

# SECONDS\* OUT



THE RECORDS OF JOHNNY KELLY BOOTH BOXER

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN smujifilms NINE ROUNDS OF READING



In his 70's, my Uncle John began to write a memoir of his days as a booth boxer. Before his death, he typed hundreds of foolscap pages, recounting events and fights from his boyhood to the early years of the Great Depression. (It seems likely that, for the detail, he was referring to a programmes and press cuttings, now lost.) As a bantamweight fighter, he was only 5' 3". But by the time he was 20 years old, he'd boxed around 100 bouts in the boxing booths and halls of Scotland: a number of fights over just a couple of years that would boggle the mind of most modern fight fans.

Like so many sportsmen of the period, Johnny's career was cut short by the war of 1939, as well as, perhaps, by his own cussedness. The following text is based on Johnny's type-script. However, rather than list all the fights in their proper order, we have chosen to focus on a few key events, sometimes conflating a number of bouts, to give a brief but authentic picture of his life as a booth boxer.

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FIGHTING FOR BUSINESS

It's possible, though unlikely, that someone may punch you in the face today in the course of your employment. If it happened, it would rightly be considered a serious 'industrial relations' incident. Yet how easily we adopt the language of aggression in our profession: we talk of assaulting markets; of brands battling for shelf space; of client conflicts and price wars; of fighting for business.

But the challenges we face are usually non-physical. The following pages tell the story of a different time: when being punched in the face to earn your pay was often preferable to other employment options.

What can we learn from the era of booth boxing? We can remember how lucky we are. But we can also learn that technical skill, courage – and the determination to 'be your own person' – can help you come through the most difficult times unscathed.

So when you meet a 'tough customer'; when strength of opinion threatens to overwhelm quality of judgement; when everyone thinks you're down and out; remember the wee man. And, metaphorically speaking, get your straight left going.



ROUND ONE

## SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS

It's 1916. Among the great powers of Europe, 'the war to end all wars' is raging. But, in households across Scotland, it's the war against hunger and want the ordinary folk are waging. And me? I'm a new mouth to feed, and welcome too. For Mum and Dad have no money worries, in the sense that they have no money to worry about.

Dad is fortunate not to have to go to the front. He's more immediately engaged in taking on Old King Coal – who, let it be said, takes few prisoners either. But what does a wean in a small Lanarkshire mining village know of the great struggles of the time? In the main, life is cheery in the Kelly household and boyhood passes in a blur.

When schooldays come round there are so many interests for me. But few of them are

in the classroom: great games of hunch-cuddy-hunch; the thrill of being asked by bigger boys to play in goal; getting the odd black eye and (more rarely) dishing one out. There must have been some learning involved, though. For when the time comes to change schools, they send me to the academy. But the joy of the daily train journey is tempered by lessons too serious for my liking.

Learning in English is bad enough, but in French! Matters are made worse by the fact that the Irishman teaching me French seems to like his cane a lot. Well, at least a lot more than he likes me.

After so many whackings, I have a stroke of genius. "The Glasgow-to-Edinburgh road is being built," I tell my pals. "Why go to school at all, when there must be a need for bright boys to make tea or run errands?" The steamroller makes a huge impression on me, as does the gaffer's tackety boot swiftly applied to my nether region. One of the fiercest men I ever saw, I blame him still for stunting my growth.

Better days lay ahead: mooching around the big stores to stay warm and dry, watching out for the supervisors who would fling you out. But, strangely enough, I can't recall ever being tempted to steal anything. It's just truancy, but still enough to get you into hot water at home – not to mention expelled from school – as I discover when the schoolboard officer pays Mum and Dad a visit.

After the high jinks, we're all for the high jump: sent back to the lower school, with our tails between our legs and our new found notoriety not getting us very far at all.

This come-down is as nothing, though, to the gathering economic gloom. It's 1929. The Wall Street Crash and the Depression hit everyone where it hurts most: in the stomach. The local pits are worked out, they say, and unemployment becomes a stark reality.

Dad and my older brother – who is now fourteen and a working man – are forced to look for work in the pits of Fife. And so the family gathers up its bits and pieces and follows.

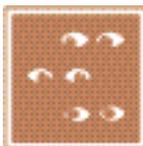


There's accommodation to be had, of sorts. But not the sort we're used to: back to back houses, just a room and kitchen and so gloomy from the outside. But, inside, once the fire's lit and there's a kettle on the hob, it's more like home.

But finding pals is a different thing. As is usual in a small village, the first thing to be done is prove your fighting abilities. So, it's not long before a local bully is taking the mickey out of my slow, West of Scotland speech: a signal for a donnybrook in which David once more defeats Goliath. And that's that, I think.

Until I turn away and he hits me with an iron plate they use for bolting pitrails together. I never see it coming and, with a split head, I need medical attention. But not before I make sure that the doctor will have two patients when he arrives...

I never go back to school. Our family, now numbering eight children, finds a more comfortable home. At fourteen years of age, I join my father and brother working down the pits, hewing coal.



ROUND TWO

## THE PITS

In the village, there's a burning bing close to the houses. So close, in fact, that the sheer weight has lifted the nearest houses off their foundations and they need huge wooden supports to stay standing. There's a terrible smell too: sulphur, I think. But we're lucky. Our new house is bigger, on higher ground, so there's no pit in sight and the air is clean.

