

TYSON – SHADOW-BOXING IN THE TWILIGHT ZONE

By Justin Kavanagh

"I am the teacher of athletes. He most honours my style who learns Under it to destroy the teacher."
Walt Whitman.

The legendary fight trainer Cus D'Amato once looked at his protégé, Mike Tyson, and mused: "I don't succeed when I make a guy champion of the world. I succeed when I make that fella champion of the world and independent of me."

When Tyson steps into a Manchester ring next Saturday night (January 29) to face Julius Francis (a 35-year-old journeyman from London), he will have fallen far from the Platonic ideals that his master preached.

Tyson is now reduced to boxing shadows in the twilight zone: A tainted freak on abhors in the Old English Curiosity Shop.

In the patois of D'Amato's era, this is Palookaville: The nadir of a strange and wasted career.

The great philosopher of the ring died a year before Tyson fulfilled his dream by gaining the heavyweight title in 1986. But since his mentor's death, the most talented boxer of his generation has been hell-bent on defiling the legacy. Obliterating his master's voice. The perverse career of "Iron" Mike has read as the unnatural tale of the living haunting the dead.

Tyson was adapted, trained and raised from the age of thirteen by D'Amato. The romantics in the press were blessed with the ultimate fight fable of the wild kid from the streets of Brooklyn being taken from a house of correction and sculpted into a world champion by the old professor of pugilism.

But the Catskills camp was not the happy house of redemption as often reported. The 73 year-old D'Amato, desperate for one last champion, indulged the boy. In 1982, the 16-year-old boxer sexually molested the sister-in-law of trainer Teddy Atlas, himself a refugee from the mean streets. Atlas pointed a gun at Tyson's head to warn against further transgressions. D'Amato sacked Tyson. Tyson learned that champions (or even champions-in-waiting) can get away with it.

An air of menace also surrounded his quick rise to the heavyweight crown. Tyson disposed of opponents with lightning combinations and the killer instincts of a mugger. He spoke of dark desires: to burst Trevor Berbick's eardrums; to force the bone of Jesse Ferguson's nose back into his brain.

Joy eluded him. When he became the youngest-ever Heavyweight Champion, he expressed only the satisfaction of doing "what I came here to do."

And with the expected success came excess. Tyson's shrewd managers, Bill Cayton and Jim Jacobs, as well as negotiating unheard-of deals, had to arrange diplomatic seating arrangements for Tyson's three women – Miss America, a top model, and the television actress Robin Givens.

Cus D'Amato had never married, claiming it would give his enemies a chance to dupe him. Tyson soon entered into the American celebrity's version of an arranged marriage. Seeing Givens on television, he dilled a date. Givens' ambitious mother, Ruth Roper, approved of the boxer's bank balances and a match was made.

The marriage was a sham. Tyson later boasted to José Torres that he threw his best ever punch at his wife. The low point came on a trip to Moscow where Tyson hung off a balcony for 20 minutes threatening to jump. Catharsis took the form of a Barbara Walters exclusive TV interview, where the boxer suffered emasculation akin to David Beckham's firsthand: A drugged Tyson sat in silence as his wife catalogued the violence, the legal wrangling with Cayton over contracts and the (false) diagnosis of his "manic depression".

Tyson's homeboys put him straight the next day. He'd been "bissed". Had. The marriage ended and a bizarre scramble for the cash began.

When manager Jim Jacobs died in March 1988, Don King joined the mourners on the Los Angeles flight to attend, uninvited, the funeral of a man he barely knew.

Tyson's wife spent that same afternoon with her mother in the Manhattan office of Merrill Lynch, demanding "my money" – several million dollars in a trust account set up for Tyson by Cayton and Jacobs. On his return to New York, the ever watchful Don King took the trouble to secure the fighter's assets, while warning his "brother" against white managers and white women.

Bill Cayton was soon reluctantly bought out. King the vulture had swooped.

