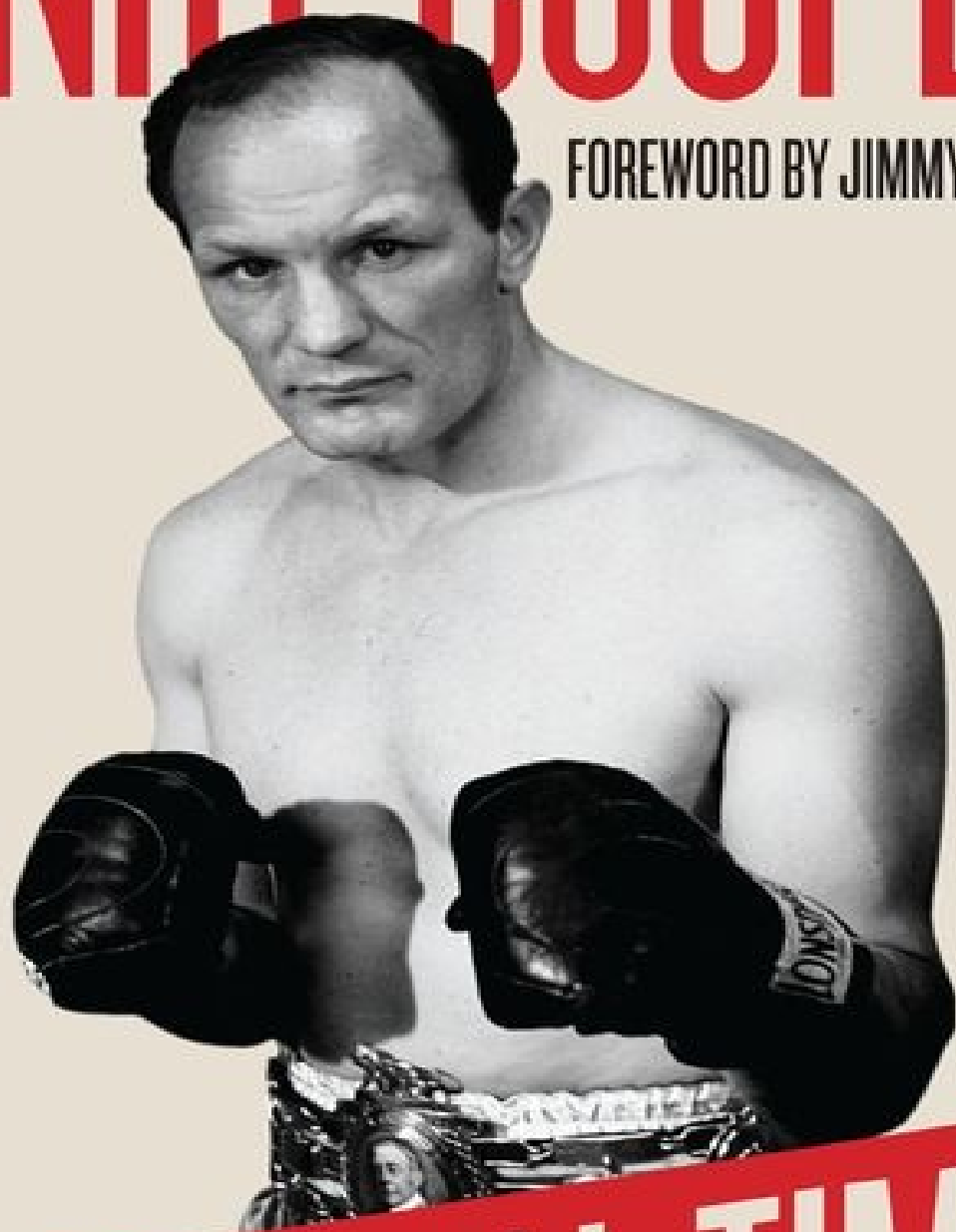


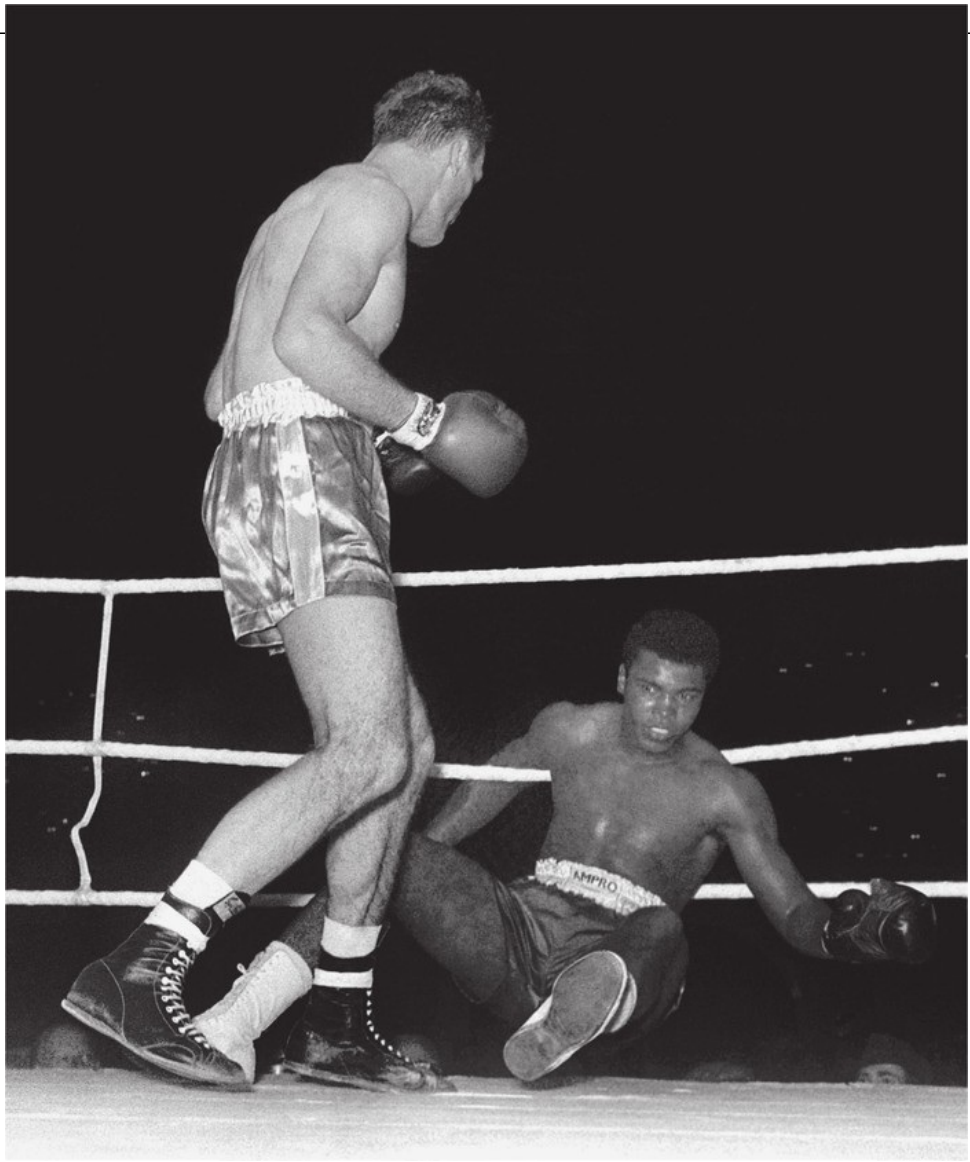
# HENRY COOPER

FOREWORD BY JIMMY GREAVES



A HERO FOR ALL TIME

NORMAN GILLER



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NORMAN GILLER

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**HENRY COOPER**

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**A HERO FOR ALL TIME**

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The Robson Press

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*In loving memory  
of Sir Henry  
and Lady Albina Cooper*