But my heart sinks in the cage. You drop like a stone into the stinking, dripping, darkness of the mine, and are soaked to the skin by the time you reach the bottom. It's eight hours in four-and-a-half foot workings – crawling along the crowded pit face with the roof rumbling like it might fall in – till you see daylight again.

One day, the roof does 'sit down', and Dad and I are trapped for a couple of hours.

But even when all three seams are worked and the mine is as big as a ballroom, voices echo spookily way back into the workings and you shiver to be on your own.

The work is hard. The men are hard too, but big-hearted, showing a great deal of care for the new recruit. Many, including my father, are over six feet tall and tower over me in the cage. But, down in the depths, my lack of height is probably a big bonus.

Sure, the village's sulphurous smell hits you like a blow on the chin, but life isn't all grim. The Jolly Beggars Social Club – who have no premises but the street corner –



is involved in all village life: from politics to pigeons. Not forgetting Dances, shirt-soaking marathons in which every villager revels from 10 at night till 5.30 next morning. The pipe band is taken seriously too. So seriously, in fact, that they have their own big practice hut which is used for meetings, concerts and plays.

And then there is boxing, my favourite sport. The village boasts a boxing club under the instruction of gifted amateur and real gent, Willie Laing. So it's out with the sandshoes for me as I join the ranks of would-be fighting men.

The first thing Willie teaches me is the importance of a good left hand, which I put to good use in an amateur competition. After three hard-fought bouts, I win the big prize. And I mean the big prize. It's a size 16 shirt – too big even for my Dad – and I vow then and there that only a mug fights for anything but money. And I mean to be no mug.

Of course, in the back of my mind, boxing strikes me as a way out of the pits. So, I begin to box professionally – or at least for money – on the winter circuit, to the point where I enjoy a win over a vastly experienced lad from Dundee, Mickey Malone. He's a real whirlwind with amazing stamina who fronts for Stewart's Boxing Booth. But, by now, I've worked out that a fast puncher is often a light puncher – withdrawing the fist before it really lands – and I catch him bonny with my good left hook.



ROUND THREE

## PRIZE FIGHTING

I also catch the attention of Pat McGreechin, famous in boxing circles as the manager of British Champion, Tommy Milligan. In a village where everyone turns out to see two cats fight, you can imagine the stir created by the arrival of some fellow with a fat cigar and a flash car.

He offers me a bout of six three-minute rounds at Edinburgh's Eldorado stadium. The pay is £3. It's more than a week's wages for a night's work and I reckon it's my big break. Bottom of the bill maybe, but from there the only way is up.

I'm matched with a Glasgow boy, Teddy McGurn, who gives me a very hard time before yours truly comes out top on points.

On this showing, however, I'm offered another bout where I get the fright of my life.

The reason I'm fighting is to earn money. But, in the days of deep Depression, so is everyone else. And, due to harsh means-testing, many boxers are fighting under assumed names. Young Snowball is my opponent – a name, I assume, chosen ironically by a coloured boy. On the night, I glance up to see a coloured boy walk in, so big he has to stoop to get in the door. I shoot off to complain about the weight disparity. "That's Manuel Abrew," laughs the promoter. "He's not fighting you – he's just beaten Britain's best heavyweight."

My fears are allayed, but I must still be shaken. Because Young Snowball (aka Tod White from Falkirk) knocks me down in the first round and I have a hard time recovering for a points win. But I learn an important lesson: never let anything get to you before a fight.

Next I travel to Coatbridge for a rough 10-round contest where I get the nod against Jim Collins. The only good thing about that night is the money and – after a freezing round trip bus ride – the warmth of my welcome home: the blow-by-blow account round the cosy fire helps me forget the bruises.

By now, I'm determined to quit the pits. I'm getting a bit of a reputation, as well as interesting offers from 'managers'. The deal is this: they will get me lots of fights in

return for 25% of any purse up to £100; over £100 they take 50%. I reply that, if they're offering to take 50% of the punches too, it's a deal. There are no takers, so I'm on my own, which is how I like it. I'm out of the pits. I'm eighteen. I've got money in my pockets and all the world in front of me. And it's all up to me.

There's plenty of fistic work: Glasgow has three licensed boxing venues. Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee have venues. In fact, there are shows each week during the winter in most big cities. And so I become a full-time professional, bantamweight boxer.

My first bout as a professional is with the as yet unbeaten Boy Hughes, a real prospect with a lovely left hand. But I master him with the drill Willie Laing taught me: let him lead to me, knock his lead over my left shoulder with my right, then punch him up 'the tripes'. Soon, he's gasping for breath and I prove too strong for him.

A few more wins and I'm matched again with Mickey Malone. He's still punching fast, but he lands a few that night and I'm lucky to finish on my feet.

But the performance is a crowd pleaser, and I'm asked for a return match. Against my instincts, I agree.

Maybe my very first win against him was beginner's luck. This time, he stops me early with a cut eye. I realise I'm on the bottom rung of a very slippery ladder, and maybe

not ready for this class of fighter. Time to recover and re-think. I need three weeks off for the eye to heal, and am lucky to have very understanding parents who give me all the help and encouragement I need. When the eye improves, I get stuck into the training, determined to go for gold, in every sense of the word.