That summer saw the first of the two defining fights in Tyson's career. The Michael Spinks contest summed up the Champion's career to date. His life outside the ring was out of control. Yet he had to be amidst the wreckage of the ghetto, he seemed to thrive in such chaos.

Within 91 seconds, he had destroyed the most respected fighter he had faced so far, a man who climbed through the ropes with terror in his eyes. For the press gang, Tyson was now unbeatable. The now *andisputed* World Champion believed it too.

Within a year, his trainer Kevin Rooney, the last link to D'Amato, would be gone. Outside the gym, Tyson epitomised the American Dream consuming itself.

Money brought him misery and sycophants, lawsuits and probably larceny on a grand scale. Asked years later what became of a \$10 million cheque for the Spinks fight, Tyson was clueless. D'Amato had scoffed that money was for throwing off the back of trains.

"Security dulls the senses and pleasure is worse" Cus had warned. "The more pleasure you get out of living, the more fear you have of dying."

Tyson was now adrift. Surrounded by "yes" men he was virtually training himself. When he bothered to train. He was said to be drinking heavily. In his 1989 title defence against Frank Bruno the D'Amato tenets of the peek-a-boo defence, the constant side-to-side head movement and the "hit and slip" technique were gone. The stoic Mike Tyson prevailed but not before being staggered by the British challenger.

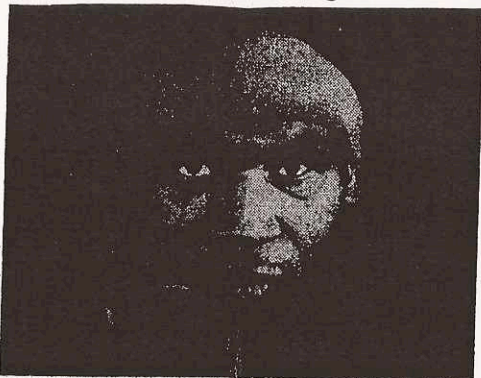
But the depth of incompetence in the champion's new corner was fully exposed in his next defence. Buster Douglas, a limited fighter, did what no-one before had done – standing up to Tyson, showing no fear. Incredibly, the champion's corner had no Enswell (a flat piece of chilled stainless steel), not even an icepack, for a badly swollen eye. The Heavyweight Champion of the World was treated between rounds with a condom filled with water, indicative of the quick victory expected, and the career neglected.

Douglas entered the ring in Tokyo at 42-1, the longest odds ever for a heavyweight title challenger. But as Sonny Liston and George Foreman had found out before (and as Cus would have told Tyson), as soon as you become unbeatable, you beat yourself. Douglas got off the canvas in the eighth round to sensationally stop Tyson in the tenth.

Tyson and Don King cried "foul", claiming the referee and timekeeper had given Douglas a 13-second count! Surely the fight was a no contest and a rematch would have to be fought! King's gambit didn't work. Douglas kept the crown.

But sport reveals character. And for the first time we saw Tyson's reaction to defeat: "I made \$12 million for losing a fight, or some crap like that" he boasted, "I'm even bigger now, got more money now than I did when I was Champion."

But if Tyson's priorities were awry, his sense of privilege and his sexual appetite were undiminished. By 1991, when he conceded a



poltergeist suit, his handlers had already settled several sexual assault charges brought against him through the years.

But Desiree Washington, a Miss Black America contestant, was not for buying. The heavyweight best had been unleashed in the wrong arena. America's beauty pageants are sacred ground in middle America and middle America would have his 220 pounds of flesh.

Everyone's got their theory on the rape, but only two people really ever know. To voice an opinion is merely to express your prejudice – black, white, feminist, chauvinist. Once again Mike Tyson was in the eye of the storm.

The question few asked was why, given his history, was Tyson invited to attend as a "role model" for black youths?

A national Baptist Church leader was investigated for a call he made to ask Washington why she was pursuing the case. Strangely enough, his Church had once given Don King a "humanitarian award". Washington, a practising Baptist, had reported a \$1 million offer made to drop the charges.

