

SANDY Strang



A MAN can be destroyed but never broken, declared Ernest Hemingway, boxer and man of letters, of that old fisherman's heart-rending destiny in *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Ken Buchanan, boxer, 54 going on a 100, could rewrite the script.

Today, he returns to his small bedsit in Cumbernauld from a deeply poignant American journey to Canastota, New York State, an archetypal, small US town, some 20 miles from Syracuse, with a self-appointed messianic zeal for upholding the fight game's finest traditions and revering its most illustrious practitioners.

This past weekend, the goodly denizens of Canastota have warmly embraced the wee Scot, and inducted him into their International Hall of Boxing Fame.

A slight, stooped, shilpit figure now, Buchanan has been genuinely touched by this sudden restoration of recognition of a career which arguably places him at the apex of the Caledonian pantheon of world champions, above Lynch, Pater-son, McGowan, and Watt.

Official deification has come late for the 1971 Sportsman of the Year.

It's nearly 30 years since Buchanan, who as a wee boy had once watched "The Joe Louis Story" with his father in a dingy, downbeat Edinburgh picture house and vowed then that boxing was the vocation for him, took his polished, cerebral, mathematically precise technique across that same Atlantic to Los Angeles.

He outboxed Ruben Navarro to secure the undisputed world lightweight championship.

Impossible dream was unequivocally translated into glorious reality. The year before, he had become the only Scottish professional boxer to win a world title on foreign soil when he won the WBA version of the world lightweight crown on points over 15 rounds against Ismael Laguna in Puerto Rico.

However, the British Boxing Board of Control, firmly encamped in WBC territory, refused to recognise his title.

Two further successful defences of his world title, against Carlos Hernandez in London, and in another gruelling encounter with Laguna in New York, brought the conventional trappings of success: the money, the Daimler, the

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romantic move from urban nowhereville to upmarket opulence. But they were not to last. For then came the devil incarnate: Duran.

Panamanian Roberto Duran reminded Reg Gutteridge of a bull rhino battling his way out of a bush.

Dubbed "Fists of Stone", he was a grinding, rather than a chilling, puncher, the streetfighter par excellence, a primeval brawler who seemed to resent the inhibiting presence of a referee.

When he met Duran on that fateful New York night in June, 1972, in Madison Square Gardens, Buchanan appeared hesitant, sluggish, and singularly below par, and a vicious scrap ended heinously when neanderthal Duran smashed his knee into Buchanan's groin.

Referee Johnny Lo Bianco turned a Nelsonian eye. In that split second, unable to box on, Buchanan relinquished his coveted crown. Unacceptably and irrevocably. There was to be no rightful restoration.

That cynical nether region of boxing politics, that twilight zone of promoters and fixers, the conniving money men, those orchestrating ringmasters who lend credence to the view that apart from the fighters themselves you're talking serious lowlife, denied Buchanan a richly merited rematch.

He was too dangerous an opponent for their eminently marketable rising star, Duran.

Malign fate also kicked in closer to home: the fair-weather friends, the seedy hangers-on who ripped him off, the ill-advised business ventures which went awry, the avoidable personal mistakes, the sad disintegration of family life.

It was the classic ghetto tale of rags to riches and back again.

The harsh ravages of time have inevitably taken a heavy toll. Yet, the natural indefatigable resilience of the born fighter still burns bright.

"Lay down," said Willie Pep, 1946 world welterweight champion, to an old adversary, "so I can recognise you."

In his prime, Ken Buchanan MBE, the man who once topped a card featuring Muhammad Ali, did plenty of looking down. He still does.

Genuinely humble, searingly honest, magnificently defiant, proudly indomitable to the last.

Down but most assuredly not out. Canonised in Canastota.

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