#### ROUND FOUR

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### THE BOOTHS

Pre-war Scotland is fighting mad. In the winter, there are licensed boxing halls, and in the summer, there are the travelling boxing booths.

It may be hard to believe but you can see some of the best boxers in the world in the booths. British Champion Jake Kilrain, Scottish Champion Freddie Tennant, even the legendary World Champion Benny Lynch, all box in the booths. It's good money, and it's good practice to spar against so many different styles.

The booths generally travel with a fair, visiting towns on market days. For instance, Kirkcaldy Links boasts the longest fair in the world. Stretching three miles along the promenade, it features three boxing booths, all charging sixpence admission and all

playing to full houses. Over a few days as a professional boxer, you could box up to 48 rounds against some of the toughest professional fighters around and earn up to £20 – a small fortune.

As a member of the public, if you're brave enough or desperate enough, you can box a few rounds with one of the booth's professional fighters and earn a fiver just by staying on your feet.

My first experience of the booths as a freelance professional gets off to a bad start. I'm ushered into the dressing room, of all places, under the ring. A paraffin lamp hangs from a cross beam and I'm crawling on my hands and knees. It's just like being back at the coal face. My opponent Ginger Lawson – a handy featherweight from Newcastle – is already there. As we change, a previous contestant is carried in K.O.d. On coming round, he starts looking for his pick and shovel, thinking he's down the mines too.

My fight works out a bit better. A points victory, and I'm asked to fight a 10-rounder the next night against one of the booth's own working professionals, Paul Jones, which goes even better. I stop him early with a cut eye.

Jim Paterson, the booth owner, is less delighted with the loss of his boy. I retrieve the situation by offering to stand in on a pay-per-fight basis. I earn a further £20, but have no need to go looking for sleeping pills at bedtime.

It's summer, and there's a boxing 'drought' in the big halls, when a man in a big car causes some excitement in our village. He's looking for me, and he's not a 'manager'. He's Charlie Woods, booth proprietor, offering me regular work as a booth professional.

The pay and free lodgings are not bad, but right now two things overcome any doubts:

- a) I don't want to go back down the mines;
- b) I want to gain more experience in the boxing game.

And so I catch up with the Woods Brothers' Boxing Booth, currently pitched at Alloa, where Charlie greets me like a long lost Woods Brother.

Like many things in life, the free lodgings are not all they're cracked up to be. In answer to my enquiry, Charlie shows me to the back of an old car. "Here you are," he says before explaining that he is in the process of building a two-bed trailer. My scepticism is short-lived, for Charlie is indeed a qualified coach builder. Before the night is over a two-wheeled trailer is ready for tenancy with some furniture and two folding beds.

As I have heard tales of over-crowding, this seems too good to be true. And it is. I soon realise that this abode has to be shared with all the boxers who can't get home on fight nights, and that can be plenty. Try sleeping six to a folding bed and, believe me, the wee one always gets the worst of it.

But my biggest surprise is in a shop window. A poster proclaims the arrival in town of Johnny Kelly, The Boxing Tornado! Ten rounds, no less, with a boy I'd boxed before and beaten. I can't recall his name. Maybe because, early in the bout, he lands a dirty big swing on the chin of The Boxing Tornado and makes all the lights in the place go out. When the lamps come back on, I'm sitting in the corner with my corner man yelling in my ear that the bell for the next round has already gone. In the following rounds, I manage to steer clear of trouble, finally get the old left going, and stop him in the last.

This is a painful business, so it's just as well I'm skint, payday is a week away and the firm gives no subs. Or I'm catching the first bus home, for sure.

A busy week lies ahead of me: a ten-rounder, two six-rounders, and an exhibition match. There's training too. But, with the prospect of boxing any of four working nights in the week, we develop fitness fast. And, with so much dependent on speed of foot, the young boxer's mind soon turns to more leisurely pursuits. Like dancing.

The boxing itself isn't the only work. I discover the show people are no layabouts either. There's hard graft pitching the booth, but match-making is a job in itself. It takes some skill, a lot of travelling, and even more diplomacy – while handing out its fair share of disappointments. These boys become very hard in a game which has no room for softies.

But, undoubtedly, the boss of the outfit is Mrs Woods. She has a hard, uncompromising

manner in business, and a heart of gold in person. Every decision needs her approval, and opening time arrives hitch-free. She collects the money, in a satchel, and may even do a bit of 'bouncing' herself. If she thinks you're the worse for drink, there's no way in.

That's probably why there's so little crowd trouble. The fans can be as vociferous in their support of their own particular hero as they like. They want their money's worth in the good old fashioned red stuff, and the Woods ensure they get it. The noise fills the booth, but all the violence stays in the ring.





ROUND FIVE

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## BOBBY DOBBS

The booth begins travelling and I share the trailer with a real colourful character. He's over six feet tall, but he can't weigh more than 10 stone. When he sleeps, his feet stick out of the trailer window, waiting to be tickled by passers-by. His skin may be black, but he's the whitest man I ever meet.

