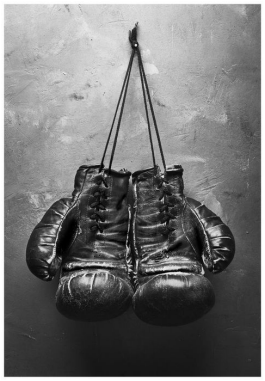
# Going 12 ROUNDS with Life

Hard-hitting life lessons,
from inside the ropes

Matthew Williams

# LET'S GET READY TO RUMBLE...



Is there any better metaphor for life than boxing?

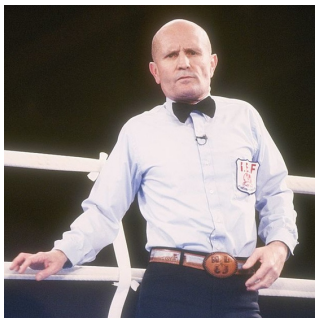
Competition stripped to its most basic form, yet demanding a level of skill that is easily missed by the untrained eye. A sport in which at any given second everything can change, where victory can be seized from the jaws of defeat, and fortunes are made and destroyed in the blink of an eye and the crashing of a gloved fist against an unprotected chin.

There is a purity in the pursuit of boxing - the sport - that is in stark contrast to the greed and self-interest that all too often governs the business of boxing.

So deeply interwoven is boxing within our culture that many of our most common sayings derive from this most noble and brutal of physical arts: coming up to scratch; down for the count; on the ropes, and below the belt, to quote just a few.

Boxing mirrors life, and just as a tough fight reveals the character of its combatants, so does boxing reveal a number of truths about the nature of this one life that each of us shares.

So, let’s get ready to rumble, 12 life lessons from the greatest sport of them all.



Without further ado, let’s get it on, c’mon!

# ROUND 1
## It's not fair

*'It's not fair man, c'mon'.*

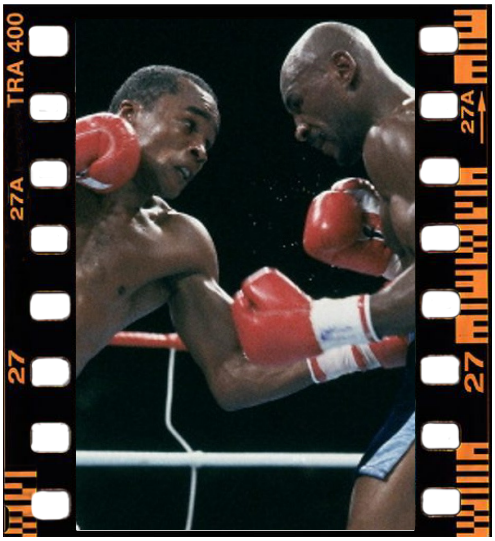
Listen to any child and you will recognise the value we place on fairness.

But life isn't fair. You won't always get what you want, nor what you deserve. Different agendas are often at play that will thwart you in the pursuit of your goals. Sometimes, you will be the beneficiary of unfairness, other times you will be its victim.

It's not fair, but it doesn't have to be personal. We mustn't let life's unfairness make us bitter, or turn us into a victim of circumstance and give our power away.

As Marvelous Marvin Hagler said ahead of his world title winning fight against Alan Minter, following a much disputed draw in his first title tilt against Vito Antuofermo, for his next opportunity he would be bringing his own judges - his fists. Hagler kept his promise and reigned as a dominant champion for seven years, before walking away after finding himself on the wrong end of a hotly disputed decision against Sugar Ray Leonard.

We won't always win, we won't always be treated fairly - but we can always choose to give our all and conduct ourselves like a champion - with dignity and class.