Once convicted, Tyson's place on the outside of American society was assured. Many champions had come from prison. No heavyweight champion, not even Ali, once reviled as a traitor, had gone there at the height of their fame. Boxing, in the minds of the largely white press was supposed to be about redemption. You came from poverty. You drifted into crime. You went to jail. Discovered a talent for combat. Got taken in by a Cus D'Amato figure and didn't look back. But once again, Mike Tyson had refused to conform, had bucked the natural order

of things.

By the end of his time in prison the PR facade was being reconstructed: Mike had read widely in jail, it was reported, particularly Communist literature. He now sported a Che Guevara tattoo – while maintaining a fleet of 30 exotic sports cars. Mike, like his second mentor, Don King, had not served time, he had made time serve him. He had even found himself a wife with a life and converted to Islam.

The probability, however, was that Tyson's very greed had continued to be served inside. *The Globe* broke the story of guards allowing exotic meals to be brought in, extra phone calls and virtually unlimited visitation. The story also included details of Tyson having sex with a female counsellor in her prison office.

Ever since that weird night in Tokyo ten years ago, Tyson has been a menacing spectre in the sordid underworld of boxing, an unnatural absence haunting the fight game. If Tyson was the natural heir to the heavyweight throne in the 1980s, he became in the 90s the man who didn't belong.

On his release from jail, the poltergeist of pugilism manifested himself once more: hurling aside the inanimate objects put before him on his "comeback" (many of whom seemed to fall over on their own volition) but coming uninvited in the face of solidity, courage and belief, as embodied by the warrior Evander Holyfield.

Having relinquished the WBC title in September of 1996 to avoid facing the current undisputed champion, Lennox Lewis, Tyson

suffered a shock 11th round knockout by Holyfield. The stage was set for the second defining fight of his career.

His state of mind in the week before the rematch with Holyfield was bleak:

"I've been taken advantage of all my life," he said. "I've been used, I've been dehumanised. I've been humiliated, and I've been betrayed. That's basically the outcome of my life... There's so much you can take and then you break."

"Team Tyson's" entrance into the Las Vegas arena in June 1997 resembled a baying pack of hounds unleashed. But when the ridiculous whooping and hollering stopped Tyson looked across the ring and for the first time in his life faced a man who had beaten him. A man who he knew didn't fear him. A man who could not be, would not be intimidated. You could now see fear in Tyson's eyes.

Surrounded by second-rate seconds, he was about to look awfully stupid. Like the schoolyard bully who is challenged to make good on his threats and can't.

When Holyfield butted him above the eye, Tyson's well-boned sense of persecution exploded. The Sweet Science yielded to street violence, and Holyfield's carotid went south. The boy from Brooklyn got disqualified, but he didn't get beaten to hell and back again.

D'Amato had said that all things being equal, it was the fighter who could understand and manipulate his fear that would prevail: "Both the hero and the coward feel fear," went the Gospel according to Cus. "The only difference between the hero and the coward is that the hero remains brave for five minutes longer."

Tyson had proved that he could not survive the lack of such wisdom. The great fighters that the young Tyson had studied on film at D'Amato's academy were talented warriors who had found a way to deal not just with their fear, but also with the erosion of talent by age. Men like Moore, Marciano and Ali who had adapted to meet their challenges. Tyson never did.

When his speed and power declined, he had failed to replace them with a decent defence, tactical game and ring nous. This is the kind of thing a boxer's manager pays a trainer to do. It's a slow process. It can take years.

The problem was that Tyson's "manager", like the others in the scampering pack, was a hand-picked Don King stooge. The keen edge of his own dress sense was more important to John Horne than the sharpness of his fighter's ring skills.