Bobby Dobbs becomes my instructor, and for the first time I feel there's someone in my corner who really knows what he's talking about. He's a most gifted boxer, graced with a body that tapers in all the right places. In the ring, he has a deceptive way of gliding round, letting opponents think there is nothing to be afraid of. He makes their punches miss by a fraction, then unleashes a devastating volley of punches from all angles. Under other circumstances, I'm sure, he would have reached the top.

I'm more like novice material: strong shoulders, a good left hook, a straight left still to be developed and a right hand fit only for wiping my nose; but still the makings of a half-decent fighting man.

Bobby highlights two related weaknesses in my boxing. The first is my inability to evade punches, as witnessed by the fact that my face is beginning to spread a bit. The second is that I'm not using the ring properly. To avoid blows, the natural tendency is to get well out of harm's way. But this careless use of energy means I'm burning myself out before a contest is half-finished, and a tired man is an easier target.

In his own boxing, Bobby never moves a foot to avoid a punch when an inch will do, and he tells me the story of the great World Champion Matt Griffo. He says this man could stand on an ordinary handkerchief and, swaying from the hips, defy any man to hit him. If Griffo is the model for Bobby Dobbs, that's good enough for me.

In my next contest, a challenger from the crowd catches the gloves: 10 shillings if he goes three rounds. He's a big fellow, and straight away he tries to take me out with a great big swinging right. On Bobby's advice, I simply step in with a tidy left hook. Down he goes, K.O.d with my first punch. Mighty pleased, but slightly surprised, I ask Bobby what happened. He explains that my opponent knocked himself out: when a mug throws all his body weight forward, all you have to do is hit the target.

Bobby isn't just generous with his advice. When we visit my village, the kids have never seen a coloured man before and start throwing small stones at him. He laughs, takes out all the change in his pockets and tosses it among them. After the ensuing scramble, he's their hero, and rightly so.

One time in Edinburgh, Dobbys boxes the Scottish Middleweight Champion Jackie McLeod. He wins on points, then corners me to a points victory over a local lad. At the end of the night, we're paid out in silver and then it's a long slog home by ferry, bus and shank's pony. It's 3am when we get there, but it seems half the village is waiting up to hear how we got on.

The fights are re-fought in the telling, then, boy, do the boyos sleep soundly that night. In the morning, Dobbys places his bag of silver on the kitchen table and says to my mother, "This is for you, Mum." And he's not kidding.

It's the winter of 1934 and these are hard times all round. Back in the ring, there are plenty of good boys waiting to do battle with the likes of us.

But this 'catching the gloves' is catching on. Now there's a host of would-bees – and a heap of never-will-bees – hoping to scrape a few bob by standing toe-to-toe for a few rounds with professional fighting men.



## ROUND SIX

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### CATCHING THE GLOVES

One thing I learn early is that the booths are not necessarily about boxing as a sport. They're about boxing as a business. There is no room for bigheads. So, one night you might top the bill, next night you're doing the journeyman bouts.

You always give 100%, but you lose when you think you've won. And you win when you think you've lost. And the action and the controversy leave the crowd in a frenzy, ensuring a full house for future nights and return bouts.

Showbiz is what the showmen understand, and maybe that's how the 'catching the gloves' starts: as a you-and-me; a gee.

It's not unknown for a professional boxer who isn't a regular with the booth to be

planted in the crowd. When the showman introduces his boxers and their respective titles, this guy starts muttering to nearby spectators how he doesn't think the booth boxers look much like champions. At which point, invariably, the crowd start calling out that there's some boy here who fancies his chances. The showman turns on the guy, who backs down until, with the crowd's encouragement, he accepts the challenge and steps into the ring.

Sometimes, of course, there are well-known boxers among the crowd who just 'happen' to be on holiday in the town when the booth arrives. Sometimes, there are just real hard amateur fighters, like Ralph and Peter Townsley, who follow the gaffs.

Lads like these can dish it out and take it too.

But as Dobbsy says, if you can handle these boys, the mugs will give you no problems. 'The mugs', as we call them, tend to be either very huge or very hungry. Not surprisingly, they often opt to fight the wee guy at the end of the line. That's me and I make it my policy to try and take them out early.

Easier said than done, of course, for a natural counter-puncher. But you're forced to take the fight to the other man for two reasons.

Firstly, I know from bitter experience that one wild swinging punch can change the course of a contest. One Saturday, I find out what this job is really all about.

Due to a call-off, I'm pitted against a giant of a man. He's throwing huge haymakers and lands a few, before I deck him. He gets up slowly at the count of six. He's on his knees and his eyes are level with mine. To tell you the truth, he's got me scared till I knock him down for the second time and he doesn't get up.

That's the truth of it. Regardless of height or weight – or anything else – the show must go on. And the booth's working men always seem to get the worst of it.

One time in Kirkwall I face a big guy who models his body on Tarzan. I feel like running home to mother, but it's too late. Thankfully, he may look like Johnny Weissmuller, but he boxes like John L Sullivan: stiff and muscle-bound with his fists well out in front. He's just inviting the left hook, which I duly despatch. In reply, he throws a roundhouse, all the way from his backside towards my head, which I parry easily. I step in to finish the job, but he brings up his knee, and lays me out with a searing pain below the belt.