***Click image for HBO Legendary Nights***
***The Tale of Hagler vs Leonard***

# ROUND 2

*'Everyone has a plan - until they get punched in the mouth'*

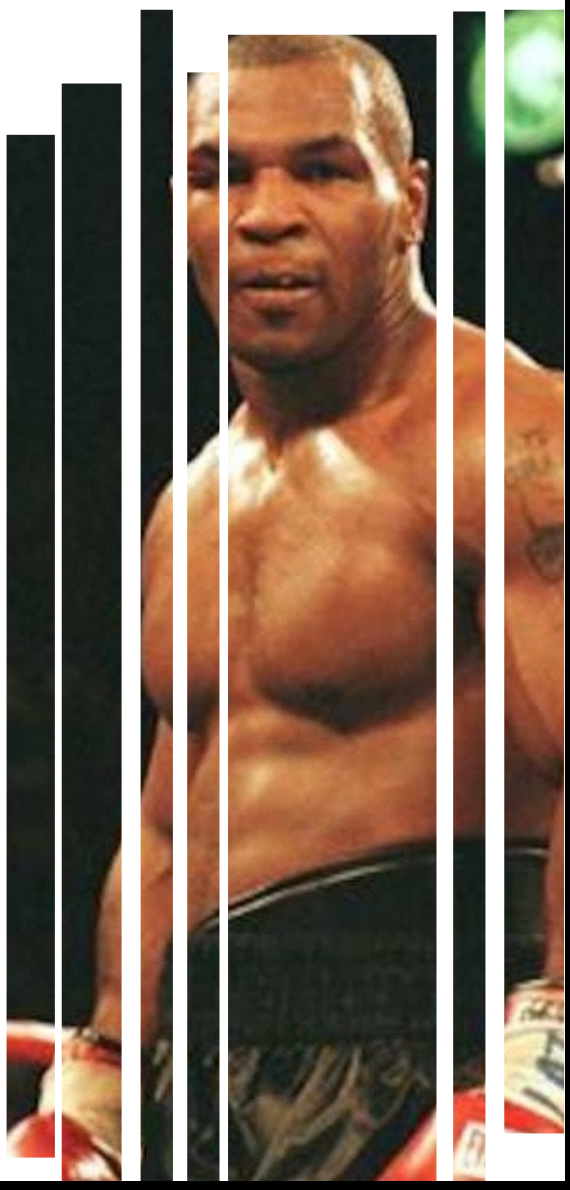
Iron Mike Tyson will forever be remembered for the emphatic statements he made in the squared circle with his fists, but he made some pretty astute statements outside of the ring too.

We might have it all figured out on paper - we've calculated the best strategy and tactics to use, we've done all we can to plan and prepare for victory, and then...

...the plan goes out of the window.

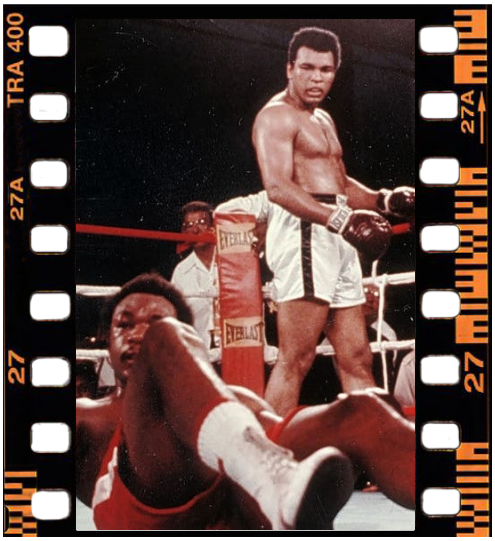
Ask Thomas Hearns. He planned to use his reach and boxing skills to keep Marvelous Marvin Hagler out of range in their 1985 classic, but Hagler had other ideas. Marvin took it to Hearns from the first bell with a fury rarely witnessed, forcing the Hitman to stand and fight, until he could fight no longer.

So it is with life. Often our success comes down to how we adapt when the plan has to be ripped up. It's not necessarily the strongest that survive, but the most adaptable.