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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Homage to a Hero  
The Henry Cooper Fight File  
By the Same Author  
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# FOREWORD

## JIMMY GREAVES

Henry Cooper was a treasured pal of mine for more than fifty years and he rates up there with Bobby Charlton as the greatest of all British sporting heroes. Wherever you go in the world everybody knows Bobby and Our Enery.

Sir Bobby found fame with his feet, Sir Henry with his fists. Bobby had his bombshell shot, Enery his 'ammer. Both represented their sport and their country with a dignity and sportsmanship that should be bottle-fed to many of today's overpaid, pampered stars, who seem to think sporting celebrity gives them the right to become men behaving badly. There was never a time when our two favourite sporting knights had to reach for the protection of a court injunction.

There were several of us at Spurs who were boxing fans and we used to watch him in his major contests. When he knocked down Cassius Clay at Wembley Stadium in 1963, I willed the man who was to become Muhammad Ali to stay down, but the bell saved him.

Henry and I started out together as professional sportsmen round about the same time, he as a boxer in South London and I as a footballer with Chelsea in West London. Our paths often crossed at various sporting dinners and charity events, and I always found him great company, ever ready to share the latest joke and a laugh. In recent years I got to know Henry even better because we travelled together to appear in the road shows organised by our chum Terry Baker, of AI Sporting Speakers.

I have known Norman Giller for even longer than I knew Henry. He first interviewed me for the local West Ham newspaper where he worked when we were both seventeen, and I have been trying to avoid him ever since. Twenty books together later, I guess I have been unable to shake him off.

I last saw Norman and Henry together at the funeral of Norman's lovely wife, Eileen. She and Norman were married for forty-five years. Henry and Albina had an idyllic marriage that matched theirs and when I heard Albina had died, I feared for Aitch. She was his right and left hand, and I worried how he was going to cope without her. Shortly after came the news that his identical twin brother George had passed on and the last time I saw Henry at a road show I knew he was in trouble. He had lost his old spirit and sparkle, and I was not surprised when he took the final count.

But let's remember the Henry Cooper who was loved by millions and gave loads of pleasure with his boxing performances and, later, his easy-going nature and willingness to help anybody in dire straits. The staggering amount of time he gave to charity was never for show but out of deep sincerity.

His life and times are well chronicled here by a writer who knew him better than most. We will definitely not see his like again. Rest easy, Aitch.

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# HENRY COOPER: A HERO FOR ALL TIME



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# INTRODUCTION

## HENRY MARCO COOPER AND JOHN PIETRO COOPER

Our Dad became a household name as Henry Cooper, a champion boxer of renown and much admired beyond the boundaries of sport by many people captured by his natural desire to give more than he took from life. We are enormously proud of all that he achieved, not only in the boxing ring, but outside with his many unselfish acts and services to charities that, to his immense pride, earned him a knighthood. Dad did not seek reward for his charity work. He saw it as a duty, having come from a humble background, and never lost sight of the fact that there were those in need who required help, support and funding.

It was distressing to lose Dad on May Day 2011, his passing coming quickly in the wake of losing his best friend, our Mum, Albina, and his beloved identical twin brother George. For we 'boys', it was a triple blow from which we have yet to recover, but the warmth of our memories of three great loved people is gradually replacing the pain of the loss.

Eventually, we intend to produce our own special memorial tribute to our dad and mum. In the meantime, we are very happy to give our blessing to this highly personal book by author Norman Giller. He was there as a witness almost from the start of Dad's boxing career and their boxer/reporter relationship blossomed into a friendship that later encompassed our mum and Norman's late wife Eileen.

There is much new material in this book that not even we knew about Dad's life and career, and we see it as a fitting homage not only to Henry Cooper the boxer but also to Henry Cooper, our dad, our Hero.

*Author Norman Giller is making a donation to the Sir Henry Cooper Charity Fund in memory of his old friend, and as a gesture for the support he has received from Henry's sons in the writing of this tribute memoir.*

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# SECONDS OUT

NORMAN GILLER

This was planned as an autobiography and Henry's first words were going to be: 'It's been quite a life so far, and I want to get some memories down on paper before the final bell...'

Sadly, we never got round to writing what would have been Sir Henry's own intimate account of his life and times. The final bell rang earlier and more suddenly than any of us expected.

The great man's demise came quickly after the double blow of losing his beloved wife, Albina, and his identical twin brother, George, within a short period of time. Our mutual mate, Colin Hart, the doyen of boxing scribes, summed it up when he said: 'Henry died of a broken heart.'

How tragically ironic for a man who was all heart.

The day Henry died – May Day 2011 – Britain lost a national treasure. His fame and popularity transcended the world of boxing in which he made an international name for himself as a heavyweight boxing champion, fighting with skill, power and the quiet dignity that marked just about everything he did in life. Oh yes, and he famously knocked down one Cassius Marcellus Clay – much more of that later.

I had known and loved – yes, loved – 'Our Enery' for more than fifty years and I have been encouraged to go ahead with this book by Henry's devoted sons, Henry Marco and John Pietro, as a personal memoir of a man among men and one of the most agreeable people ever to cross my path during this ephemeral existence of ours.

It had been planned as the fourth book I had written with Henry, following on from *Henry Cooper's 100 Greatest Boxers*, *Henry Cooper's Most Memorable Fights* and *Henry Cooper's How to Box*.

I approached entrepreneur Terry Baker, a friend and near neighbour of mine in Dorset, who promoted Henry's popular road show appearances, about the feasibility of publishing a limited edition autobiography, each copy signed by Henry. What a collector's item that would have been!

We were about to discuss it with Henry Marco in his role as his dad's business manager when alarm bells started ringing about our hero's health. It seemed almost overnight he went from the affable, happy Henry we all knew and adored to a shuffling shadow.

In a matter of months he had passed on, leaving behind a mournful army of admirers whose lives he had brightened with his pleasing personality and presence, as well as with his achievements.

