland spoke with sincerity in his post-fight interviews, secure in the knowledge that diligence and determination outweigh excessive verbal trumpeting.

"It was strange boxing with no vest or headguard, but this is the pro game," he said. "I took some silly jabs which I shouldn't have but my trainer Brian Lawrence will sort that out in time. Next time I'll do better."