I'm doubled up in agony, but he's not disqualified. Crazy as it seems, I'm given a 10-minute break before the bout, like the show, must go on. Afterwards, the doctor orders a month's rest. The booth gives me a week off and then it's back to the boxing.

What's the second reason why it's crucial to put away the challengers? What else? Money. The Woods may like to see the cash come rolling in, but they don't like paying out to the 'glove-catchers'.

At Rathven, Dobbsy is tasked with demolishing Big Jock (aka The Highland Carnera\*) inside six rounds – or cost the firm a fiver. But Jock has a three-stone advantage, and Dobbsy hits him with everything, even puts him down twice in the last round, but fails to nail him. The Highland Carnera ends the bout on his feet. With the partisan local crowd going crazy, Charlie Woods reluctantly hands over a £5 note. Which would be a good end to the story, except Big Jock is a sucker for a game of cards and Charlie Woods skins the entire fiver back off him that night at the booth's gambling school.

Nonetheless, some 'glove catchers' do pick up the prize. One such is Isaac, the Iron Man of the Orkneys. What he doesn't know about boxing can fill a book. But, as many can testify, nobody can soak up punishment like this man – or be so pleasant about it.

First off, on accepting a challenge, he apologises to you for his lack of knowledge of the fistic art. Then he disconcerts you by saying you can hit him as hard as you like, and he won't mind. Then, after the bout, when you've just about killed yourself trying to knock him out, he thanks you for going easy on him!

I eventually come to like boxing big bad fighters. It's just the big good fighters that worry me. Too often, though, in these desperate times, we're simply faced with poor starving souls who have to get the price of a meal somewhere. Up against the well-fed, well-conditioned men of the booths, they usually end up adding a sore face to their empty stomachs.

But, there is something more amiss for me. Is it just homesickness? Do I realise that very few promising boxers really travel with the shows? (They just use the booths as a practical, economical way to achieve peak fitness and to spar against a range of styles.) Or is it just that the severity of my new profession finally begins to dawn on me?

\*Reference to Primo Carnera, Italian heavyweight, World Champion in 1933-34. Nicknamed 'The Ambling Alp', he had recently boxed exhibition bouts in Scotland. Famously knocked out by Joe Louis in 1935.



ROUND SEVEN

## THE CAULIFLOWER INDUSTRY

Between 1934 and 1935, in the booths and the halls, I box maybe over 100 bouts, and never go to bed with anything less than a shirt full of sore bones. I get the classic ‘cauliflower’ ears and a broken nose. (The ears are obvious. But no-one – not even me, and I must get punched on it plenty – notices that my nose is broken till after the war.)

Life’s a great big game when you’re young, and recovering from sore blows doesn’t take long when the bloom of youth is strong. And yet, as I box in the booths, I see too many men who have gambled their wits in the ring and lost.

From the first, I’m aware of the dangers to my health as well as to my handsome-ness. In an early bout, I face a big sailor, fresh from foreign parts with a host of Far Eastern

championships under his belt. I'm beating him easily, but he keeps hitting me on the chest. Later that night, I'm in terrible pain everytime I breathe: not very comforting for a budding champion, and I feel forced to call on the local doctor.

As I lie on the examination couch, I tell the doctor that I think I may be having a heart attack. He gives me a thorough once-over, but bursts out laughing when I tell him about my boxing exploits. This kindly over-worked man explains that I have a perfectly sound heart – just a bit of muscle bruising. We have a nice little chat, and he tells me he'll be on-call any time I need him. Before I leave, I ask about the punch-drunkenness I see in older boxers. The only remedy, he suggests, is not getting punched in the first place.

So I try to make it part of my strategy to take as few blows as possible: developing an acute sense of counter-punching. The aim – to make opponents more wary of throwing punches and to minimise the force of any blows which do land – isn't always achieved, but I manage to come out of each bout with my faculties more-or-less intact.

But not every case is sad. Billy Andrews laughs when I land a punch. "Hee-hee-hee!" I hit him again. "Hee-hee-hee!" He is driving me crazy till my corner man explains that Billy has nerve damage that makes him giggle every time he's hit.

You're aware of the blows during a fight, but when the real punch that takes you out comes along, there's not much you can do about it. There's only pain and misery and

hurt pride. I love reading about great fighting men who say they have never been on the floor. But, in my opinion, the true measure of a man is his ability to pick himself up, gather his scattered wits and take the necessary action to win the fight. It's not always possible, but it's surprising how often it's done.

And so, sick of the booths, I pick up my gloves once more for a tilt at The Big Time.





ROUND EIGHT

SECONDS OUT

Cuts to the eye are my most common injury. But daft as it may sound, I don't feel my opponents set out deliberately to hurt me. The occasional, accidental clash of heads may be unavoidable, but the respect and sportsmanship among fighters is incredible: two guys spend the best part of an hour battering one another, then spend ten minutes disentangling themselves from an embrace that, under other circumstances, could get you arrested.

I have great sympathy with fighters forced to retire due to eye trouble (usually caused by dirty gloves or unwashed towels infecting cuts). And so I turn out for a charity bout at the Adelphi for a blinded boxer. I'm matched with Scottish Featherweight Champion Jim McInally. But I have to admit I don't treat the opportunity as seriously as I should.

