

Nipper

The Amazing Story of Boxing's Wonderboy

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‘Perhaps the greatest tragedy the sport of boxing has to offer is the story of Nipper Pat Daly... So long as boxing is carried on and men have memories Nipper Pat Daly will not be forgotten.’

– Gerard Walter (*News Chronicle* and *Daily Mirror* sports reporter),
White Ties and Fisticuffs, Hutchinson, 1951

Introduction

‘Of course I’ve heard of Nipper Pat Daly,’ exclaimed TV pundit, writer and sports personality Reg Gutteridge with some incredulity. ‘Mind you,’ he added after a pause, ‘I’ve not heard that name for years.’ It was a privilege to speak with Mr Gutteridge for some 20 minutes back in the summer of 2007, and to hear first-hand some of his favourite anecdotes from a lifetime in boxing.

His knowledge stretched back to when his father and uncle – the famous Gutteridge twins, who seconded everyone from Eric Boon to Primo Carnera – introduced him to the sport that became his bread and butter. He told me that Premierland, the legendary East End hall where Nipper Pat built his career, was slightly too early for him; but he well remembered watching boxing elsewhere during the depressed 1930s. He recalled, in particular, seeing contests at the Holborn Stadium (site of Nipper Pat’s biggest fight), which was bombed to bits during World War Two.

It was wonderful to speak to a man who had witnessed first-hand the long lost sporting epoch I intended to write about, and all the more so one whose commentary skills and writing I greatly admire. I left Reg hoping we’d speak again (we never did), but also with the sad realisation that he was one of the last men alive who could talk first-hand of the fight game of the inter-war years; and moreover one of the last who recalled the days when Nipper Pat Daly was a household name. Reg passed away in January 2009.

Another splendid writer, the late Gilbert Odd, was the man first tasked with writing this biography. Unfortunately, that book never reached fruition, but during the early 1980s Nipper Pat wrote down his memoirs for Odd, many of which, I suspect, were forwarded on to him with no copies made. Luckily, copies of *some* of them – eloquently penned in old-fashioned handwriting – remain with the Daley family and are reproduced throughout this book. I believe they add a real feel for the era, and, although Pat was a matter-of-fact type of man, at times we get a real insight into his thoughts and feelings; as great an insight, anyway, as a man of his phlegmatic nature would ever offer. Parts of the book written by Pat in the

Nipper

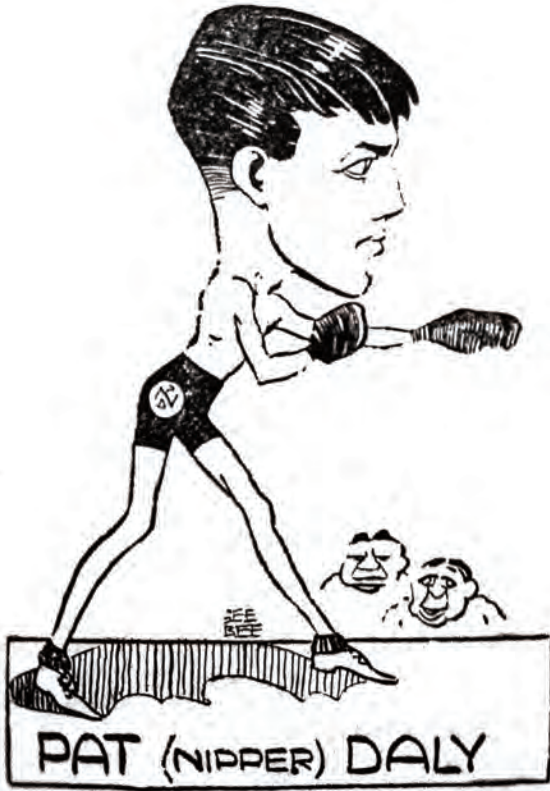
first person are from these notes made originally for Gilbert Odd.