In his warm eulogy at Henry's moving private funeral in Tonbridge, Kent, comedian Jimmy Tarbuck said: 'Henry was a nice man... a very nice man.' That captured Henry, simply but perfectly. Yes, a very nice man.

The publishing baton was picked up by Jeremy Robson, renowned for his illustrious sports publishing ventures over more than forty years. He agreed with me that Henry deserved a biography putting in context not only his exceptional boxing performances but also his impact as a hero of the people, going far beyond the world of sport.

In the following pages I plan to paint a personal portrait of Sir Henry that I hope is both accurate and worthy of a man who won the hearts of the nation, with both his fistic feats and his exhaustive work for charities that was appropriately rewarded with a widely welcomed knighthood.

The quotations I use throughout the book were gathered over years and from scores

conversations with Henry, and I hope his voice comes through to give meat and merit to my memories. Nobody can paint a portrait of our hero without dipping into the meticulous autobiography produced in partnership with former *Guardian* sports editor John Samuel (Cassell, 1974) or the more cerebral biography from Robert Edwards (BBC Worldwide).

Oliver Cromwell instructed his portrait artist Sir Peter Lely: 'Paint me warts an' all.' Well, I have spoken to scores of people who knew Henry inside and outside the ring, and I cannot come up with a single blemish. Mind you, his old nemesis Brian London confided: 'He could be as nice as pie one minute and then knock ten skittles out of you the next...' I've cleaned that up.

But that was Henry's brutal business and he went about it in an assassin's thoroughly professional manner, yet somehow managing to retain his self-respect at all times, even when he was on the receiving end of the punches and the punishment.

One skeleton in his closet: he was an Arsenal fan. But nobody's perfect (this written as somebody with Tottenham leanings, always a subject for rivalry and banter between us). You judge a sporting hero not only on how he performs in the sports arena, but also his behaviour away from the cheering throng. Can he meet Rudyard Kipling's twin impostors of triumph and disaster and treat them both the same?

Henry had a quiet grumble about a few of the results that went against him, particularly in his farewell fight against Joe Bugner. But outside the ring his general behaviour was impeccable and an example to today's high-profile sportsmen and women as to how to conduct themselves in public and in private.

Yes, Henry Cooper – Our Eneery – was a hero for all time.

Come with me now to the springtime of his life as I tell the Henry Cooper story over fifteen rounds which fittingly was the championship distance when he was hitting and hurting for a living.

Seconds out, here comes Our Eneery...

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## ROUND 1

# THE BISHOP AND THE TWINS

Our first meeting: it was 5.15 a.m. on a freezing December morning in 1958 and Henry Cooper was standing alongside me stark naked, apart from a pair of heavy-duty size eleven army boots.

No, I am not uncovering a sordid kinky secret from Henry's past. I had asked for an interview for a feature I was writing for the fight game trade paper *Boxing News* and Cooper's manager Jim Wick told me in raw, unadulterated Cockney: 'The only time that he's got to rabbit to you, my son, is when he goes on his early morning gallop. So get a pair of strong daisies and join him on the old frog if you want any nannies.'

Meet The Bishop – Jim Wicks, the most influential and important man in Henry's life and boxing career. Jim was not just his manager, he was his minder, mentor and best mate. And an unknowing master of malapropisms.

Very misleadingly, he was called 'The Bishop' because of his distinguished, benign looks and bald dome that would have fitted perfectly into a mitre. But ex-bookmaker Jim's church was the betting shop and his altar rails were at the racecourse. In those pre-mobile days he would eat only at restaurants where there was a portable payphone that could be brought to the table, so that he was able to place bets throughout the meal. Win or lose, his poker face gave nothing away and his mood would never change from amiable, and he always picked up the bill.

Jim and his betting cronies could have stepped out of the Cockney equivalent of Damon Runyon's *Guys and Dolls*, a sort of *Geezers and Birds*. I wish I had the Runyonesque skill to transfer them to the page, the likes of ticket spivs and gamblers synonymous: Johnny the Stick, One-Arm Lou, Fat Star, Razor Laugh, The Hat, Italian Al, Beryl the Peril (the first female boxing promoter, Beryl Gibbons), Harry the Hoarse and, of course, The Bishop. Come to think of it, scriptwriter John Sullivan managed it with *Only Fools and Horses*.

These were the sort of Del Boy oddballs surrounding Henry. But he never allowed himself to become distracted, tainted or stained by them, just nicely amused by the sort of larger-than-life Cockney characters you just don't see around anymore. Jim Wicks, ex-publican son of a Bermondsey docker and a pioneer of sporting spin and propaganda, was the most memorable of them all.

I will translate for The Bishop as we go along. 'A pair of strong daisies' – daisy roots, boots. 'Frog' – frog and toad, road. 'Nannies' – nanny goats, quotes.

Our meeting place for the early morning road run was the Thomas a Becket gymnasium, bang in Del Boy territory down the Old Kent Road, where Henry was training for an upcoming challenge for the British and Empire heavyweight titles against his old foe Brian London at Earls Court.

He ran a regular four miles around South London streets every morning before they became polluted by traffic fumes and here I was about to accompany him, along with his spitting-image twin brother George and trainer Danny Holland, who allowed himself the luxury of a bicycle. I introduced myself to Henry and he showed no embarrassment as he warmly shook my hand while wearing nothing but his boots.

'Watchyer, Norm,' he said with his huge trademark smile, instantly putting me at my ease as if with

were old mates. 'I always put me boots on first. It's habit from when I'm getting ready to fight – boots first, then jockstrap, protector, shorts, hand bandages and me dressing gown last. Then the gloves of course, yeah.'

He had a rhythmic way of talking that you could have set to a snare drum accompaniment and he would invariably end a staccato run of sentences with a sign-off 'yeah', like a cymbal crash from a percussionist. Sometimes, as if influenced by the Beatles, he would put in a 'yeah, yeah, yeah'. It was the equivalent of Frank Bruno's 'Know wot I mean?' or the 'y'know' of a million Cockneys, a spoken punctuation mark.

Henry pointed down at the boots. 'These are all I've got to show for serving Queen and Country.'

'King and country, 'n' all,' chipped in brother George, who was already in his Army boots and a tracksuit. 'We swore allegiance to King George when we started our National Service and the Queen was on the throne by the time we were demobbed.'

If you had your back to the Cooper twins you had no idea which one was talking because their voices were of the same timbre and tone, and for such big men surprisingly soprano-pitched at times, particularly when they were excited.

I had just stripped off and was about to pull on a tracksuit when The Bishop arrived, looking immaculate as if he were on his way to morning prayers. A smart, grey trilby protected his bald head from the cold morning air and he was sheathed in a fine-check Crombie overcoat. He had probably just come from a Mayfair casino or an all-night card school.

'Bleedin' 'ell,' he said, catching sight of my skinny-as-a-pipe-cleaner, nine stone featherweight frame alongside the, by comparison, perfectly chiselled Adonis that was Our Eney. I was a blushing boy of nineteen, Henry at his physical peak of twenty-five. 'I've got greyhounds fatter than you,' said Jim, in unmerciful mood. 'You need a good meal rather than a good run. For gawd's sake, Eney, don't let him fall down any drains.'

