

JABS & JOLTS

A fabulous incredible amazing Boxing fanzine



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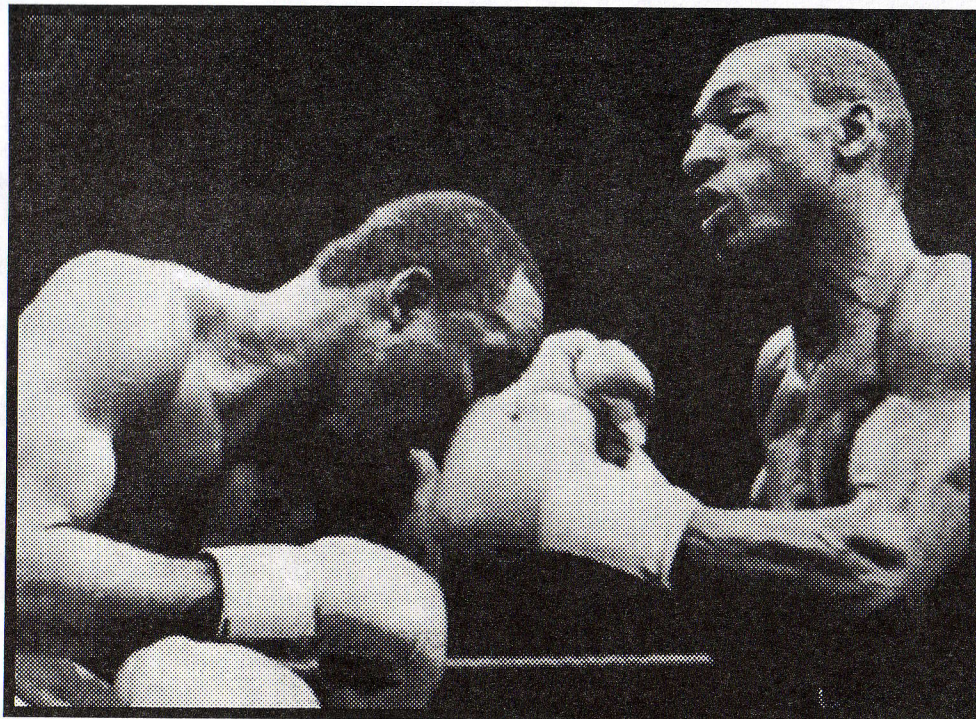
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Herol Graham vs Mike McCallum

THE TRAGEDY OF HEROL GRAHAM

With the September 1995 victory of Naseem Hamed over Steve Robinson and the crowning of the Prince who is now King, it is easy to forget that the same stable that produced the inimitable Hamed also produced another of the most unorthodox, unusual, and, unfortunately, unheralded boxers the fight game has ever seen.

Herol Graham was born September 13, 1959, and picked up a bucket-full of titles, including the Commonwealth and European Light Middleweight Championships, at which he remained undefeated. Unlike Hamed though who picked up his first world crown at the age of twenty-one (the first of many?), Graham failed in two attempts at the world title, and ended his sparkling career on a down note when he was stopped in a domestic bout.

During the 70s and 80s the middle divisions of British boxing

produced a wealth of talent, including the erratic but entertaining Tony Sibson, the plain-speaking Alan Minter who went on to win the world middleweight title, and Errol Christie who had literally shone as an amateur, and was hyped as "the" prospect of the 80s.

However, he was ruthlessly exposed in a brutal 46 second stoppage by the (admittedly heavier) Jose Seys on September 19, 1984. Graham announced immediately that he would take on Seys, and less than a month later, stopped the oafish Belgian in six rounds after making him look stupid. This was Graham's most outstanding characteristic; he did

title against Steve Cruz in Las Vegas in June 1986, but while McGuigan dropped a narrow but deserved points decision after 15 gruelling rounds, Graham stopped the unfortunate Ernie Rabotte in the first round. As long ago as June 1981, Graham bombed out Prince Rodney in the first.