Without realising it, I started researching this book back in 2002, when I decided to learn more about my paternal grandfather, who had died when I was seven, who I was told was in his day a very gifted professional boxer, but of whom I otherwise knew very little. As time passed and I delved deeper into Nipper Pat's career and the age in which he fought, I became increasingly sure that I had unearthed an incredible yet long forgotten human-interest story.

Before I knew it, I was immersed in a bygone world of smoky, ramshackle boxing halls, fly-by-night promoters, unscrupulous managers, and fighting men whose courage went beyond the call of duty. It was a sporting scene unlike any I'd heard of or known, and I could scarcely believe that it happened not so long ago. For the boxers of that era, trading leather was less a sport than a means of survival. Their limitless courage, their single-minded resolve, and their willingness to fight anyone, anywhere at any time sets them apart. It was an era stranger than fiction, crammed with controversy, colour and larger-than-life characters, like a chapter from a Dickens novel.

Nipper Pat Daly was as extraordinary as the era in which he boxed. He was one of the most amazing talents to grace a boxing ring, and his achievements while in his mid-teens – when he not only beat but outclassed a string of champions (all grown men of course) – go unsurpassed. Although he never won a British championship, he could have become the youngest to do so given the chance. Indeed, the chief question concerning fight scribes in those days, was at which weight would the kid win his first *world* title? He never got that far, but all the evidence suggests he should have. To discover what went wrong and to understand why he retired from the sport he loved when only 17, please read on.

Nipper



A caricature from *The Sporting Chronicle*, 4 Sep 1929.

1

The Champion and the Child

In May 1928 Giovanni Sili, flyweight champion of Italy, arrived in London to do battle with one of Britain's best eight-stone boxers. It was his first bout on British soil and most likely his first time in the country. He had probably heard of his opponent, who for some months had been setting newspaper columns aglow with vivid reports of his ring exploits, but he had never seen him in action. Nipper Pat Daly – the 'Marylebone wonder' – had arrived seemingly from nowhere and quickly established himself as Britain's most precocious boxing talent. Big things were forecast for this gifted young man – comparisons were being made with the greats of yesteryear, and some had already tipped him as a future world champion – but in no way did this deter or frighten the Italian.

While this young British prospect had chalked up some notable victories, he had never faced a fighter of Giovanni Sili's class. The 23-year-old Italian had captured the national title the previous November, dismantling Enzo Gaggiula in Milan. And five weeks ago, in Paris, he'd fought the top-ranked Frenchman Emile Pladner, who within a year would be world flyweight champion. The man from Roma was proud to be champion of Italy – a distinction he'd earned through years of dedication. He was well known for his punching power – tragically, in his next title defence later that year, Sili's opponent Enzo Cecchi would die following a knockout. If the young Brit was as gifted as they said, then Sili's powerful right hand would surely nullify his boxing talent. Age, experience and weight of punch were all on the Italian's side.

The fight would be staged at the headquarters of British boxing: Covent Garden's illustrious National Sporting Club (NSC), an establishment that fashioned the rules of modern boxing and for decades ruled the fight game with an iron fist. Traditionally this stuffy members-only establishment – in which fights were observed in near silence – was the reserve of the wealthy and well-connected. On a

normal NSC night, a hushed, dinner-jacketed assembly looked on as two working-class lads fought hell for leather for their entertainment. The only sounds audible were the gasps and grunts of the fighters and the dull thud of leather against skin or glove. The NSC once held a monopoly over British title fights. It chose the challengers and told both men under what terms and on which date they would fight. No one apart from the Club's elite patrons could watch these contests; the 'great unwashed' could only read about them in newspapers. But by 1928 the status quo had altered; the Club had lost its grip and promoters with deep pockets had moved in. They now staged championship fights at large venues, such as Olympia and the Royal Albert Hall – all paying customers were admitted and the NSC's blessing was no longer needed. Faced with financial ruin, that year, for the first time in its history the Club had opened its doors to the general public for special events. With great reluctance, but the utmost necessity, the cloth-cap and muffler brigade were finally allowed through its sacred gates.

