



BOOK EXTRACT

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Author:	Tel Currie
Foreword By:	Roy Shaw
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6

GYPSY KINGS AND BARE KNUCKLE KNIGHTS!

Bare knuckle, on the cobbles or street fighting has been around since the year dot but is most commonly associated with the gypsy community. Of course, not all cobble fighters are of travelling stock but travellers have settled financial and domestic disputes in this noble way for centuries. The top man in the unlicensed game has long been known as the Guv'nor where the travellers hail him the 'King of the Gypsies'.

The most common method is what is known as a 'straightener' where no kicking or butting are permitted and a mutually agreed 'fair play man' acts as a referee. 'The fair play man' is usually somebody who has been a fighter themselves and has respect from everyone involved. No gloves are worn on the cobbles and commonly the fight continues until one side calls 'best' (gives in) or is simply unconscious. The 'all in' is even more savage and has no rules at all. 'All in' fights have been known to be fought to the death!

It goes without saying, that the 'all in' is the most brutal, savage form of organised street combat and is mostly saved for family verses other family disputes where pure hatred or revenge is the motivation. Bare knuckle fighting is illegal, unlicensed is not and here some get confused. I have worked on the doors for many years and some doormen count a punch up with a drunk or simply slinging one out as a street fight. If you have witnessed a real organised bare knuckle fight you will realise that this is not true. This is the only explanation for some of the ridiculous tallies of street fights some doormen claim. Lenny McLean claimed around 30,000 bare knuckle fights! (Depending on the interview). Sorry, but unless you are counting every drunk you turn away, that's impossible!

Also, so much money is staked on these fights that with that many clean wins, McLean would have owned his own island! Trust me, 20 to 30 organised knuckle fights is a lot even in a lifetime. Lenny's

unlicensed record was 15 fights, six losses, knocked-out four times, stopped once in three rounds and outpointed once. That would mean he won thousands of fights against raw hard knuckle but was knocked spark out with gloves on, it doesn't add up. None of this takes away from the respect I have for these men but when writing the truth and dispelling myths you can only deal in fact ... and some people love their myths. I find it amazing that many people need these things pointed out to them. It's also a difficult thing to do when the person in question has passed away, but again, there are no insults here just plain fact. Everyone of us must pass away at some point, that does not give us the right to be regarded as perfect and it has to be said that soem of what Lenny McLean said was far from the truth. This has now even being admitted by McLean fans, like my good friend Tony Thomas, whose book *The GUV'NOR* through the eyes of others is a classic read. But some of these books are just so obviously made up. Unlike pro boxing, you can't just look up fighters' records in unlicensed or bare knuckle, so you are simply taking the author's word.

I am fortunate enough to have lots of gypsy friends who are staunch, respected people including good families like the Frankhams, Stockins, Smiths, Frenches, Brazils and men like 'Gypsy' Joe Carrington ... all good solid families. These are proud people and don't leave their crap everywhere, some of the caravans are like palaces.

There are some great bare knuckle gypsy names that run down the years including ... Tucker Dunn, the Gaskins, Mark Ripley, Hughie Burton, Uriah Burton (Known as Big Just), John-John Stanley, boxer Tom Taylor, Dan Rooney, John Rooney, Ernie McGinley, Henry 'The dentist' Arab, Henry 'The outlaw' Francis, Eli Frankham, Joe-Boy Botton, Bobby Frankham, Johnny Love, Joe Smith and, one of the best fighters I have witnessed, Louis Welch from Darlington who may well be the modern day 'King of the Gypsies'. Mark Ripley from Kent is a man with an awesome reputation. Joey Pyle's son Joe jnr, a man who of course was brought up surrounded by the fight game, calls Mark 'one hell of a tasty bastard'. Joe jnr has seen it all and is not easily impressed. When you add that to the equation, Mark really is a bit special.

One man who you really wouldn't want to fight on the cobbles is former British Light Middleweight champion Andy Till. He is simply ferocious! He is no longer a light middleweight but he is one of the hardest men I have met and I know most of them!

When Andy was British Champion, he was also a milkman. He wasn't my milkman but Greenford/Hanwell where I am from is next door to Andy's manor of Northolt. He would do his roadwork at around 3am then go on his round, that would kill most people for a start off! He was a good man and took his Lonsdale belt to his kids' school to show all the other children. Andy was a warrior in the ring, one of those you would have to near kill to beat.

On his milk round one day, he knocked on the door of a family with a bit of a reputation, to collect the bill. For some reason, a row broke out. Then three big lumps who were brothers all sprinted halfway down the stairs and took flying leaps at Andy. Andy clumped each one right on the button while they were in mid-air. Each of the brothers thumped to the ground fast asleep after being knocked spark out. Another member of the family, then went to fetch the milk bill money. If only they had of done that in the first place!