Maybe it's a hangover from all the booth boxing: a contest, no matter how important, is viewed as just another fight and decisions lose their importance. And rather than win at all costs, your aim is to take as little punishment as possible.

In any case, the Champion gets the nod on points, and I can't say I feel cheated. But a lot of fight fans think I've done enough to win and, once more, the percentage men are after me.

As before I explain that, as I'm taking all the blows, I feel it's only fair that I take all the money. This is my sole conviction: to determine my own fate – as far as boxing is concerned, and as far as I can.

And so begins a run of bouts that will see my name touted in the press as a genuine prospect. Victories over Dom Rea, Jim Laird, Billy Masters and a host of other tough boys bring me to Perth and a match with one of Scotland's most fancied fighters: Jim Cowie, ex-Featherweight Champion of Scotland.

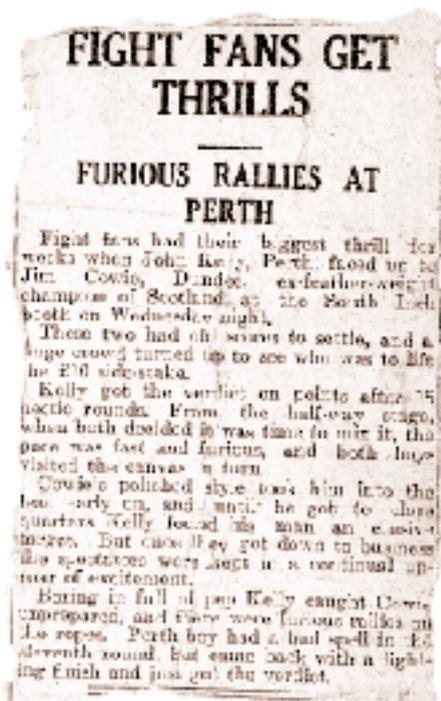
Maybe it's a step out of my class. But I reckon he's going and I'm coming. Or to put it another way, he has the experience to spot a young hot-head in a hurry and starts to needle me. When he questions my parentage, I lose the head and, with my defences nowhere, lose the match. He puts me down with a short right, and I never fully recover.

Revenge will be sweet, I tell myself and sign up for a re-match.

So much for managing myself. The contract is in the post when I realise that I am already committed to fight in another town on the same night. I'm double-booked!

The answer is a friend with a fast car – a big Overland, like they use in gangster movies.

I meet Jim Cowie in Perth and, when he starts his antics, I keep my punches short and tear him apart. Then it's into the car to Kirkcaldy, getting changed on the way, before slogging my way to a painful draw with Bobby Wade which flatters me.

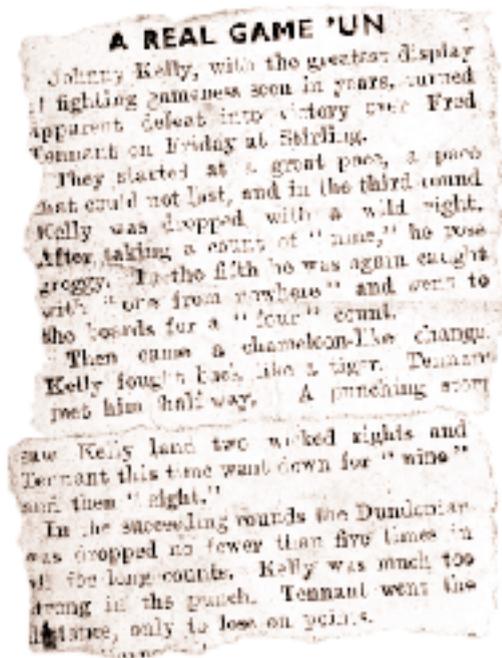


Press report of a later Kelly-Cowie clash in the booths.

I also draw with Harry McQuade, Champion of Scotland... which flatters me too. But I put my name forward for the Scottish Championship anyway.

You begin to believe you can do anything. I've fought Freddie Tennant many, many times in the booths: right ding-dongs with results swinging one way, then the next; just the way the showmen like it.

By now, I have a slight weight advantage over Freddie. But he has more experience. He's fought all over Britain. He's one of the few men to master the legendary Benny Lynch. And he's fought in Paris – narrowly losing to European Champion Praxille Gyde.



A typical account of a Kelly-Tennant confrontation. Little wonder the wee men's bouts were eagerly anticipated then.

Not bad for a wee Dundee boy, far from home, and all alone.

And so the Dundee master gives me a complete tanking. But it must look closer from the safety of the ringside seats because a re-match is hurriedly arranged.

This time, he knocks me down in the last, but I get up to win on points. A third and final decider is required. Any time I've fought Freddie in the past, the two wee men always put on a show and, afterwards, I've felt completely drained.

Now, it's the third bout and I fall to pieces in the ninth. Strength and instinct pull me through without serious injury, but I'm just not at the races.

I'm shattered. And I still haven't heard back from the Board of Control about the Championship eliminators.