In 1986, Graham took on and stopped another former Errol Christie opponent, Mark Kaylor, who had stopped Christie in the eighth round of what was surely the domestic fight of the year, on Bonfire Night 1985. To date, Kaylor's only defeats had been against Tony Cerda, Buster Drayton and Tony Sibson, and his only meaningful

humiliated yet another former Christie opponent. By this time the former eighties prospect had begun to look rather fragile around the chin, having been stopped by Charlie Choo Choo Boston in eight rounds. Boston was rightly confident and not a little arrogant, having got up off the floor in the sixth to batter the once highly touted Christie to submission in the 8th, and boasted that he would do the same to Graham. In the run up to the fight he was quoted by one paper as saying that he had heard Graham could run, but that "he" had come to fight, and that Graham should do the same.

everything wrong deliberately, flouting the rules, sticking out his chin, and doubtless making the likes of Gene Tunney turn in their graves. Whatever the rule books said though, Graham piled up an impressive series of wins, and at the time of his first defeat, to Sumbu Kalambay, held the longest unbeaten run in British boxing. Although he was a counter-puncher and was never known as a big hitter, Graham pulled off a fair number of dramatic stoppages. He opened for Barry McGuigan when the Irishman defended his

defeat was when he was stopped by Buster Drayton on the same night the limited Bruno was exposed by Bonecrusher Smith.

Kaylor v Graham took place almost a year to the day after the Kaylor v Christie fight. Kaylor predicted a knock out against Graham but retired on his stool after the 8th round. Personally I didn't think he was doing that bad, but then I wasn't the one taking the punches, and Graham had always been a heartbreaker as much as anything else.

In 1987, Graham took on and

The American would live to bitterly regret his words, because although a counter-puncher noted for going backwards, in this fight, Graham came to fight. In fact, all night he came forward, and every time he did he hit Boston at will. And when Boston went to hit him, Graham wasn't there. It was quite the most remarkable display of boxing skill I have ever seen. Heck, it wasn't boxing, it was poetry, and it was no surprise that a battered, bruised, humiliated and totally demoralised Boston retired on his stool at the end of the 7th.

One fight that never came off was Graham v Sibson. Graham once said that Sibson was avoiding him because he, Sibson, had beaten him as an amateur, and didn't want to run the risk of having that form reversed, as surely it would have been. Sibson was taken apart methodically in six rounds by Marvelous Marvin Hagler, and Graham had visions of fighting the great man, feeling that in spite of Hagler's dominance of the middleweight division, he was ready to be taken. Unfortunately for Graham, a fighter with a far higher profile had the same idea. Sugar Ray Leonard came out of retirement for a dream fight. Obviously Hagler would take a big bucks fight against a fighter who was coming back after a lengthy retirement in preference to a fight against an unrecognised, but surely far more dangerous, Graham.

Most good judges (including the current writer) thought Leonard was making a big mistake; Alan Minter predicted that Hagler would walk right through him. Leonard proved us all wrong, boxing magnificently and taking a (supposedly controversial) decision; for the record, I thought the scoring was spot on. After this fight, Graham praised Leonard and said he would have fought Hagler and beaten him, in exactly the same way. And who's to say he wouldn't have? In my humble opinion, it was his failing to get a deserved shot at Hagler that was Graham's downfall as much as anything that happened inside the ring.

Graham's first defeat - a points loss to Sumbu Kalambay in a European title fight - was totally out of character. Graham fought so badly that night it was as though a different man was in the ring; he took defeat philosophically, saying

afterwards that nobody could win every fight, but he was obviously putting on a brave face.

Having blown his big chance, Graham returned to domestic level. In spite of having been hyped up to high heaven from the start of his professional career, Frank Bruno had never condescended to fight for a domestic title, and only went for the European championship after failing against a class American. Graham though had always taken pride in any title fight, and in June 1988 he toyed with James Cook, stopping him in five one-sided rounds for the vacant British Middleweight title. Three months later he dispatched a supposedly dangerous Johnny Melfah, also in five rounds, and in similar fashion. Then his big chance came.

