As the subway train stops at Manhattan's Penn Station a swarm of baseball fans, decked out in Mets jerseys and caps, eagerly board and turn the carriage into a heaving capsule of blue and white.

Yet one passenger stands apart. His all-black attire coupled with dark skin and shaven head cuts an intimidating figure.

A Mets fan turns around to take another glimpse of the dark standout, and in the process of assessing the character he is met by a question.

"Who won the game?" asks the black man.

"The Mets. One to nothing," answers the fan, who purses his lips in hesitation before realizing a familiarity with the rugged features of the inquisitor's face. "You were a fighter, right?" he offers.

A response is not immediately forthcoming as the man raises his arms to grab the handrail above his head. He then flashes a wide smile before proclaiming, "I'm Iran Barkley. The five-time champion of the world."

"Oh yeah! Was it Hagler you beat for a title?" responds the fan.

"Tommy Hearns. I'm the only man to beat him twice," replies Barkley. "Marvin Hagler, [Ray] Leonard, they didn't want to fight me. I could have beaten any of them. It was the promoters that took my titles from me."

Iran doesn't turn down an opportunity to lament his frustration with the commerce of boxing. He garnered an estimated $5 million during his prizefighting career, but now lives a more meager existence in the same South Bronx housing projects he grew up in. He puts much of the blame on the sport's powerbrokers. But there are plans to gain retribution. Barkley figures to force the top promoters to pay him what he feels is deserved by resuming his boxing career and bludgeoning the sport's biggest names.

"I'm training every day in Gleason's [Gym in Brooklyn]. I'm looking real good and I'm just waiting for someone to sign me," he claims.

Barkley may exaggerate some of his pugilistic accomplishments [his official boxing record suggests he won recognized world titles on three occasions] but his face does little to perjure his former profession.

"People recognize me from time to time," he says. "They know the look on my face."

While his skin is remarkably smooth for a 49-year-old with 63 professional fights on his record,

his features show distortion; the cartilage of his nose has lost its curvature and a thick mass of tissue overhangs the left eye.

The brunt of Barkley's eye damage can be traced back to the most famous night of his career: a 1988 challenge for Hearns' middleweight world title in Las Vegas. Hearns, already a three-weight champion, was regarded as one of the most violent punchers of his generation, a wiry specimen that could extract maximum leverage from his long frame.

For three rounds he abused Barkley with chopping right-hands, bloodying the unfavored New Yorker, who appeared to be little more than a brave brawler. Blinded by a steady flow of claret and piercing blows, Barkley could only offer token resistance, seemingly extending the beating for the crowd's pleasure before the customary Vegas climax of seeing a man concussed by one of the game's great combatants.

Yet Barkley was able to look past all the blood and long odds to gyrate his body into a motion that generated a furious right-handed strike which scrambled Hearns's equilibrium. The champion regained his footing but a follow-up assault left him clinging to the lower stands of the ring ropes having relinquished his grasp on the World Boxing Council's 160-pound championship.

Barkley defied expectations to rise above his athletic limitations and wrest glory in Ring magazine's upset of the year. His journey through the fightgame would involve further triumphs, with Iran joining a select club of three-weight world titlists, but the troughs came fast and deep.

Barkley announced his retirement in 1999, concluding with a résumé of 43-19-1 (27 knockouts) but closed out his career fighting for paltry paydays in obscure venues, while winning just one of his final nine outings.

After his last official contest he allowed his weight to balloon nearly a hundred pounds above the fighting limit of his prime. But today he appears leaner than in recent years, probably scaling close to 220. His speech is clear and he makes prolonged, direct eye contact when asserting his desire to compete against the best fighters of the current era.

"My body has had a rest. I'm ready to go," he maintains. "I want to fight at cruiserweight [200 pounds]. I hear Bernard Hopkins wants an opponent. Why not fight me?"

A bout against Hopkins, one of the pound-for-pound elite, would never gain approval with a credible athletic commission, and it's probable that Barkley would be denied a licence regardless of his competition.

"In Iran's mind he can beat anyone out there now," says Bruce Silverglade, owner of Gleason's Gym. "He trains here every day. I don't recommend that he fight again. He realizes he needs to get in shape if he wants to get licensed to fight, but I don't believe anyone will licence him in New York. But that won't stop him from fighting. Someone will licence him somewhere."

Various media outlets, including the Times of London, reported that in 2006 Barkley engaged in

an unsanctioned heavyweight bout in Aruba against a young prospect for $7,000. Barkley purportedly knocked his opponent unconscious in the second round. Yet when questioned about the event today, Barkley insists that the fight took place over ten years ago, upholding that he has not fought since 1999.

While it may seem that he is simply confusing the fight's date, a more likely explanation is that he wants to disregard the Aruba debacle, thus distancing himself from the desperate pug that would fight anywhere for a paycheck.