Perhaps the best example of this comes from The Greatest himself. When, in 1974, Muhammad Ali realised at the end of the first round that he wouldn't be able to dance around George Foreman for 15 rounds, he courageously - seemingly foolishly - decided to soak up Big George's bombs and achieved the virtual impossible, rope-a-doping his way to triumph in the epic Rumble In The Jungle.

Plans are helpful, but to maximise our chances of success we must know when it's time to change things up and do things a different way.




***Click image for highlights of Foreman vs Ali 'The Rumble in the Jungle'***

# ROUND 3

## Appearances can be deceptive...

It's easy to take people and situations at face value, and to judge them on first impressions. Perhaps we are too easily influenced by what we hear about them from others, by the snapshots of their lives that we see on social media, by their looks, or by a particular moment or incident in their lives.

But things are rarely as simple as they seem on the surface.

Anthony Joshua found that out when he faced off against a rotund Andy Ruiz in defence of his world heavyweight titles. Looking at the two fighters side-by-side, few would have predicted anything other than a spectacular and conclusive KO for AJ.

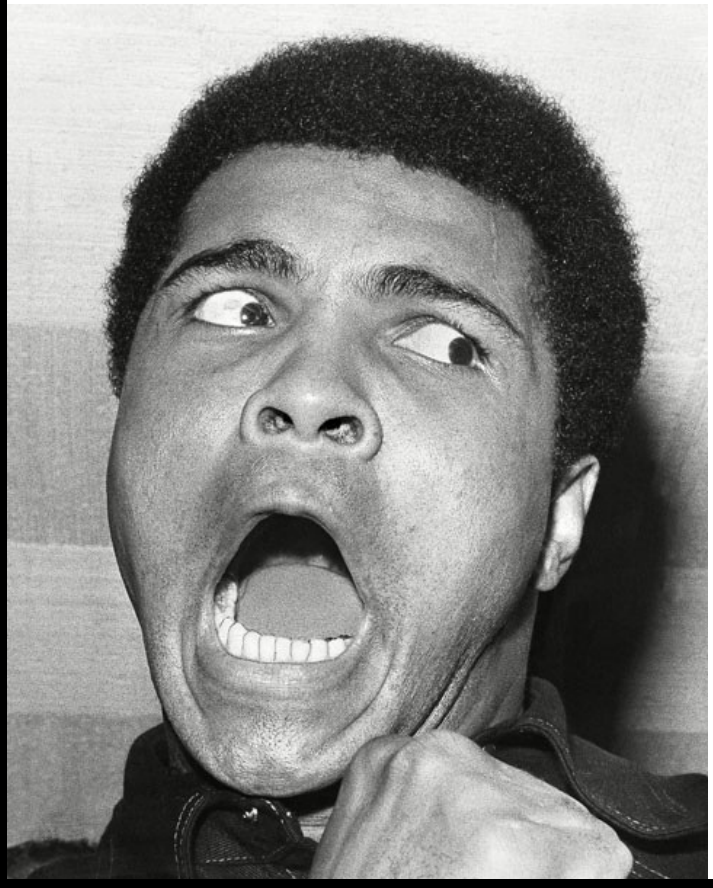
Well, it didn't work out quite that way.

It's easy to judge and condemn others too quickly, and to form our opinions based on what we see on the surface, ignorant to what lies beneath. Remember, there's usually far more to people and situations than meets the eye.

# ROUND 4
## Talk is cheap

Boxing is well known for trash talk. In fact, many a fighter - and plenty of promoters - have profited very handsomely from a bit of the verbals.

Some of the biggest names in the sport have had the biggest mouths - Muhammad Ali and Tyson Fury to name but two.



It's all good talking the talk, but when it comes down to it, what matters is how we walk the walk.

(Something that Ali and Fury proved to be pretty good at...).

Actions are what matter, and it is our actions that reveal our true character and spirit.