One such occasion was the Anglo-Italian boxing night of Friday 18 May 1928. The bill comprised two 15-rounders and three 10s – each pitting a top Italian against an Englishman. Mr A. Molinari, the promoter, hoped the evening would raise funds for the Italian hospital in London and sold his tickets at a premium: £1 10s for ringside, £1 1s for stalls, from 15s 6d to 5s 9d for reserved seating and 3s 6d unreserved – all sizeable sums for the day. Come fight night, the cheaper seats and standing areas were crowded, but much to the organisers' surprise, the dearer seats were only sparsely filled. Did price hikes alone account for so many notable absentees? Or was the prospect of a working-class invasion simply too much for some Club members to bear?

Nipper Pat Daly, who opposed Giovanni Sili in one of the 10-rounders, arrived at the Club with his trainer and manager, 'Professor' Andrew Newton, at around 8pm. If the bouts all went the distance – which they virtually did – he would not be due on until 12:30am, so could expect a long wait. Sprawled across two of the NSC's floors were a series of dressing rooms for the boxers. Pat and his party settled into one next to Giovanni Sili, and waited to be called out. Among the Daly team was Leo Phillips, another Newton pupil, who in the '30s boxed out of Birmingham and became a top

welterweight. At this time he was 14 years old and accompanying his famous stable-mate at Newton's invitation, on the condition he brought his violin. His job that night was not to box but to play songs chosen by the Professor. In a moment of inspiration the Prof picked the famous Neapolitan ballad, *O sole mio*, and did not let Phillips change the tune all night. 'Play it again, Leo,' he growled, 'we'll show 'im we're not afraid of 'im.' His plan, presumably, was to unsettle the Italian and gain a valuable psychological edge.

Meanwhile, in the Club's main hall, two great nations waged war. Salvatore Ruggirello drew first blood for Italy in a contest that ended bizarrely. His opponent, Jack Stanley of Deptford, slipped on a patch of water in the ninth, landed awkwardly and was counted out. Later it transpired that he had dislocated a kneecap. Next, Primo Ubaldo made it two-nil to Italy, forcing Erith's Jim Shaw to retire between the ninth and tenth with a badly cut eye. But Bristol lightweight George Rose salvaged some English pride with a 'no thrills' points win over Milan's Saverio Turiello. England then fell irreversibly behind when Mile End bantamweight Lew Pinkus lost a barnstormer of a fight to Dino Tempesti. Italy had triumphed, but nobody present dared leave their seat just yet. The most intriguing bout on the bill was up next.

With Professor Newton in tow, Pat left his dressing room and strode out into the magnificent Club hall. On one side was a stage, a relic from the building's theatrical days, over which the curtain was permanently raised. On here, their pens eagerly poised, sat pressmen on rows of benches. Overhead, stretching along the other sides of the hall, were ornately crafted balconies, shaded by chandeliers; clusters of men leaned over them for a bird's-eye view. Beneath them was the gallery, which on this night was the busiest part of the hall. In the very middle, gleaming brightly beneath electric chandeliers, was a white, roped squared ring, clearly visible to all in this old amphitheatre. To men accustomed to watching fights in grimy, ramshackle buildings, this magnificent hall, with its splendid décor and prestigious past, was a real treat. As Pat approached the ring, a volley of cheers rang out through a dense fog of tobacco smoke. With an appreciative smile he climbed through the ring ropes, crossed to the farthest corner, and sat down in a relaxed posture. Sili appeared next and he too received a warm welcome, particularly from an Anglo-Italian contingent getting

its first glance at a national champion. Ducking beneath the ropes, he shot a cursory glance at his opponent; he then paused and started to laugh.