Henry came to my defence. 'Don't listen to him, Norm,' he said. 'You can't fatten thoroughbreds.'

From that day on it was a catchphrase between the two of us, as what started out as a working relationship blossomed over the next fifty-plus years into strong friendship.

Four weeks later Henry took the British and Empire titles away from Brian London with a convincing fifteen rounds points victory. I told him that it was down to the fast pace I had set in our road run together. It was not at all funny but Henry, bless him, was polite enough to laugh. 'Yeah, Norm, yeah,' he said. That somehow captured his spirit of generosity.



Henry and George had been born in the York Road hospital, Westminster, on 3 May 1934. George VI was on the throne, Ramsay MacDonald was leading a coalition government, Hitler was about to declare himself Führer, the Ambling Alp Primo Carnera was world heavyweight champion, Agatha Christie wrote *Murder on the Orient Express*, a pint of beer cost twopence and a semi-detached house in London would set you back £800, and more than 40 per cent of people in the United Kingdom, including the Coopers – were living on or below the poverty line.

Henry arrived twenty minutes before his brother and weighed in at 6lb 4oz, two pounds lighter than George, who remained slightly heavier throughout their lives. As they grew up, the only way that people – other than their mum and dad and older brother Bernard – could tell them apart was that George was right-handed, Henry left-handed. They were mirror twins. There were times when even their father, Henry Senior – himself once a handy fighter – got muddled up and paddled the arse of

## Henry Junior for something George had done, or vice versa.

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It came as quite a shock to Mum when we were born because she was expecting one baby and she was going to call us Walter. A nurse looked at us and said, 'They seem like a right Henry and George to me.' So that's what we became rather than Walter.

Our first home was at Camberwell Green, which adjoins Lambeth, but we always think of ourselves as Bellingham boys from Lewisham in South-East London. We grew up on the council estate there and it was at Bellingham Boxing Club where we first started taking the old fight game seriously. We were what was called, back in those days, ruffians, but we respected our teachers and lived in fear of Dad's slaps if we back-chatted him or failed to do whatever Mum wanted. Dad used the same discipline on us as his dad used on him. Granddad George was a notorious cobbles fighter, who used to scrap for pennies round the Elephant and Castle area, and Dad would cop a right hander from him if he misbehaved. In our time it was all right to whack your kids and teachers would cane you or slap your arse with a slipper. Somewhere between the way they disciplined us then and the namby-pamby way they treat children today would be about right. You have to teach them respect. My boys, Henry Marco and John Pietro, have had quite a few hand whacks on the bum when they've got up to mischief. Nothing heavy, but enough to show them the difference between right and wrong.

George and me grew up when there were a lot of villains around, blokes who would use violence to get what they wanted. But that was never our game. The only real naughties we got up to was nicking balls from the local golf course, mostly from the lake, and then we'd sell them to club members for half-a-crown. Golf was then a rich man's sport. Little did I know that it would become my passion, slicing plenty of balls into lakes but with no urchins to sell them back to me for half a dollar.

We had loads of energy to burn, and boxing proved the ideal outlet and kept us on the straight and narrow. I suppose we might have run with the hounds but for boxing. We grew up in the Teddy Boy days when there used to be gang fights, with knuckledusters, bicycle chains, razors and flick knives. But me and George kept out of all that, thanks to boxing. Anyhow, neither of us had the hair for that thick, greased look with the combed duck's arse at the back.

A quick way to aggravate Henry was to call him an East Ender. I'm a Stepney boy, born in Cabot Street, a quarter of a mile from Tower Bridge on the north side of the Thames. That is at the heart of the East End. Cross the Bridge into Bermondsey and you are into the Cooper territory of South-East London. The real East End takes in just Stepney, including Aldgate, Mile End, Whitechapel and Wapping, Bethnal Green, Bow, a bit of Hackney and Poplar. East of that, you're an East Londoner. My generation of East Enders will tell you there is a geographical difference. 'You're riff-raff,' Henry used to tease. And I wasn't going to argue with him. 'We South Londoners are posh compared with you lot,' he'd say, possibly even meaning it.

Even in his beautifully delivered eulogy at Henry's funeral, Jimmy Tarbuck called him the pride of the East End. But why should Scouser Jimmy know any better? Perhaps I should explain to him that it's like calling an Evertonian a Liverpoolian.

What I always found disconcerting about being in the company of the Cooper twins and manager Jim Wicks is that they always talked in the third person, using the Royal 'we'. It was 'we' did this, 'we' are going to do that, 'we' will take care of it, he didn't hurt 'us', he's never met anybody who hits as hard as 'we' do. Henry and George really were as one at times. You would find them continually finishing each other's sentences, ordering the same food from the menu at the same time, saying things in unison, and laughing or protesting at identical moments.

I had enormous respect for George, who never once moaned or groaned about having to live in his more famous brother's shadow. Back in their amateur days, many good judges rated George the better prospect. He had a booming right hand that was even more potent than Henry's famed and feared left hook, the 'Ammer.

But George was never quite the same force after breaking his right hand in one of his last amateur

contests. He was an unlucky fighter, suffering throughout his career with far worse eye cuts than those that handicapped Henry. To try and beat the curse, he had plastic surgery to take the edge off his protruding eyebrows, but he continued to be known in the trade as 'a bleeder'. He won forty-two out of sixty-four amateur contests, many of the defeats caused by cut eyes; he also had to battle to overcome the rheumatic fever that put him flat on his back in hospital for three months when he was sixteen.

George was obliged to change his name to Jim Cooper when he turned professional in 1951 because there was already a licence holder from Poplar called George Cooper. Jim/George... identical twin brother Henry... a Dad named Henry... Jim Wicks, who could never get anybody's name right referring to himself as 'we' as if the twins were triplets. It's a wonder George/Jim didn't have an identity crisis.

There was never a time when George gave me anything less than 100 per cent support. When we were boxing on the same bill, I always used to insist that I went on first because I got too nervous when he was fighting.

His right hand was the cat's whiskers. Gawd help anybody who got in its way when it was really travelling. He knew the boxing game inside out and was often in my corner, giving good advice and always keeping a cool head in a crisis.

We worked at Smithfield meat market for a while, carrying huge slabs of meat about on our shoulders. That was really hard graft, but the early morning shifts fitted in nicely with our training. Then we tried our hand at plastering, and that suited us down to the ground, or perhaps that should be up to the ceiling. I used the trowel with my left hand and George with his right. We would start on opposite sides of a room and meet in the middle of the ceiling. Nobody could finish plastering a ceiling quicker than we Coopers. I reckon that helped build our power. They used to say that between us we had Popeye's arms, because my left arm and George's right arm bulged with more muscle than our other arms.