Barkley's aggressive boxing style routinely saw him absorb heavy blows in exchange for his own slashing hooks and uppercuts, lending credence to his moniker "The Blade". In his prime he fought with such relentlessness that sportswriter Pat Putnam described him as "an angry brawler who jumps in an opponent's face and hangs on the way a Doberman hangs on to a piece of red meat".

His fearsome reputation was enhanced by a furious march to the ring, while sporting a dark hooded robe and menacing scowl, all against the backdrop of past membership with the notoriously vicious Black Spades street gang. Such prominent factors combined to cultivate an image as a belligerent street thug.

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"I hope you're in shape," Barkley says as we exit the train at 138th street station. "We got to run if we want to make the next train to the Bronx."

As Barkley hurries from one side of the platform to the next he exudes glimpses of his infamous ringwalk. With his head down and shoulders slumped forward he breaks into a hasty trot towards the train.

"I like taking the subway," he says as the intense heat inside the carriage spawns beads of sweat on his shiny forehead. "I don't need a car. I've got everything I need here. I used to have a lot of things, like apartments and cars. But the money went away. You have to pay your trainer, pay your manager, then pay Uncle Sam [taxes]. I had two divorces and four kids. After that, there's not much left."

Barkley at first seems philosophical about his current predicament, but the more he talks about the business of boxing, the more agitated he becomes.

"My managers weren't good," he insists, jabbing the air with his finger to emphasize an annoyance with the subject. "One of them didn't even know the business. I had to teach him about it. I taught him everything he knew. Promoters only gave me enough money to pacify me. I got half a million dollars for my big fights. Guys I beat got millions more. When I start fighting again my old promoters are gonna have to pay me big money. Top Rank better pay me millions if they want to sign me."

Top Rank, headed by Bob Arum, promoted Barkley through the high points of his career, but

today the fighter has little affection for his former handlers. He claims the organization has ignored him in recent times, and failed to look after him when he won his world titles.

Barkley is aggrieved that the promoters failed to give him the customary easy first title defence and multi-million paychecks that other marquee champions received. “They put me in tough fights all the time and didn’t pay me what I deserved,” he says. Barkley’s succeeding fight after defeating Hearns was against the great Roberto Duran, a fight Iran lost by a close points verdict.

But much of his recent disdain for Top Rank comes from comments made by Arum in a 2007 piece in the New York Times.

“Iran never made Ray Leonard or Tommy Hearns-type money, but we did put him in a number of big-money fights,” Arum told the Times. “He just kept giving all of it back to the casinos, and that’s the real story. We tried to stop him, but there was just no talking to Iran at that time.”

“They said I gambled my money away, but that’s not true,” counters Barkley. “I didn’t gamble that much. I take some of the blame, but not all of it.”

Barkley never possessed matinée idol looks and didn’t attempt to be the type of sweet-natured sports star that middle America could take to their hearts. Consequently, he was not a fighter that major promotional outfits would invest millions of dollars to market. Yet Top Rank did take Barkley from obscurity and matched him with Hearns, even if it was as a sacrificial opponent.

“Before I signed with Top Rank, Arum told me that if I sign with them he’d get me a world title shot,” recalls Barkley before pausing.

“I suppose he did what he said he’d do at the time,” he adds.

The loss to Duran, in an exhausting battle widely recognized as the best fight of 1989, was followed by defeats to Michael Nunn and Nigel Benn; encounters in which Barkley believes outside forces conspired against him. Subsequent surgery to remove a cataract and repair a retinal tear in his left eye ate into Barkley’s finances, and when he returned to the ring he was written-off as a viable contender, leaving him to fight for four-figure purses against obscure opposition.

But his career was resurrected in 1992 when Top Rank provided him with an opportunity for redemption against super middleweight world titlist Darrin Van Horn. Barkley duly grasped the break with a second round knockout victory, which was followed by another title-winning performance in a rematch versus Hearns. Yet the most lucrative bout of Barkley’s career, versus James Toney, also represented its zenith when he earned a million dollars for receiving a systematic beatdown that ended his standing as a high-calibre prizefighter.

Twenty-five more official contests followed for rather pitiable monetary rewards in American states with lax athletic commissions and distant international locations such as Australia and Finland.

Regardless of his latter form, boxing analysts generally remember Barkley as an exciting fighter that was on the cusp of elite status.

“Iran Barkley was somewhere in between being real skilled and a brawler,” says broadcaster Al Bernstein, who provided television commentary for Barkley’s biggest bouts. “He just wanted to get opponents out of there. But he was not great defensively and overall he was just short of greatness. But if he was fighting today he’d definitely have a world championship.”

When Bernstein alludes to Barkley fighting today, he is referencing Iran Barkley in his athletic prime, not the middle-aged version.

As Barkley continues to talk of a comeback, his motive for resuming his career sways from regaining recognition as a champion to reclaiming the vast sums of money he lost. Even phone bills pose a problem these days as late payments resulted in his service being temporarily cut off last month. In recent years he has had short stints as a car salesman and a shop assistant, but suggestions he should earn a living away from the ring are sharply rebutted.