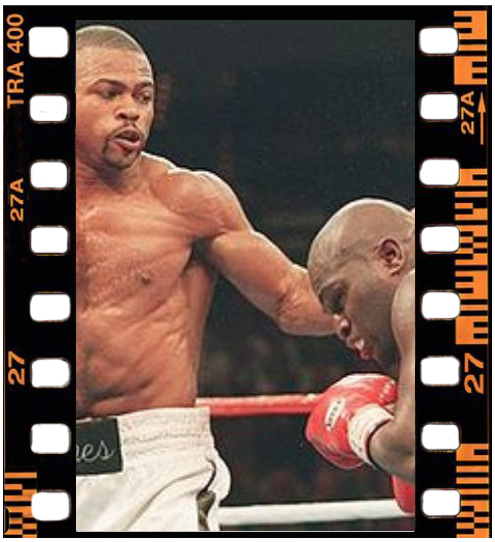
Roy Jones Jr memorably reminded James Toney of this ahead of their eagerly anticipated super-middleweight title fight in 1994.

'Lights Out' Toney was never known to be shy in letting an opponent know what he planned on doing to them, and was no different with Jones, who responded to the taunting by saying,

*"Who cares about a mouth? You've got birds that can talk."*

Jones proceeded to conduct a masterclass, dominating and widely outpointing Toney and taking his title.

Remember, talk is cheap, and life is about what we do, not what we say we're going to do.




***Click image for highlights of James Toney vs Roy Jones Jr***

# ROUND 5

## You're on your own

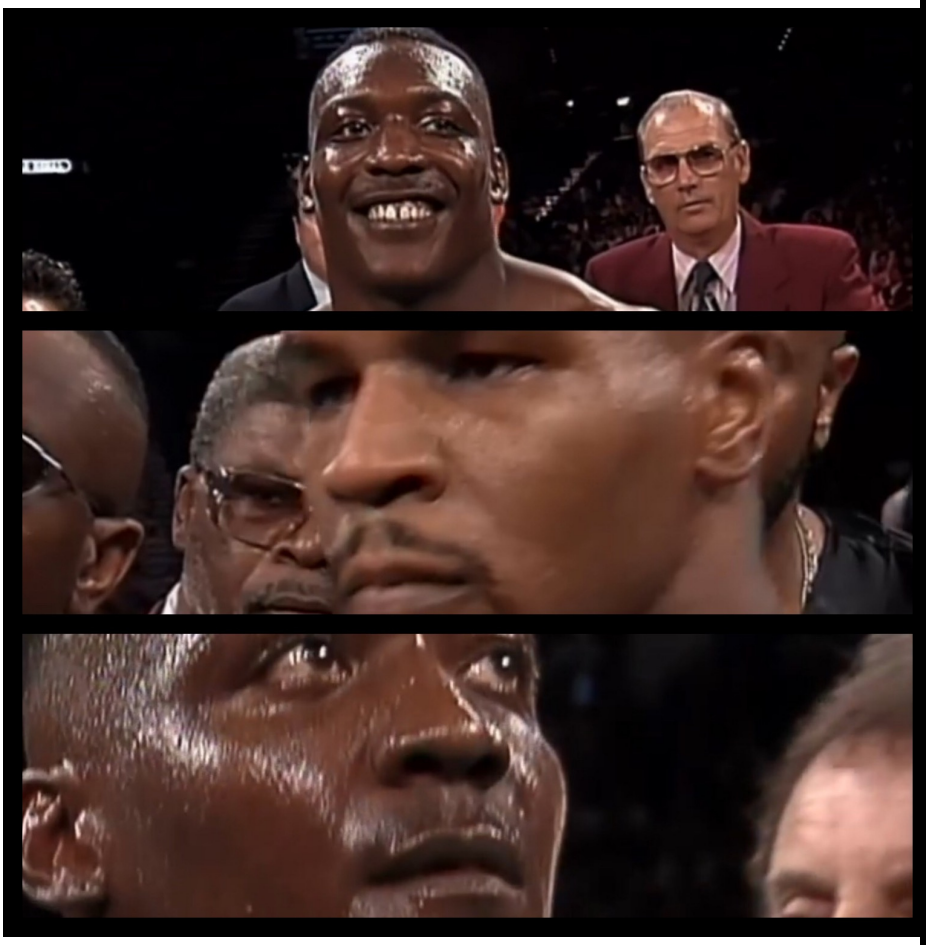
Many fighters surround themselves with an entourage of cheerleaders and hangers-on.