Whatever the champion had read about England's young prospect, however he had envisaged him, he was not prepared for the undernourished cherubic face gazing up at him from across the ring. In contrast to the Italian's own stocky, bronzed physique and rugged countenance, was this pale, gangly adolescent with a face like a choirboy. In place of muscle mass, around shoulders, thighs and calves was angular bone draped in a milky whiteness of skin. His opponent didn't look like a prizefighter – he looked like he needed a good square meal. Yet if Sili had studied the youth more closely; if he had looked beyond the immediate; he would have spotted an already flattened nose – the product of scores of professional fights – and would have noticed in those eyes an unshakable gaze, devoid of fear, belying the boyish features. The Italian, however, had not.

'I did not come all the way to England to fight a child,' he sneered, and began to remove his gloves. He explained both to his seconds and to the referee that for the champion of Italy to be matched in this way was not just a joke but an insult. In any case, he added, he would like to avoid killing 'this little boy' if he could help it. 'If you don't fight you'll be letting your country down,' they told him. 'Think of all the Italians who've turned out to see you box!' At first he maintained that he would not proceed with the contest; the mere thought of him fighting this skinny youth was absurd. But after further cajoling, finally he relented, and the fight was back on.

The two boxers were then called to centre ring for final instructions, and for the first time stood face-to-face. Pat was a few inches taller but also a shade lighter than Sili (they met at catchweights with separate weigh-ins). Unfazed by the furore of a few moments before, Pat met his rival with a confident stare. In response, the Italian narrowed his eyes and curled his lips in utter disdain. Back in his corner, he muttered churlishly to his seconds, then shot Pat another scornful glare, as if to say, 'This will not take me long.' To this the Londoner grinned and shrugged his shoulders.

At the clang of the first bell Sili shot from his corner in a crouching stance, bobbing and weaving as he moved. He seemed determined to

finish the fight quickly and teach the matchmaker and this impertinent infant a lesson. *Boxing* (the sport's trade paper) surveyed the action as follows:

‘This Sili knows a thing or two and he tried them all out. Crouching almost to a sitting posture and swerving his head and body from side to side, he presented a constantly moving target and would then leap into furious action, swinging, hooking and lashing out in desperate attempts to send a winner over. Pat kept cool and boxed brilliantly, refused to be tempted into experiments, made use of his excellent left at every available opportunity, used the uppercut judiciously, but wisely refrained from taking risks. The boy had sensed at once that his opponent was laying traps and he wouldn't be caught.’

The Italian pulled out every trick in his repertoire, but to his astonishment he found his opponent wise to them all. In a bid to confuse the youngster he tried alternating his stance between orthodox and southpaw. Each time he did this, however, he was caught by a stinging straight left or well-timed right. Round after round the British lad bombarded his man with piston-like lefts. Time and again poor Sili was forced to retreat behind raised gloves, astonished by the pace and precision of these blows and left shaking his head in disbelief.

In the later rounds – his face now a bloodied mess – Sili charged at Pat in a desperate series of punch-slinging rushes. But he was swiftly stopped in his tracks by a hard left or well-placed uppercut, or made to look clumsy by a neat sidestep and counter.

At the close of 10 action-packed three-minute rounds, ringsiders, among them some of the leading figures in Anglo-Italian society, rose to their feet amid rapturous applause. They had just seen the finest fight of the evening and a show of boxing worthy of the best. The lad from London was the undoubted winner, as Signor Sili sportingly acknowledged. Sidling up alongside him, through cracked and swollen lips, Sili smiled to his conqueror and remarked in broken English, ‘You-a look like such a baby, but you are a great, great fighter!’

Boxing's correspondent was thrilled by what he had seen, declaring, ‘Pat gave one of the best performances of his already brilliant career, and won well... Nipper Pat put up one of the best displays of scientific boxing seen anywhere for quite a while.’

Giovanni Sili, flyweight Champion of Italy, had to be led from the ring by his seconds. The blazing ring lights had faded, the audience were now shadows, and both of his eyes were swollen shut. His 'unworthy' opponent was unmarked. Pat was 15 years old.

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