



Heavyweight of responsibility

Peter Michael recovers from his pounding to write about a charity event that brings direction to young offenders

"But to see two men smashed to the ground, smeared with gore, stunned, senseless, the breath beaten out of their bodies; and then, before you recover from the shock, to see them rise up with new strength and courage, stand steady to inflict or receive mortal offence, and rush upon each other, 'like two clouds over the Caspian', this is the most astonishing thing of all — this is the high and heroic state of man!"

The Fight, William Hazlitt's celebrated essay, first appeared in the *New Monthly Magazine*, February, 1822.

With the deafening chant of "Pedro", "Pedro", "Pedro" rolling in thunderous waves around the stadium, I found myself being swept through the surging crowd and into centre ring.

"Stay close, stay tight," said my trainer and second Tony Trimble, a former world-ranked kickboxing champion and fight night veteran.

Bobbing and weaving in the narrowed tunnel of my vision, he too, seemed consumed by the electric energy that reverberated from the rafters and showered in meteoric sparks across the great hall.

"Keep comin'. Keep comin'," Tony urged.

Faces loomed out of the darkness at me; friends offering support; strangers clapping me on the back; others screaming blue murder.

"Smash him, smash him, smash him," bellowed one mate with all the conviction he could muster as if that brimming emotion might infuse my blood and muscle and empower me to greatness.

Tony shouldered his way through the group gathered in my corner, sprang up to the ring, peeled back the ropes and motioned for me to make my entrance.

"Go. Get in."

Hustled through the small gap, I stood erect and beheld the arena with much the same awe as a gladiator emerging into the light of the great coliseum of ancient Rome.

Legendary sportswriter Hugh McIlvanney once observed there are mainly two sorts of fight fan. "Most spectators at boxing shows are at worst sadists vicariously satisfying a blood lust, or at best benighted souls who somehow feel they can acquire virility by osmosis in a fight crowd," McIlvanney wrote. "It is the one sport in which the fundamental aim of a contestant is to render his immediate opponent unconscious. [But] for some of us boxing, with all its thousand ambiguities, offers in its best moments a thrill as pure and basic as a heartbeat."

Standing in the swirling vortex of all that light and noise and energy, I distinct-



ly felt that heartbeat. It stopped time. And then it flushed my veins cold with a toxic mix of adrenalin, fear and fortitude.

Suddenly the focus of my ambition for several months, after countless hours of gym and roadwork and some brutal sparring sessions, was about to be distilled and clarified into six minutes of warfare. The showbiz savvy announcer re-ignited the rumbling of the masses as he reeled off my less-than-impressive statistics: "With zero fights, no wins and no losses. Weighing in at 220 pounds, to call him the underdog is an understatement. Laddees and geeentlemen, welcome to centre ring, our heavyweight contender for the fight you have all been waiting for: Pedro 'The Pleasure and the Pain' Miguel."

Across the sweat-and-blood covered canvas stood my opponent, Police Boxing Club heavyweight campaigner Danny "Shaka Zulu" Lawley, with 12 fights, eight wins and four losses, also 220 pounds.

The eyes of the South African southpaw seemed to bulge with adrenalin and venom as they glinted with the portent of pain to come. My only instinct was to shake out a few punches, bounce on the floor, and glare back.

Quickly it began.

Following some perfunctory checks, the referee walked briskly to the centre of the square held his hand in a downward chopping motion and yelled: "Fight".

From the first, I flew at my adversary like a tiger, struck five blows in as many seconds, three first, and then following him as he staggered back, two more, right and left.

Within 30 seconds my reserves of power and strength had been sucked through

the floor — fatal victim of uncontrolled nervous energy.

We circled, and clashed, fists flailed into my face and body.

Mounting an assault, I unloaded a consecutive combination of lefts and rights to the head, ribs, hooks, uppercuts.

The crowd roared.

And then everything stopped. The big copper crashed a well-timed left cross — his power punch — flush on to the button of my jaw.

With the same destructive power as a wrecking ball slamming into a derelict building, it rocked me into blackness.

My only sensation was the numbness

suddenly flooding the length of my body, my only thought: "I hope I can regain consciousness before he hits me with another one of those".

Four months earlier . . .

Like some missive from a bygone era calling me to arms, the e-mail arrived in the in-box challenging me to "get it on" in the name of charity. "There is a smoker in the Football Club courtesy of the British Chamber of Commerce in October and this would be a great headline fight," wrote police counter-terrorism expert and "Operation Breakthrough" founder Superintendent Barry "B.J." Smith.

"It would also give you about four

months to get in shape. You will appreciate that you would be unable to use our gym as it would be distracting for the both of you to train together.

"You could probably weave this into a very interesting story for the paper — maybe a personal diary of your build-up training together with a blow-by-blow [literally] account of the fight."