Each individual may - or may not - serve a specific and useful purpose to the fighter, and as a collective they can often be seen pumping up their fighter, whooping and hollering, and trying to distract, unsettle, and intimidate the opponent.

But when the ring empties and the referee calls the combatants together, you’re on your own. And in the moment of truth, you need to know that you’ve done the work, have the tools to do the job, and to have full belief in yourself and your abilities.

One man that didn't was Bruce Seldon. The 'Atlantic City Express', surrounded by his team, danced and smiled his way to the ring and throughout the pre-fight preliminaries for his 1996 battle against the fearsome Mike Tyson.

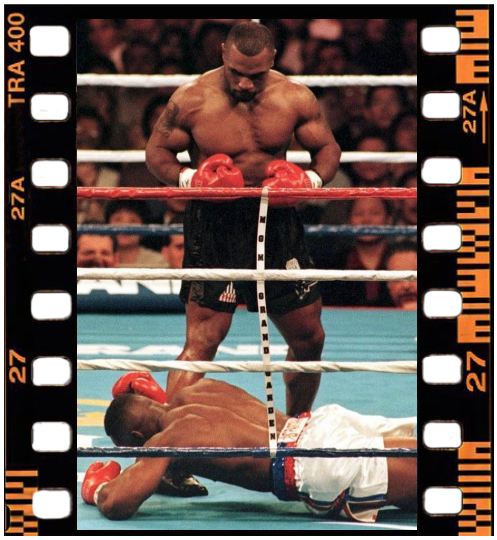
When the time came to face Iron Mike in the centre of the ring for instructions, the false bravado visibly drained from Seldon's face, as he encountered the reality of what he was up against.



Less than two minutes later, and following a knockdown from a punch that flew over the top of his head, it was all over.

We need to be honest with ourselves at all times. Whatever we face in life, we need to know who we are, what we're about, and that we have the tools needed to do the job in front of us. This enables us to stand tall and fight hard.