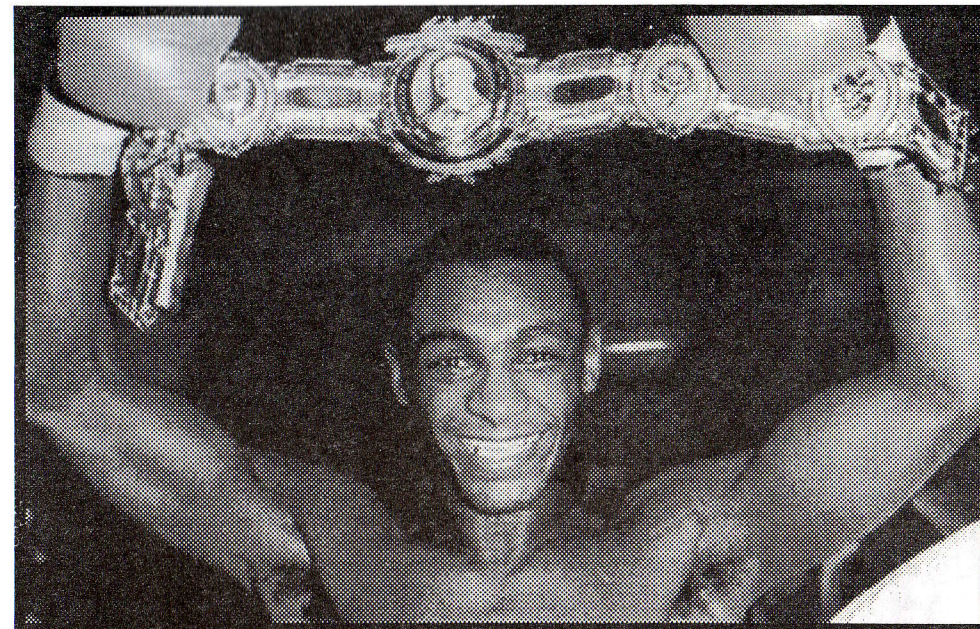
In May 1989 he fought Mike McCallum for the Vacant WBA Middle-weight title. McCallum is easily the best fighter who has ever come out of Jamaica, and without doubt an all-time great. At the time of writing he is still active (and has already had a few fights too many), although even in 1989 he was past his best. That being said, McCallum is a master boxer, and he just sneaked past Graham.

Really Graham had only himself to blame, because instead of boxing McCallum he concentrated on trying to make him look bad. McCallum ignored Graham's showboating, worked to the body and took a justified points win.

Once again, Graham dropped back down to domestic level, this time taking on a dangerous and

highly touted unbeaten fighter, Rod Douglas, and yet again, Graham proved that he was head and shoulders above any other British fighter in his division, toying with Douglas before stopping his exhausted opponent in 9 rounds. Unfortunately, the severe beating not only ended Douglas's unbeaten record but almost ended his life. He was admitted to hospital with a blood clot and never boxed again.

Graham got a second chance at a world title, and in November 1990 he took on the big punching but limited Julian Jackson in Spain. (The British authorities had refused to sanction the fight because of Jackson's retina problem). Early on in his career, Jackson was bombed out in two rounds by



Herol Graham with the Lonsdale belt. He always took pride in defending his domestic titles

more tragic circumstances - by Nigel Benn.

In November 1990, Graham should have beaten Jackson. Abandoning his backpeddling he took the fight to the Virgin Islander; Graham had him pinned in a corner, with his left eye closing, and was literally beating him up when Jackson threw one of his big punches blind and wild and knocked Graham cold. After the fight, Chris Eubank argued that Graham had got careless and that Jackson's knock out punch was more skillful than lucky. Chris Eubank may believe that but I'm damned if I do, although to be fair, the one result that can never be argued with is a knock out from a fairly thrown punch. For the record, this result nearly put me off boxing, and I have never been able to muster quite the same enthusiasm for the sport since.

From here on it was downhill all the way for Graham. He lost a rematch with Kalambay (unlike McCallum, who was defeated in a lacklustre first fight but put the record straight a return match.

Graham's final appearance in the ring was in March 1992, against Frank "Terminator" Grant, who stopped him in 9 rounds. No disrespect is intended to Mr Grant, but the Herol Graham he fought that night was a shadow of his former self, and a couple of years earlier Grant wouldn't have been fit to carry Herol's gum shield.

There was talk after this of Graham making a comeback, but it was not likely. He ended his career with a 49, 44-5 record (after winning 38 on the turn). Herol Graham was not only a unique fighter, but was without doubt one of the finest boxers never to win a world title. He is

also one of the sport's nice guys and had a big following in his native Sheffield. It really is a pity that a few of the many plaudits that will surely belong to the inimitable and enormously talented Naseem Hamed couldn't have belonged to him.