I need a rest, falling back on my savings for a visit to my home town. I'm 'cook of the rook'. Everybody indulges me, and I indulge in cream cakes, my favourite food. Soon, I'm piling on the pounds everywhere, except my bank balance.

So, it's back to the training. I hire a small place as a training camp in the village for myself and a few other fighters where we pound the bag or spar in a makeshift ring. I've always hated wearing a head guard and, one day, I take it off after the first round of sparring. Almost immediately in round two, a head clash cuts my eye wide open.

By the time the eye heals, I'm skint. I need bouts. I put in a hard-fought draw with an Irish fighter, Jackie Campbell, who like other Irish fighters I've met, is made of stern stuff. In the return, I win on points, but I'm so strapped for cash, I head for the booths.

An easy win over 'a mug' is marred by the father and mother of a keeker he's clever enough to give me. Next night I face Frank Ferrier at Premierland in Glasgow, and it's a draw. My excuse is that I can't see out of the shiner. At least, that's my story.

Despite the set-backs, I'm feeling in good form. I'm set to fight Dickie Richardson of Dunfermline – a man in the peak of physical fitness who combines the ability to soak up your best blows with the ability to dish out a non-stop battery of hurtful punches of his own. But I'm confident.

He punches fast and hard, but not that hard. Meanwhile, my eye problems are over and I'm in great condition. One other reason for my confidence is my home-town support. Everyone tells me I'm going to win, and half the village puts its shirt on me.

It's a ten-rounder, with the advantage ebbing and flowing over the first few blistering rounds. But by the eighth, to my mind, I'm well ahead on points. So, never one to do things the easy way, I decide to take a rest. Perhaps Dickie's glove glancing off the top of my head with a swinging right makes the canvas look more comfortable, but I find myself resting on the floor near the time-keeper's table.

I'm in full possession of my faculties while I listen to the time-keeper tolling out. But as I get up on the time-keeper's count of nine, the referee is already counting ten, and I'm out. It's the first real blot on my record, and I have a lot to live down locally. Not least with those who lost money on me.

Nonetheless, I'm soon back to my winning ways, with wins over Andy Robins (uncle of the Andy Robins who famously raised and wrestled Hercules the Bear), Irishman Paddy Malone, Dan McGoldrick (hotly tipped as the future champ) and a notable stoppage of an English opponent fighting under the 'nom-de-plume' of Steve Slater.

Still with no word of the Championship eliminators, I receive an offer I can't refuse. £1 a round over ten rounds at the Adelphi in Glasgow. There's a catch. The match is with none other than the fistic wizard Gilbert Johnstone: over six feet and only nine stone, he's currently taking the professional featherweight scene apart.

I feel it will be as awkward for a big man to fight a wee man, as for a wee man to fight a big man. Besides I've had plenty practice on the big guys through the booths. And so it proves.

I'm still on my feet at the finish, and have survived some hairy moments, like when he bounces me off the bottom rope for half a minute in the second round. But I recover and go on to pick up the biggest prize of my career so far. I have £10, two black eyes

and an unrecognisable face. Gilbert Johnstone soon goes on to fight a top-ranking American import, narrowly losing on points, which makes me feel that the gap from the bottom – where I am – to the top isn't as big as people think.

As expected, I receive offers from 'managers' who can set me up with similar fights. But, as I have no wish to be the richest man in the graveyard, I give them my usual reply. Word must be getting round by now, because I get no more approaches.

Strangely enough, I'm starting to find it hard to get fights in the halls too. I flatter myself that the fighters in the Championship eliminators are beginning to think I'm too dangerous. Maybe more like the promoters think I'm too much trouble.

Unlike my broken nose, payment is becoming a sore point with me. I agree to box on a show run by a great pal of mine. Of course, no contract is needed: our word is our bond. The event seems to go off well, except the money needs to be forwarded to me. And I'm still waiting, all these years later.

Yet one Championship hopeful – Teddy O'Neil of Dumbarton – agrees to take me on. A 10-round bout is arranged at the Adelphi in Glasgow. The purse is £6 plus travelling expenses, and I'm looking forward to proving that I can be a contender. It's a decisive points victory for yours truly and the performance seems to please the crowd and the national press. And I'm delighted.

Finally, I must be in the running. One thing spoils the night for me. The promoter hands me £6. I ask about my expenses. That's it, he says. We look each other in the eye.

I'm only nineteen, but I've been punched too often to take kindly to a slap in the face. I demand what I'm due and he coughs up grudgingly. I never work in any licensed boxing hall again.

Teddy O'Neil goes on to win the Championship, but it's back to the booths for me.



ROUND NINE

## AFTER THE BELL

There's a strange atmosphere in a crowded boxing booth: an eager, seething shouting mass. While people appreciate a good fight, the moment the blood starts to flow, they become very excited and lose all sense of fairness. They're buying for blood – blood and snotters – and sometimes it's yours they're after.

Maybe it's the social conditions of the times. Maybe the people need to see someone more buffeted, more downtrodden, more humiliated than they are. And maybe that's why the Second World War takes the heart out of the boxing booths: there are too many young men spilling too much blood across the battlefields of Europe and the Far East for full-contact fighting to have the same appeal. The British Boxing Board of Control also takes steps to regulate the booths and end the unfair fights; the unhygienic

practices; the grim procession of damaged men. The financial strain of putting the shows on a more 'professional' footing eventually puts the booths out of business.