George was reckoned by everybody who employed him to be a true artist of a plasterer. I used to just bish-bosh it on, but he went in for the fancy stuff – swirls, stipples, fans, that sort of thing – and you could have hung his work in a gallery. He married Barbara, the daughter of Reg Reynolds, who taught us all there is to know about the plastering game. So George did more than all right out of plastering. And before you make any jokes, we never once came home plastered. Throughout our boxing careers George and I rarely touched a drop of alcohol and neither of us went near tobacco until after we'd packed up boxing.

In fact the only booze we drank was a dreadful cocktail recommended by Jim Wicks. It was a mix of port and Guinness, and Jim used to encourage us to have it occasionally because he reckoned it was good for the constitution. Said he'd learned it from old-time fighters around about the First World War period when he was a good scrapper and had a few fairground bouts. Many years later when I started to suffer from gout I blamed it on that drink of Jim's! You should have seen the faces George and me pulled when we used to down the drink in one go. The Thomas a Becket pub, over which Jim had his office, was a Courage house and we used to say we needed courage to drink the Wicks cocktail.

Tell you what, nobody has a better brother than George. He's always there for me and me for him. I always used to jokingly put him in his place by saying I was the older and wiser one, but in truth we were bang equal in everything. Funny, but I could never really whack hard with my right hand, and George couldn't break eggs with his left. In fact, I reckon I would have been a southpaw if my early coaches had not insisted on me leading with my left. Now if I'd had George's right hand to go with my left hook, I think – no, I know – I would have done even better in my career.

George could whack every bit as hard as me, maybe even harder when that right hand of his was at its most potent. With just a little luck, he might easily have been a world champion. He was that good, but the old mince pies let him down big time.

The twins had their education interrupted by the war years, during which their council house on Fermstead Road, Bellingham took a hit, but the boys were by then safely evacuated to Lancing in Sussex. They left the local Athelney Road school at fifteen, more Philistines than Einsteins but street smart to degree level. Both Henry and George had got off to a less than distinguished start to the

careers when boxing in the vest of the Bellingham Amateur Boxing Club. They each lost their first four schoolboy contests and both showed a worrying weakness against body shots. Bob Hill, a local fire brigade boxing champion who had recommended they take up the sport, was mystified. He then discovered that before each bout, both Henry and George were fed huge bread puddings by their mother Lily, who thought this was helping them be strong, instead of sluggish and unable to take hard punches to the stomach.

Once they got their diet sorted out, they began to make their mark as amateurs. The slightly heavier George eventually boxed in the heavyweight division, leaving Henry to boil down to make light heavyweight, because they had sworn never to fight each other.

In 1952, aged just seventeen and now boxing for the Eltham and District Amateur Boxing Club, Henry won a coveted ABA title and retained it the following year when he beat the highly acclaimed Australian Tony Madigan, who was later to give one Cassius Marcellus Clay a close call in the 1960 Rome Olympics.

But while developing into a celebrated amateur boxer on the domestic front, Henry did not travel well, failing to make an impact in his two major international tournaments overseas. Many thought he was robbed in his only contest in the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki, when he was adjudged to have been outpointed by Russian Anatoli Perov. The following year he competed in the European championships in Warsaw. By then he was Lance-Corporal Henry Cooper of the Royal Army Ordnance Corps, otherwise known as the Boxers' Battalion. Corporal Cooper came up against a huge Russian behemoth called Juri Jegorow and suffered a public execution. He was giving away height and reach, and was stopped in the first round, his legs doing an involuntary dance after the Russian had landed a booming right to the jaw. It gave a new meaning to corporal punishment.

'The ref was right to stop it,' honest Henry acknowledged. 'I was not in a position to properly defend myself and could have taken a real tanking. I moaned at the time, but that was just me prattling on. Deep down I knew I'd got off lightly.'

Henry won seventy-three of eighty-four amateur bouts and was a regular in England and Great Britain vests. Among his opponents was his close pal in the Army, Joe Erskine, with whom he was to have one of the most exciting and exacting serials in British boxing history. They met three times as amateurs, Henry winning two-one. It was a friendly yet fierce rivalry that was to spill over into the professional arena with – as you will learn later – a near-disastrous climax to one of their fights.

We loved our amateur careers. This was in an era when it was every bit as popular as the pro game and we used to get full houses for the top competitions. There was great inter-club rivalry and the highlights were the divisional, London and national championships, and you would get to box at the main venues like the Albert Hall and Wembley Pool, and it was often on the telly. Me and George were local heroes and enjoyed the buzz of it all.

My only disappointment is that I didn't cover myself in glory in the two major events. Looking back, I realise I was too young. I was still a baby of eighteen when the Olympics took place in Helsinki in 1952. They were probably the hottest Games ever in boxing and very political because the Iron Curtain was at its most menacing and the Russians – professional in everything but name – refused to live in the Olympic village. My contest with Perov, a big unsmiling geezer who could have haunted houses for a living, was nip and tuck, and I thought I'd nicked it with my left jab that was never out of his wide face. I had two Eastern European judges vote against me and the French judge called me the winner. So out I went, beaten on a split decision by a mature man while I was still just a kid.

The Americans had a fantastic team, including future world stars of the calibre of Floyd Patterson, Spider Webb and Nate Brooks. The Hungarians had Laszlo Papp, the South Africans the Toweel brothers, and the Swedes Ingemar Johansson, who got himself slung out in the final for allegedly not trying. He later made them eat their words!



If we could have made a living out of it like the Iron Curtain boys we would have been happy to stay amateur, but you can't eat cups and medals, so George and me turned pro as soon as we escaped from the Army.

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After their final amateur contests in April 1954, Henry and George honoured their pledge to sign as professionals with Jim Wicks. They had been introduced to him before starting their National Service by London *Evening News* boxing writer J. T. (Jimmy) Hulls, who liked the Cooper boys and said he wanted them to be in safe hands. Jim Wicks looked after them as carefully and as caringly as if they were precious porcelain china.

The Bishop already had a star-studded stable featuring such top-of-the-bill fighters as British light heavyweight champion Alex Buxton, Empire bantamweight title-holder Jake Tuli and British lightweight king Joe Lucy.

The twins signed just one three-year contract with Wicks, which was never renewed. Both Henry and George were happy to let The Bishop manage them on word of honour only. It was as close to a father and sons' trust as you could get. Jim did not pay them signing-on money and just supplied them with satin shorts and dressing-gowns adorned with their names on the back. Other boxers accepted upfront money from unscrupulous managers, who would then make matches with a view to getting their money back rather than with the best interests of their boxers at heart. Jim Wicks was crafty but never a crook. The twins could not be in better hands.

A couple of years before signing the Coopers, Wicks had declined to sign another pair of twins who were causing something of a stir across the water in the East End. They were Reggie and Ronnie Kray, both of whom had short professional careers before concentrating on using violence outside the ring to make their fortune.

