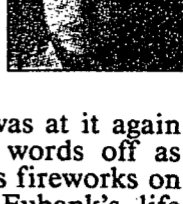


Eubank hits the nail on the head

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LockerRoom

SO CHRIS EUBANK was at it again last week, letting his words off as wantonly as he releases fireworks on the beach. Much of Eubank's life and career has been gaudy pantomime stuff and the greasepainted theatricality of the man has to be subtracted from his latest pronouncements before their real worth can be assessed.

Not for the first time, Eubank hit a nail on the head.

Needless to say, the members of the audience to which Eubank plays — those who don't discriminate between the tawdry antics of the World Boxing Organisation and the mechanics of real sport — were quick to fall into a fainting swoon when they heard Eubank suggest that he should have placed his career before Steve Collins' life when they first met in the ring at Millstreet two years ago.

Eubank, angling no doubt for a rematch, was quick to water down the specifics of his sentiment, announcing afterwards that he regretted his choice of words. Inadvertently, or not, however, he had stumbled across a core truth at the heart of boxing, one which anyone who seeks to defend the sport must first confront. To advance, you must destruct.

Remember the scene in Millstreet late in that bout as Collins (still then in the early stages of his metamorphosis into celtic buffoon) was sent reeling around the ring with a couple of telling blows which stilled the Stevo Chorus Line-up in the stand. He hit the canvas twice.

Rather than finish Steve Collins off, Eubank retreated. He stuck up his plumage and strutted a little, he made faces and taunted Collins, but he didn't do what was required of a professional boxer in such circumstances. He didn't step in and deliver the concussive blows which would lay Collins out on the canvas.

In the ring, Eubank put Collins' life before his career.

He had good reason for his caution, Collins' antics in the preamble to that fight were shameful. It is one thing for the Celtic Warrior to dress up in a kilt and funny haircut and dispatch hapless firemen from Kansas for the greater good of sport. It was another thing entirely for Collins to pretend that night to be fighting under the influence of hypnosis.

Collins, with typically-subtle, pre-fight antics spelled out in great neon letters that he would be hypnotised for the fight and would be feeling no pain. Eubank took fright and for much of that day steadfastly said that he would not fight.

Those dullards and patriots with shamrocks in their brain and not just shaved into their temples laughed their heads off. Collins, however, was cynically mining the seam of tragedy which runs under all boxing.

Weeks previously, Gerald McLelland had been lifted from the ring in a coma and on a stretcher, having been put there by Nigel Benn's fists. Before and after that bout, the boxing world was rife with rumours that the services of a well-known hypnotist had been used.

These events would have sent a shiver down any man's spine. The stark truths of boxing are scarcely digestible. Tossing in the possibility of boxers continuing to absorb punishment beyond their natural threshold because some hokey medicine man in a rented tuxedo has conditioned him to feel no pain makes boxing more obscene than ever.

In his autobiography, Collins quotes from Eubank's first introduction to Tony Quinn as follows . . .

Quinn: "Well my name is Tony Quinn and I am a doctor of clinical hypnosis and I've been working with Steve for the past month . . . when Eubank hits him, I've ensured Steve will not feel any pain . . ."

Eubank: "This is not right. How can I fight a man who has been hypnotised? He will not feel pain. This is dangerous. It is wrong."

Collins: "On the way back to the safe house, we rolled around with laughter. 'We've fooled him,' I told Tony. 'We've fooled the poser.'"

So they rolled around with laughter, did they? Eubank, who had experienced the profoundly upsetting experience of almost ending Michael Watson's life in White Hart Lane in September 1991, had said in the immediate aftermath of that fight that he wanted Watson's urine checked, so abnormal had his responses and strength been.

"Michael's behaviour in that fight," said Eubank later, "his strength, and his vigour, his motivation was abnormal and unnatural."

Indeed it was. Coming to the end of that bout, Eubank needed a knockout, Watson needed to stay on his feet.

At the bell for the start of the 11th round that night, Watson dropped Eubank with a right cross and a left hook. Eubank stood up after a count of three and Watson walked blithely into an arcing uppercut, a huge, swinging punch which seared through the middle of his defences with the explicitly violent impact of a comic-book haymaker.

The damage to his brain was done then, but conditioned as he was, his subconscious told him to stay on his feet for another three minutes. The grim tango went on. Watson fought on after his body told him not to.

Eubank has lived with that, the knowledge that "they, the crowd, want to see you do it. They want to see it done to you, or you do it to the man."

He has had plenty of poignant moments. Here is Ambrose Mendy's account of another bad night for boxing back in 1990 when Jim McDonnell was carried out of the ring unconscious after a fight with Kenny Vice at the Albert Hall.

"He had been knocked out like you cannot believe it's possible to knock somebody out. Whiplash, blood from the ears, mouth, everywhere. He's out. He's just gone completely. He's history. He's going into a coma, like rapid . . . He's going deeper and deeper and deeper and over in the corner, crying like my two-year-old son cries, was Eubank. I said to him: 'You have a distinctive voice. You train together, talk to him.'"

Eubank spoke into McDonnell's ear and brought him back from the depths before it was too late.

All this was swirling in Eubank's mind in the 10th round of a fight against a man whom he believed to be hypnotised, the 10th round of a bout which had started with him reaching out to touch gloves with Collins. According to his autobiography, at this point Collins looked Eubank in the eye and told him: "I'm going to kill you."

The courage of boxers lies not just in the ability to take punches. They must, as Thomas Hauser wrote many years ago in *The Black Lights*, "move toward a battered, beaten foe whose hands are down, whose eyes are rolling and if the referee allows, smash his face again."

That's the bare bones of it. At such junctures, you put your career before the possibility of killing or crippling another man. In the ring, having been cynically duped by the Celtic Warrior, Eubank drew back from that.

There was pure humanity in that gesture. All the rest is just talk, sanctimony, cant and boxing hype.