“My job is fighting. If you’re in shape and you feel good, you can do your job. They can’t say I’m too old. That’s like me saying someone is too old to be a doctor,” he contends, as the increasing volume of his voice draws attention from passengers on the train. “You don’t fill a job application to be in this sport. You have to be blessed to be able to do this sport. God has to give you a talent to do it.”

Barkley also refutes the idea of being a trainer to promising boxers. His pride will not allow him to play the supporting role to a fighter that may never achieve excellence.

“I’m not going to wait around every day for some guy who might not even make it,” he says.

Efforts for establishing proper support structures for former fighters have met with little success, with retirees like Barkley left without a pension or medical insurance. But Barkley has recently been fuelled with a new optimism.

“With [Barack] Obama as president, things will get done,” he predicts. “John McCain was trying to pass measures for ex-fighters years ago, but he’ll have more success with Obama in power.”

While the system that regulates boxing can partially be blamed for Barkley’s current financial woes, the pride and single-mindedness that saw him withstand Hearns’ onslaughts have never diminished, and prevent him from settling into a subordinate role in society. He spent countless hours in the gym soaking up punches while being told that “quitting is for losers”. A man cannot be expected to rebuff decades of such conditioning.

He promises to soldier on, expressing a yearning to once again rise above his surroundings. But it is not just the security and limousines that he misses; he pines for the chance to once again help out his community.

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"This is where it all happens," pronounces Barkley, breaking into a broad grin as he climbs the steps from the subway toward the daylight of the South Bronx.

"I've been here in the Patterson projects nearly all my life. I lived in Hackensack [New Jersey] for a while [and] I was in the Middle East when my Dad [a military serviceman] was stationed there [in Iran]. That's how I got my name. But I didn't stay there too long, not long enough to learn Arabic," he quips, letting out a distinctive chuckle as he walks along 143rd street.

The Patterson housing projects are alive with activity as local youths play basketball and the older residents take advantage of the warm sunshine. There is a heavy police presence on the streets, giving credence to Barkley's labelling of the neighbourhood as "Gaddafi-land"; referencing the Libyan terrorist Mummar al-Gaddafi in relation to the violent street crime that persists in the New York borough.

"Just last night a young guy was shot in the face here. The kids are obsessed with guns these days," he laments, shaking his head in bewilderment at the hostility.

Despite the threat of violence in the area, Barkley seems peaceful in his familiar environs, jovially greeting the numerous residents that salute him as "champ".

He draws attention to a faded mural on the wall. "That's me right there," he remarks, while unwrapping a piece of Starburst candy and admiring his dulled portrait. "They painted that for me in the 1980s. When I get the money I'm gonna get it touched up, and this time they'll put my belts in the picture."

A lot has changed since that mural provided an accurate depiction of Barkley. In the mid-nineties Barkley's father and two brothers died of terminal illnesses, while in 2000 he lost his mother, Georgia, who Barkley attributes as his "inspiration that put him on the right track with God." He now lives with his sister in a housing block directly opposite the apartment in which he grew up.

Standing beside Barkley's dulled mural is Bimbo, a 60-year-old life-long resident of the Patterson projects. Bimbo was involved in the planning of a youth event to be held in the neighbourhood on this evening, but a lack of resources meant the occasion could not go ahead.

"Back in the day Iran would have paid for something like this," recalls Bimbo. "But today there's no community spirit, no one to keep the community together."

"I used to make these [events] happen," says Barkley, looking despondently at a pack of squirrels rummaging through an over-flowing garbage can. "We would have had a tent, music, everything right here. I gave a lot to the community, but not everyone remembers when you do good things."

But many people within the boxing industry still recognize Barkley's social awareness.

“He’d give you the shirt off his back,” says Bruce Silverglade. “He has a heart of gold. I don’t know where his money went, but he always helped people out. Even today he’s always willing to talk at hostels and to kids.”

“Iran is a glass half full type of guy,” adds Bernstein. “That’s what has sustained him through his difficulties.”

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As he leaves the projects Barkley realizes he has forgotten something. He turns around and approaches a man at the street corner.

“Hey, do you know the lottery numbers?” inquires Barkley.

“Not good, they ended in 666,” is the reply.

“Damn. Still, it’s worth doing [the numbers],” Barkley explains. “For just a few dollars I can get lucky and win thousands.”

Barkley’s financial success expired a long time ago. Fighting will not bring it back. And deep down he must know that. As the day progresses his rhetoric about resuming a fighting career eases. His lambasting of promoters and challenges to current fighters dissipate from conversation. Instead he seems happier to talk about his plans for the weekend: to go to church and then into the city for some dancing.

“I like going to church. Some people have nasty spirits and that can rub off on you sometimes,” he admits. “I’m not a selfish person. I still pray on my hands and knees giving thanks for what I’ve got.”

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