Andy had some rowdy, loyal supporters as well. during a fight with a guy named Robert McCracken from Watford. The crowd tried to kill each other in one of the worst boxing crowd bust ups ever seen. But if you want to see Andy at his best, get hold of the two fights against Wally Swift, a highly rated boxer also from Watford, you will see how hard Andy Till is. I think Andy could of been pretty untouchable on the unlicensed circuit but, although he came to mine and a few other shows, I don't know if he was interested in doing it. Andy had been fighting since a very young age, so he may have fancied a well earned rest by then. But he's certainly not someone to take liberties with!

Without doubt one of, if not the hardest man in a street fight, is not a gypsy either but on the top rung of the 'chaps' his name is Vic Dark. Vic is a soft spoken, polite, gentleman from the East End and now lives in Essex. Young Vic Dark was a member of the notorious West Ham I.C.F. (Inter City Firm). A lot of hard men started in the I.C.F. Like Carlton Leach, Cass Pennant, Steve Guy and of Course Billy Gardner. Add Vic Dark, and just those few are positively lethal!

Vic is a black belt in a number of martial arts and a heavy weight lifter. But Vic doesn't use Karate or whatever, he mixes everything together into one awesome street fighting technique so that I really don't think anyone would get near him on the street. He is also extremely respected by the top so called gangsters. He was a pallbearer along with young Joe Pyle, Roy Shaw, Jamie Foremen (movie star son of Freddie), Freddie himself and Ronnie Nash at the funeral of the 'Boss of Bosses' Joey Pyle snr. That's how highly Vic is thought of. He was also one of Reg Kray's trusted inner circle in the nick.

Vic is someone I see as ideal. There's no shouting and roaring, he's a gentleman. He would rather have a laugh with his trusted mates than go fighting all over the place but take a liberty and God help you!

A couple of years ago, they tried to get Vic put away for life after a contract killing. Every day he went to court there were guns, vans and helicopters everywhere. I wrote to Vic and gave him my support while he was on remand. When he got a not guilty (quite right too!) he phoned me and sent me a message of thanks for the support. I will always support Vic Dark. A man among men!

One man from America, who has been called the 'hardest man in the world', is Randy Couture, a mixed martial arts fighter who I'm sure we will hear a lot more of in the future. Perhaps a fight against Kimbo Slice? But then again, my cage fighting and mixed martial arts knowledge is pretty crap!

As I said earlier, the man who has been considered as 'King of the Gypsies' for many years now is 'gypsy' Johnny Frankham. Johnny was not only a thrilling cobble fighter, he was British light heavyweight champion and had three blistering fights with Chris Finnegan at a packed Royal Albert Hall when the crowd and chairs became as much a part of the fight as Frankham and Finnegan. Johnny was usually asked to be 'fair play man' in local fights because he had the respect of everyone and still does. As a ring fighter, he was extremely hard to hit, a bit like Kevin Paddock but, with respect to Kevin, of a lot higher calibre than the unlicensed fighters.

"Frankham, You are as slippery as an eel!" Finnegan called to Johnny at ringside in jest at one night out. On the cobbles, he was the complete reverse. Another gypsy warrior who commands great respect is Les Stevens from Reading who was also a pro and took the great John Conteh the full distance which took some doing in those days. John Conteh was one of the most underrated fighters this country has produced. I spent a couple of great fight nights in the company of these two legends. The real deals are always gentlemen, it's the wannabes that are prats!

Bartley Gorman claims: "I challenged Johnny to a bare knuckle fight a couple of times at Doncaster Races. I was heavier than him but he was quick and experienced. I would liked to have tested my boxing skills against his." I related this story to Johnny Frankham who nearly choked on his beer laughing! I know a hell of a lot of good gypsies as Joe Smith and Jimmy Stockin will confirm for you and nobody had heard about these challenges!

Bartley also claims with confidence: "If Mike Tyson and Lennox Lewis were fighting in one field and I (Bartley) were fighting in the next field, all the gypsies would come and watch me." What do you think?

One ex bare knuckle fighter stands out for various reasons, he was a decent fighter but far from the best and certainly not the worst. He was also a safe blower, that great occupation pioneered by men like George 'Tatters' Chatham and wartime double agent Eddie Chapman, in the same era as the Irish Charmer Peter Scott was stealing Sophia Loren's jewels and breaking into any Mayfair pad that took his Raffles-influenced fancy. But this young cobble fighter from Sunderland turned desperately to the cobbles and gelignite just to make ends meet. As he fought and felt the pain, there was no way he could have known that one day he would buy Darlington football club and clear their five million plus debt in one swoop. He is worth £300 million, he went from a four year prison sentence to the *Sunday Times* rich list from selling chipboard and worktops. He is of course George Reynolds.