I asked Henry if he knew them. 'Of course I did,' he said. 'You couldn't be in the boxing game and not be aware of them. They used to come and watch me train and would sit ringside for my fights. But that was as far as it went, although I did appear at a few charity events for them. Their villainy got on the headlines, but they did put something back into the community. In truth, we wanted nothing to do with them. I remember matchmaker Mickey Duff telling me he had banned them from becoming members of his Anglo-American Sporting Club at the London Hilton and the next week his wife opened a parcel hand-delivered to their door. Inside was a dead rat. Charming people.'

Henry listened politely to my story about my connection with the Krays, raised just half a mile down the road from me in Bethnal Green. In the 1960s they were looking to improve their public image and put the word around that they wanted a public relations adviser. A bit like Jack the Ripper seeking a media makeover.

Peter Batt, another Stepney-born sportswriter, and I got on to the shortlist, but were beaten to the job by Fred Dinenage, later of *How* TV show fame. Afterwards I discovered that I failed the interview because Reggie thought – blush, blush – I was too pretty (it was in my skinny, twenty-something days) and would be a distraction to gay Ronnie, who was having a fling at the time with the bisexual Lord Boothby. It was Fred Dineage who was in charge of the publicity when an infamous Sunday newspaper photograph was published of Boothby with the Krays, causing a political storm.

When I told all this to Henry he said: 'Fred Dinenage got the job? How?'

That was Aitch, always with the witty punchline.

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## ROUND 2

### FIRST PROFESSIONAL PUNCHES

Jim Wicks not only knew his boxers, horses, greyhounds and playing cards, he was also a master public relations man in an era when if you didn't beat the drum you went unnoticed and unheard because there were few sports television programmes to carry the message to the masses. 'It's no good being a shrinking violet in this game, son,' he once told me, without any hint that he knew he was mangling a cliché.

In the 1950s, BBC Television had a flagship midweek show called *Sportsview*, which was presented by a creative pioneer producer named Peter Dimmock, a wartime RAF pilot who was terribly English and always wore a starched collar, and was immaculately groomed as if he had stepped out of a Savile Row tailor's shop window.

It would be difficult to imagine two more contrasting people than Dimmock and The Bishop. The latter was Mr Pickwick meeting the Artful Dodger. They were separated by a common language, but Jim worked his Cockney charm on the BBC sports boss and persuaded him to feature the Cooper twins signing professional contracts live on air. It could only be 'live' in those days because recording facilities were in their infancy. Jim told me years later in his Arfur Daley tones: 'I just had a word with Mr Dimmock's shell-like and told him I was about to sign boxing's equivalent of the Beverley Sisters who were the biggest act in town at the time.'

The stunt drew more publicity than even Jim envisioned, when the studio ring in which Henry and George were sparring with each other collapsed. Neither of the twins was hurt and they clambered over the wreckage to sign British Boxing Board of Control contracts in front of the cameras.

As the boys switched to the professional ranks, they brought with them their highly rated Eltham ABC trainer Georgie Page, who had been a top-flight amateur boxer before becoming a dedicated coach. The plan was for George to work in harness with Danny Holland on their fitness and tactics. But Page was at heart a diehard, dedicated amateur and the shenanigans of the professional game were against all he stood for; so it was not long before he quit to return to his first love of youth boxing and training the stars of the future.

The twins both made winning debuts in down-the-bill six-rounders at Harringay Arena on 1 September 1954. This was long before Harringay became Haringey. Henry floored veteran Harry Painter twice in the first round with the left hook that was to bring him fame and fortune, and the referee counted out an opponent who at 14st 13lb was more than a stone heavier than Our Energetic Being. Being outweighed would become the norm for Henry. In only eight fights throughout his career did he have a weight advantage.

George had a tougher scrap in his debut, surviving a brutal butting attack before winning on points against a wild young Welsh giant called Dick Richardson, who would figure in Henry's future fight programme.

Me and George felt like millionaires that night. We shared £70 plus £35 expenses. Dear old Jim did not take his percentage, and it was a couple of years before he did collect the 25 per cent cut he was entitled to. It would have taken four weeks or more to earn that kind of dosh plastering.

We went out next morning and bought Mum and Dad their first television set, a thirty quid black-and-white Pye with a nine-inch screen that you had to watch in a darkened room, and with a giant H-shape aerial on the roof that looked as if it could have collected signals from Mars. It was state of the art then and there was only the one BBC channel. I remember sitting watching presenters McDonald Hobley in a dickie bow and Sylvia Peters in a ball gown and feeling undressed without a tie on.

We just wanted to show our appreciation to Mum and Dad for the way they'd always got behind us and encouraged us. Life had been really tough for them. Dad worked on the trams and then cleaning out furnaces, and never earned more than eight quid a week, and Mum slaved as a charlady to help feed Bernie, George and me in the wartime and ration book days. We were hungry young hounds, as you can imagine. We weren't exactly tiny chaps, were we! Fancy having to feed and clothe us. Gawd knows how they managed it, but they did.

George and me used to wear hand-me-downs from big brother Bernie and used to go through shoes in weeks because we were always kicking stones around if we couldn't get a ball to kick, and we were forever tearing our clothes while clambering around the bomb-blitzed buildings near the docks. Back in those days I was dreaming of following either my idol Joe Louis as a boxer or England goalie Frank Swift as a goalkeeper. I was useful between the sticks and got to play in goal for South London schoolboys, but boxing won out in the end because George was as mad on it as I was, so we settled on fighting rather than football. Think we chose well, because footballers back then were only earning about seventeen quid a week, not like today's millionaire players.

Mum worked miracles during the war. Dad was away fighting in Burma and she brought us up on her own for nearly four years. She could be as tough as Dad with the old discipline bit. If we misbehaved she would clip us round the ear, and if that didn't work she'd take her shoe off and tan our arses. As kids, you don't realise at the time how tough it must have been for your parents. Looking back on it, Mum deserved a medal for the way she managed while Dad was doing his bit for King and Country. As George and I started to earn from our boxing, we were able to repay our parents for all the sacrifices they'd made to bring us up. They did a fair old job considering everything.

Henry took his love of his parents to the extreme of having 'Mum and Dad' tattooed on his left arm. I don't think I was the first boxing scribe to describe his left jabs and hooks as giving his opponents his mummy and a daddy of a hiding.

His professional career got off to a promising start, with nine straight wins in seven months, all but two inside the distance and including an impressive eight rounds points win over the huge Birkenhead based Jamaican Joe Bygraves. 'Jolting Joe', built like a brick outhouse, had turned professional with a few days of chinning a referee who had disqualified him during a Wales v. England international. The same referee had earlier disqualified Henry, who responded with a more sedate shrug of the shoulder. Bygraves would come back to haunt (and hurt) our hero.