As for his trainer, well, that position, which should have been the most coveted job in boxing, had become a movable feast. Richie Giachetti and Panama Lewis shared the job at the time of the Holyfield rematch. Lewis had done time for tampering with a fighter's gloves. The joker in the pack was a "master motivator", or loudmouth, called Steve "Crocodile" Fitch, who like Don King had served five years in jail for manslaughter. Tyson's aura, if not his ringcraft, was well bolstered with gangster bravado.

Horne complained after the fiasco of Holyfield "crying like a bitch". Posturing has always played a big part in the psychological warfare before boxing contests. But the truth will out in the ring. Yet now, here was Horne posturing after the fight. Defending his man, who had been disqualified for biting a man's ear off. But Tyson was a child of his litigious era. It was always someone else's fault.

Horne's "crying like a bitch" tirade could have described his own winning persona. Loud, bejewelled and gaudily garbed, he was a very empty vessel. The hip-hop generation had truly arrived in boxing. And Tyson was lost in their vacuously rapped fantasy, unable to cope when reality hit hard.

Horne and Holyfield were soon gone. Tyson used King for \$100 million. In the words of ex-champ, Willie Pep: "First your legs go. Then you lose your reflexes. Then you lose your friends."

Mike Tyson gave up on boxing that night. "My career is over," he admitted. "I understand that."

So did Teddy Atlas, his trainer in the early years: "There's been a lot of lies in Tyson's career... from a lot of different sources. But there's a purity about boxing. No matter how you lie and lie, you are eventually forced into a situation that makes you come clean."

To the money men it scarcely mattered that he no longer held the title. He was still a huge attraction: being the most controversial. The most sensational. The most marketable. Not great boxing, but great TV. Sport was superfluous. Titles irrelevant. Tyson was scandal and scandal sets. Next Saturday night, the whiff of sulphur (not Spice) will waft around Manchester.

The irony of Tyson "refereeing" a World Wrestling Federation match during his year-long suspension spoke volumes of his lack of self, of pride, of any kind of dignity.

He returned last year to further sour the Sweet Science. He tried to break Francois Botha's arm, then, following another spell in prison

(for road rage), he hit Orin Norris after the bell. Even Las Vegas cried "no mas".

And now comes exile and the travelling roadshow. The combinations are long gone, only the purses of the gullible remain to be plundered. The boxer is dead. The shell of notoriety is being sold off to pay the taxman.

Mike Tyson has been the perfect Heavyweight Champion for the age. All eras get the sports heroes they deserve: The 60s and 70s got the courage and imagination of Ali and Pelté; Sporting gods who transcended all borders. The 80s and 90s got Tyson and Maradonna: Greedy street genius in annual freefall.

He also reflects the era's lack of shame. From presidents to heavyweight champs, the gratification of ego is seemingly excusable if the crime is committed in the service of one's celebrity. In America, in this age of egocentricity, fame negates all shame.

Mike Tyson will not leave the ring on Saturday night a broken man, nor a broke ex-champ, although that may yet be his destiny. Character is destiny. "People born round don't die square" was one of Cus D'Amato's main maxims.

D'Amato was cursed with handling history's most apologetic heavyweight champion, Floyd Patterson, a man who packed a disguise in his suitcase before every title fight to make good his escape from the shame of defeat. Yet his legacy to the world was the most unapologetic fighter of all, a man who needed no disguise for he had no shame, and ultimately, no identity to hide.

Teddy Atlas cast this judgement: "Tyson will never be successful as a human being, partly because of Cus D'Amato. He has no individual identity. He still talks Cus-isms, and now he's talking about Machiavelli and Mao and Plato. He always assumes someone else's identity. He is never himself."

Tyson's one joy in youth was keeping pigeons. He doted on them, loved to watch them soar up and away from the bleak streets of Brooklyn.

To see into Tyson's soul, it was said, you looked not into the black, impenetrable eyes, but at those lethal hands when they gently held his pets.

In December 1999, an animal welfare group rescued ferrets from the fighter's vast Las Vegas estate. Some of the animals were dead. The others, starved, raging in their cage. Dying of neglect.

Mike Tyson was nowhere.