And me? I'm 30 by the time the war ends, my best years as a boxer behind me.

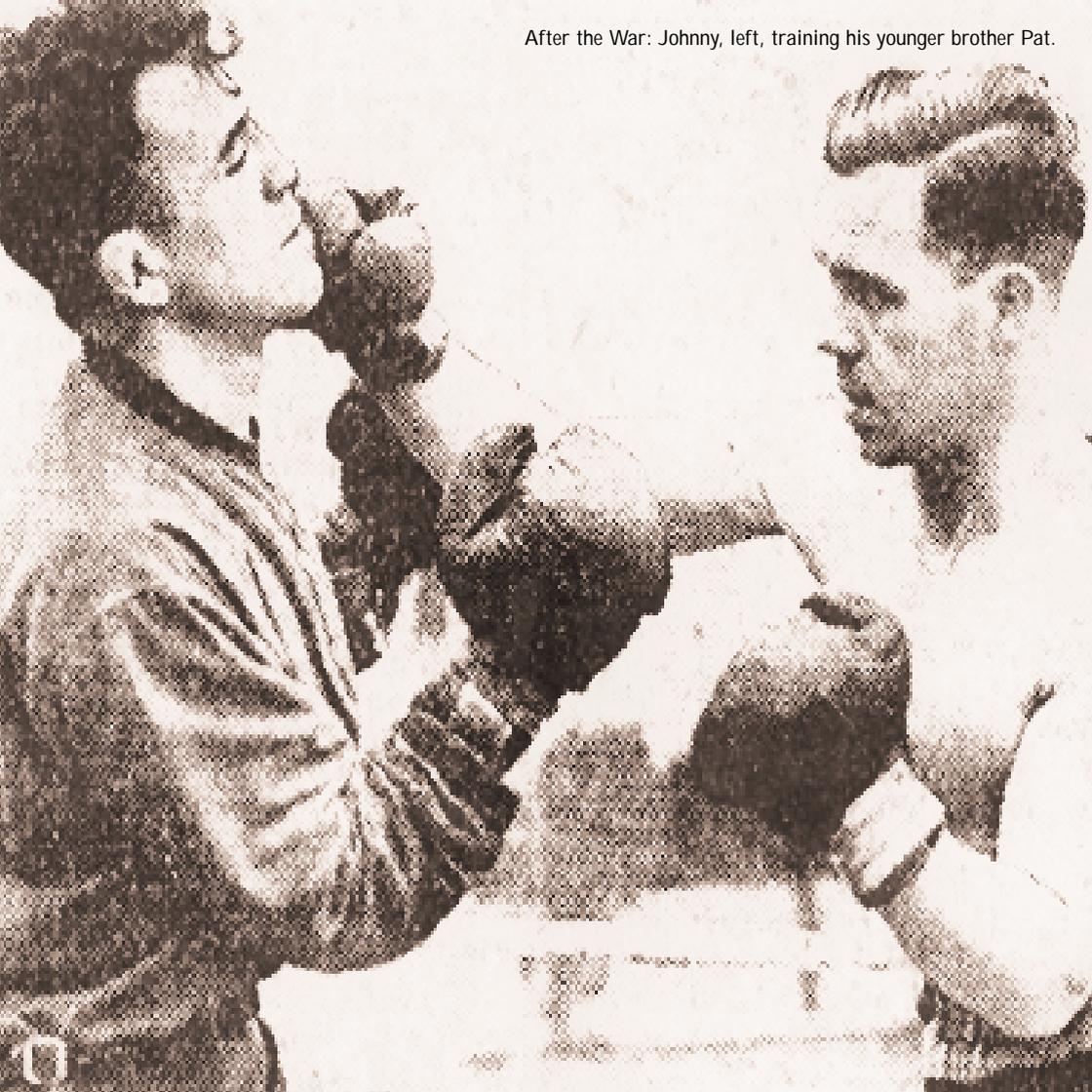
But all in all, I can't say things turn out too badly for yours truly. Maintaining my independence maybe kept me out of the big money stakes, but the harm to one's self was topmost in my mind. I'd seen too many men – most of them just not up to the job – physically and mentally damaged in this most dangerous game. And I reach retirement age still fighting fit.

After Demob, I become a fight promoter, a gym instructor, a construction worker – even a bookie. But that's another story. Boxing remains my abiding love and I always run a club: teaching young men the noble and manly art of self-defence, and the importance of a good straight left.

Johnny Kelly died in 1990, aged seventy-three. An obituary in the local press read:

“In a life filled with perhaps more than its fair share of personal sadness, Johnny never lost his sense of humour. Whatever cruel blow fate threw at him, he took it on the chin. And as for ducking and diving that just wasn’t his way. Even to the most final bell of all, Johnny showed the inner strength of a remarkable man. In the memories of his countless friends, Johnny will always be what he truly was: not just a boxer, but a real champ.”

After the War: Johnny, left, training his younger brother Pat.





Johnny Kelly (right) pictured in 1984 with his arch-rival and great friend Freddie Tennant.