The Cooper style of boxing had not changed noticeably from his amateur days. He was still as upright as a guardsman and advanced from behind a rat-a-tat-tat left-hand lead that was the precursor for a left hook that was always delivered with venom. His right hand was held high, protecting his chin from counters, and he would use it sparingly, mostly as a supplement to a sudden burst of combination punches perfected on the speedball in the gymnasium. His favourite blend was a short left to the ribs bringing down his opponent's guard, and then an instant left hook to the jaw. When it worked to perfection it was like violent poetry, but for the opponent on the receiving end nothing rhymed. One of his specialities that he produced throughout his career was a left hook counter, delivered while drawing his opponent forward and with his weight on his back foot, then suddenly shifted to the front to give what he described as a car-collision impact as the punch landed on the jaw of his advancing adversary.

Henry and George could have put on a Vaudeville act with their side-by-side synchronised rope skipping, and both could get up on their toes and dance around the ring, but for their big punches the

used to plant their feet for maximum impact.

Taking on his first Continental opponent in his tenth fight, a red curtain descended on Cooper world and it was a portent of things to come. He was well in command against Italian champion Umberto Bacilieri when a clash of heads midway through the second round opened a deep gash on his left eyebrow. Jim Wicks called the fight off as soon as Henry returned to his corner at the bell. It was not that the cut was so bad as Jim not wanting to risk further damage. 'We couldn't see out of the eye because of the blood,' 'triplet' Jim reported afterwards. 'It's a pity because we were in great shape and well on top. It would have been insanitary for us to carry on.' Jim, of course, meant insanity.

Henry quickly got back to winning ways once the eye had healed, and in his twelfth fight avenged his defeat by Bacilieri at London's White City on 13 September 1955, knocking the Italian cold in the seventh round. 'We knew we could take him out anytime but wanted to get a few rounds under our belt,' said The Bishop. 'Yeah, yeah, yeah,' said Henry.

It was unlucky thirteenth for Henry when he was narrowly outpointed over ten rounds by his old foe Joe Erskine in an eliminator for the British heavyweight title at Harringay Arena on 15 November 1955.

In these days of monster heavyweights, it seems incredible that Henry was fretting that he was coming into the ring too heavy at 13st 11lb.

My best fighting weight was a few ounces either side of 13st 6lb. I know it sounds ridiculous that a couple of pounds can make a difference, but I was finding out that if I went into the ring at, say, more than 13-9 I was sluggish and unable to get into my rhythm.

I dared not carry any extra pounds against a wily old git like Joe, who was the cleverest and craftiest boxer I ever met. I used to tell him he boxed like he played cards. We played for hours when in the Army together, and when he was holding the pack he had a sleight of hand that somehow ghosted just the card he wanted on to the table. I couldn't kick up a fuss because I could never prove he was doing it, but I used to say to him, 'You should belong to the Magic Circle, Joe.' And that was how he boxed – now you see me, now you don't.

He was an absolute master at making you hit thin air and for a card shark he had the perfect poker face. You never knew what he was thinking or whether you had hurt him with a punch. His expression just never changed from one round to the next. If he had been able to punch his weight he would definitely have won a world title. Him beating us in that vital eliminator was the biggest choker we'd had in our career to date. Meantime, George was having problems with recurring cut eyes, and so that was a low time for us and we had to work at trying to lift each other's spirits. We were both still living at home with Mum and Dad and a blanket of gloom dropped over our little house.

George had sharper, more protruding cheekbones and eyebrows, and leaked blood in virtually every fight. He eventually went into Queen Victoria Hospital at East Grinstead, where a plastic surgeon sort of planed the edge off his eyebrows. But sadly for George it did not really cure his problem.

It could easily have been that the press were reporting the death rather than the defeat of Henry after his points loss to Erskine. Driving home after the fight in their old, second-hand Ford Prefect, the twins were involved in a terrifying crash, and to make it worse big brother Bernie and his pregnant wife, Cory, were passengers in the back. They collided with a huge Wolseley at a crossroads in Hackney and the car somersaulted twice, with the Coopers trapped inside. Miraculously nobody was seriously hurt, but the driver of the Wolseley did a double take when he saw Henry climb out of the wreckage with his face still bruised and bloodied from his losing fight with Joe. 'We were lucky as hell to survive the crash,' Henry said. 'Our only concern was for Cory and the unborn baby. She had a check-up and everything was all right. Scared the life out of us all, but we later had a good laugh at the

look on the other driver's face when he clocked my cuts and bruises!'

Henry quickly restored his reputation and ranking in his fifteenth fight, with a sensational first round victory over 'Blackpool Rock' Brian London, who had won the 1954 Empire Games heavyweight title in Vancouver, boxing as Brian Harper. When turning professional he took the ring surname of his father Jack London, who had been a British professional heavyweight champion in the immediate post-war years. Always shooting from the lip, Brian had made no secret of what he intended to do to Cooper. He had rushed to twelve victories since turning professional, eleven of his wins coming in quick time. Henry had beaten his brother, Jack, as an amateur and Brian had stopped George Cooper in four rounds as a pro, so it was a real family feud when rookie promoter Freddie Mills brought them together at the Empress Hall on May Day 1956.

The fight was barely a minute old when Henry had London sending out distress signals. He made him grunt with a short right to the body and London momentarily dropped his hands. That was like sending a gilt-edged invitation for Henry's left hook, which he smashed against London's unguarded jaw with such force that it knocked him back into the ring post in a neutral corner. He was out on his feet, propped up against the post, and as Henry unleashed a string of combination punches the referee jumped in and led the outgunned and out-to-the-world London back to the safety of his corner.

'We like to do our fighting with our fists, not our mouths,' declared The Bishop. 'Brian said some very naughty things about us and we had to make him pay for it. Now we want to be considered back in contention for the top titles.' Over to Henry: 'Whatever Jim says we'll do, yeah.' They were the best double act in boxing.

The confidence of the Cooper camp evaporated before the year was out when Yorkshire heavyweight prospect Peter Bates opened the left eye wound again to force a fifth round stoppage after Henry had dropped him for a nine count and was just waiting to deliver the *coup de grâce*.

Then came Henry's *annus horribilis*, a year in which he seriously considered hanging up his gloves. He became disillusioned after three title fight defeats in succession in 1957.

The first setback was against Joe Bygraves, whom he had outpointed two years earlier. This time the British Empire title was up for grabs and the Cooper camp made the mistake of sending Henry in the ring at his heaviest ever, 13st 13lb, to try and counter the Incredible Bulk that was Bygraves. Aito (that's what his Cockney pals called him) fought that night at Earls Court as if he was on sinking sand rather than a ring canvas. There was no snap in his punches and his footwork was more Old Mother Kelly than Gene Kelly.

In the ninth round, with the scorecards even, Bygraves threw a short right from close range that caught Henry in the solar plexus. The punch literally took his breath away and he collapsed to his knees, gasping for air, as the referee tolled the ten-second count. Jim Wicks, his face longer than the bishop's cassock, told the press: 'We couldn't breathe. If we'd stayed on our feet it would've been even worse, so we dropped to our knees. It was just a freak punch. We'll be back.' Henry nodded. 'We'll be back, yeah.'