I agreed.

My exposure to the great work that both Danny and B.J. do with young offenders had made me a big fan of both men and their charity.

Both Superintendents, avid boxers, dedicate many off-duty hours to saving hard-case youngsters from the worst excesses of the street.

There has been much discussion about taking young triad members and street toughs and equipping them with an arsenal of punching firepower.

But B.J. has a different view: "As you are fully aware boxing takes a lot of internal discipline to keep training and get match fit. It also takes a lot of personal courage to get into the ring and fight someone on an equal footing. The sport is governed by very strict rules and regulations and so we are not teaching boys to be better street fighters but simply to be better people through the medium of a noble sport."

"I doubt we would have the same impact with table tennis."

Funds raised from these black-tie boxing smoker events goes towards sending troubled lads on Outward Bound camps (\$5,000 a head) where "they learn about expanding their mind and taking responsibility for their actions", said B.J.

His words about the noble art of pugilism had struck a deep chord.

There is something very humbling about the fight game. The more you train for it the less you want to engage in some meaningless clash in a bar over a spilt drink or careless gaffe.

Entering the ring is probably the most direct way a man can plumb the depths of his inner steel.

Heroism, bravery, audacity and sheer pluck of the human spirit; these are all familiar themes that resonate and have their home in this noble art.

One excerpt I uncovered in the William Hazlitt essay *The Fight*, celebrated as one of the greatest works of the sport, embodies this spirit:

"I never saw anything more terrific than his aspect just before he fell. All traces of life, of natural expression, were gone from him."

"His face was like a human skull, a death's head, spouting blood. The eyes were filled with blood, the nose streamed with blood, the mouth gaped blood. He was not like an actual man, but like a preternatural, spectral appearance, or like one of the figures in Dante's *Inferno*. Yet he fought on after this for several rounds."

Hazlitt continued: "Magnanimity, my dear Tom, and bravery, should be inseparable. Modesty should accompany the fancy as its shadow. The best men were always the best behaved."

Fight night . . .

Shaking the black fog of darkness from my head, I managed to slip away from the violent onslaught.

He stalked me like a big cat and again connected with a couple of big lefts.

By the second round his experience and technical prowess — combined with my apparent willingness to allow him to keep pounding that wrecking ball into my head — had taken its toll.

After one encounter, I stumbled backwards over some sloppy footwork to face a count of eight.

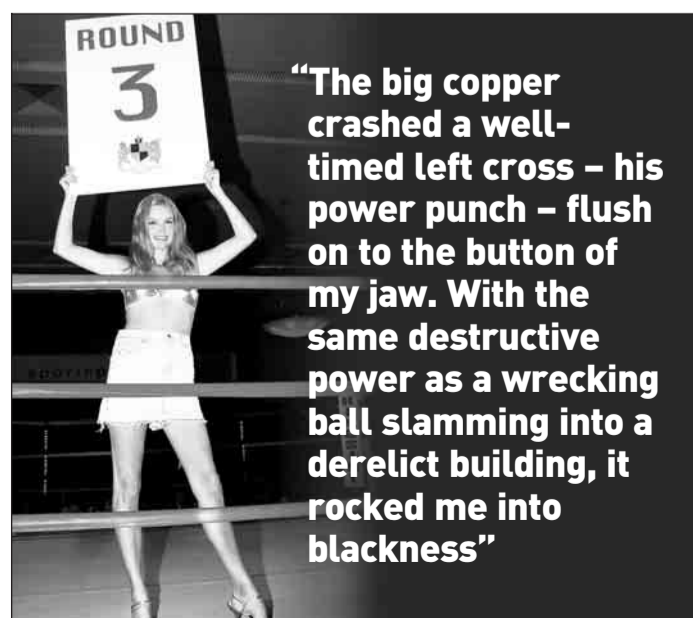
Tony, a man of few words, was yelling encouragement from the corner: "Get up. Get him. Go."

I did. And I kept punching until the final bell.

In a fitting tribute to a champion, Danny, 43, announced his retirement immediately after the fight; won the bout by unanimous decision; and was awarded best fighter of the night.

As for me, when asked if I will do it again, my only answer is: "Let me get back to you after I can chew again."

● The Boxing Smoker, sponsored by the Henley Group, featuring a six bout card on October 9 raised more than \$250,000 for Operation Breakthrough.



Peter Michael is rocked back on the ropes by his opponent Danny Lawley (top) as the well-dressed crowd roars encouragement (above left). Two young boxers come to grips in an earlier bout (above right) and a glamour girl struts her stuff. Photos: Steve Cray

"The big copper crashed a well-timed left cross — his power punch — flush on to the button of my jaw. With the same destructive power as a wrecking ball slamming into a derelict building, it rocked me into blackness"