Next stop Stockholm and a European title challenge against the handsome, dimpled Swede Ingemar Johansson, who had won his sixteen professional fights to date but had many doubters, who considered him too cautious to make it to the top. Blackening his CV was a controversial performance in the 1956 Olympics, when he had suffered the humiliation of being disqualified for 'not giving of his best'. Johansson appeared to have frozen with fear and did not throw a punch in the final against American giant Ed Sanders. He was literally running away around the ring, and eventually the referee spread his arms and declared enough of one of the most embarrassing exhibitions ever seen in an Olympic ring. Years later Ingemar had the disqualification expunged from the records, when his explanation that he

was trying to draw Sanders on to a counter punch was finally accepted.

~~Ingemar was an unashamed playboy, who took his girlfriend to his training camps and said he put all his faith in his 'toonder and lightning' right hand, Ingo's Bingo.~~

Strangely enough, his fight with Henry was taking a similar pattern to the notorious Olympic final. Ingemar hardly threw a punch for the first four rounds and as Henry had decided he would also use counter punching tactics it was becoming a toothless tango. Both boxers circled around the ring without any risk or danger of making physical contact as the sun set over the open-air arena on a beautiful May evening in Stockholm. Over to Henry:

The crafty so-and-sos saw to it that I had the corner facing the setting sun and I was blinded for much of the fight. That's not an excuse, that is fact.

If I'd paid to see the fight I'd have been asking for my money back after four rounds of nothing more exciting than shadow boxing. It was weird because there was so little atmosphere in the enormous stadium that I could hear the conversations of the ringsiders.

Like a mug, I got impatient and decided to change my tactics and go after Johansson. Big mistake. As I went forward in the fifth round hunting him, he drew me towards the setting sun. I could not see a thing and then b-o-o-m he let his looping right hand go. The next I knew I was down on my knees in a kneeling position and by the time I scrambled up the referee was shouting 'Nine, ten... Out.' Bleedin' Bingo!

Apart from amateurish flicking left hands, it was about the only punch he threw in the fight. I felt more embarrassed than hurt because we'd not had a proper fight. Of course, a couple of years later he goes and does the same thing to Floyd Patterson and wins the world title. Ingemar was a real charmer out of the ring but, let's be honest, he was not the best of world champions. All he had was that right hand, but what a punch – and it made him a fortune.

Never having been knocked out in my life – my boxing career ended with two broken wrists in an EA London schoolboys' championship contest that I won – I asked Henry what it was like. 'You know as much as me,' he said. 'The lights go out, and when you come round you wonder what hit you. Whether the punch is to the jaw you don't even feel any pain, and the next thing you know you're on the floor and the ref is counting over you, and you wonder why your legs won't obey you. The worst knock-out for me was when Joe Bygraves landed that punch to my solar plexus. Your breath just leaves you and for a moment you cannot help but panic, wondering whether you're going to get your breath back. One thing I know is that I preferred giving rather than receiving!'

The heartbreak hat-trick of defeats that best-forgotten year was completed by Joe Erskine, who successfully defended the British heavyweight title he had taken from Johnny Williams with a narrow fifteen rounds points victory over Henry at Harringay Arena on 15 September 1957. This gave him a 3–2 lead in their series since first meeting as amateurs. For all their thumping of each other, they remained good pals and Henry was sporting enough to say after his defeat: 'Good luck to Joe. I hope he goes on and takes the European and world titles. He's good enough.'

Henry kept to himself that he was depressed to the point that he was considering throwing in the towel and going back to taking up the trowel. He was still living at home with his parents, was leading the Spartan life of the dedicated sportsman, did not drink or smoke, allowed no distraction from the opposite sex, trained consistently and conscientiously and here he was, a four-times-on-the-trot loser. Meanwhile, his brother George was proving he could make as much money plastering as fighting, and the trowel did not hit you back.

After stewing at home for a month, Henry realised he could not do without boxing. He was literally hooked on it.

Henry phoned The Bishop and said he was ready to get back into the ring.

~~'I knew you'd come to that conclusion, Enery,' Jim told him. 'I've arranged a nice little trip for u~~  
We're going to Germany.'

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## ROUND 3

### HENRY ÜBER ALLES

Even with all his Barnum and Bailey blarney, Jim Wicks could not cajole home promoters into using Henry after his four successive defeats. It would have been easier to sell ice lollies and Eskimos.

So Jim broadened his horizons and arranged for Henry to fight away from critical British eyes against German champion Hans Kalbfell in Dortmund on 16 November 1957. Suddenly Henry was cast in the role of journeyman, and only a victory could save him from the ignominious slide toward fighting purely for money and being 'the opponent'.

Kalbfell stood 6ft 4in tall, looked as if he had been hewn out of German granite and had more than a stone weight advantage. He was being groomed for a world title challenge, and his promoters and supporters saw Henry as just a stepping stone. Instead, our hero stepped all over Kalbfell. He boxed his ears off with a magnificent display of controlled aggression, dominating the ten-round fight from first bell to last.

British soldiers based in Germany invaded the ring and triumphantly carried Henry shoulder-high around it after he had been confirmed as the runaway points winner, and the consensus was this was his finest performance to date. 'We have never boxed better,' said Jim Wicks. 'We were wunderbra.'

Our Enery was back in demand. In Germany.

The victory did not generate a lot of press coverage in Britain, so Jim put his thinking cap on and came up with a story that made huge headlines: 'OUR ENERY UNDER HYPNOSIS'.

He revealed that Henry was being hypnotised by a German professor, who was teaching him how to relax, and that he was now ready to become a world-beater. Substance was given to the story when Henry was spotted making several private visits to Germany.

The fact was that he had met a pretty Fräulein called Hilda and had a brief relationship with her. It suited him to say he was going to Germany for hypnosis sessions.

The Bishop was no mere spin doctor, more a spin surgeon. He would go to any lengths to publicise a fight. Jim managed a South African flyweight called Jake Tuli, who he had photographed with a spear and billed as Zulu Jake Tuli, telling tales of his warrior deeds. Jake had never seen a spear in his life before celebrated South London sports photographer Derek Rowe handed him one for the promotion photo.

To get early-career publicity for the twins, Jim once leaked a story that he had turned down an offer of £50,000 for their contracts, at a time when that was a small fortune. He said the offer had come from a syndicate headed by film actor Stanley Baker, a great fan and friend of Henry's who stood the story up although there was not even a germ of truth in it. Jim later confided that a bookmaker had offered to take Henry and George off his hands in settlement of a five grand betting debt. The Bishop preferred to pay up rather than lose the two boys he looked upon as sons.

Another of Jim's nicknames was Seamus, because of his Irish family background and the fact that he was full of blarney. When he signed Tuli, he told the press he had a soft spot for South Africa because he had visited there as a boy drummer during the Boer War. It was published as fact, with



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