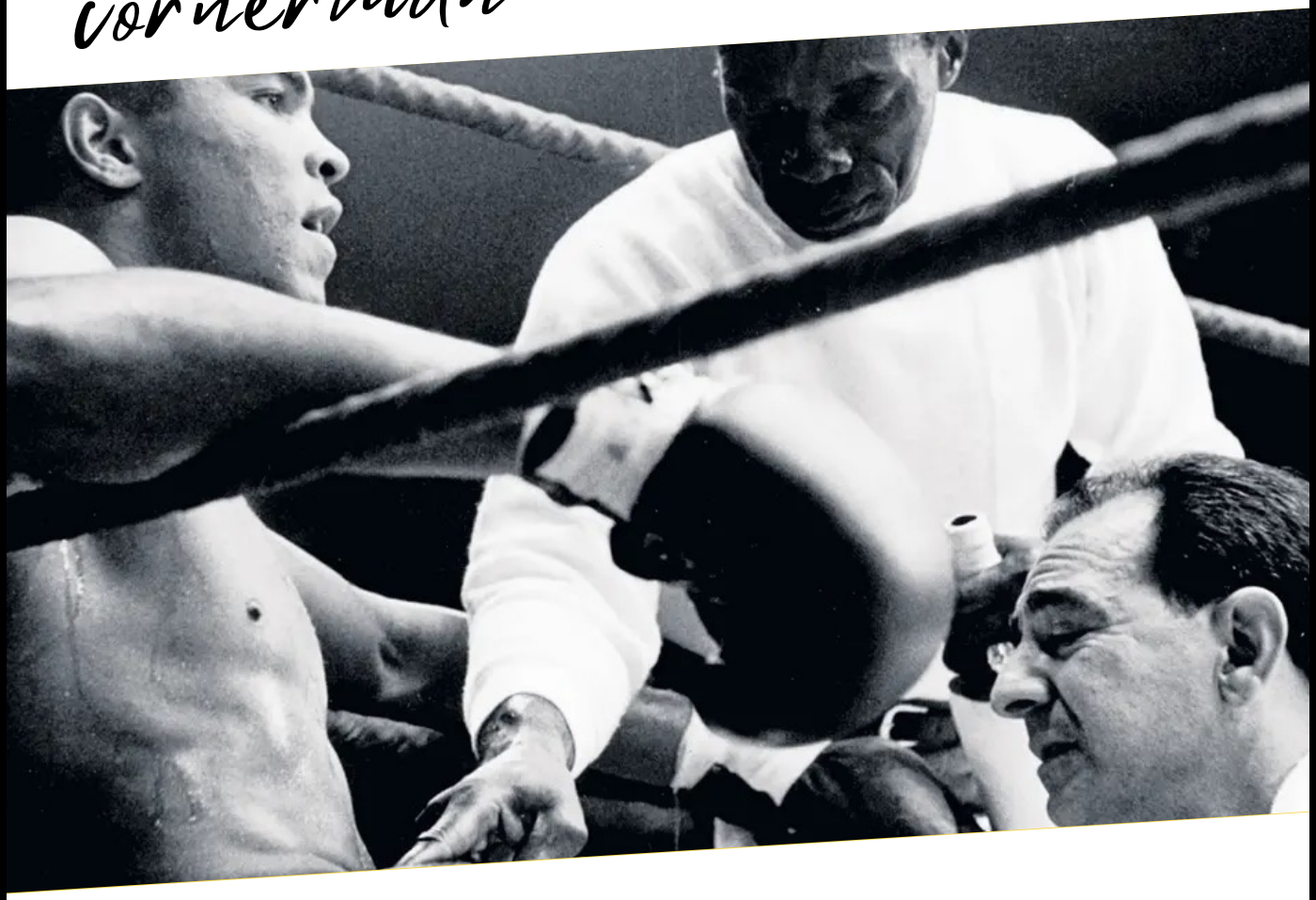
Some we'll win, some we'll lose, but we must always compete.




***Click image for Seldon vs Tyson***

# ROUND 6

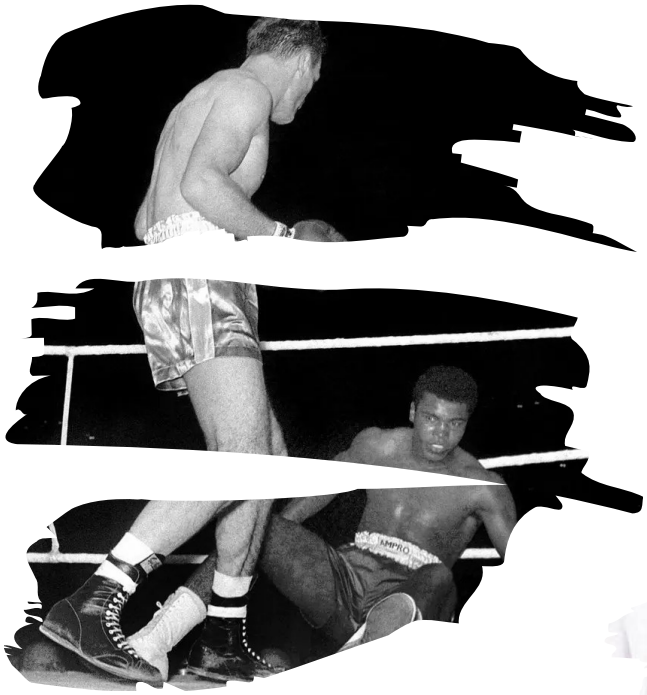
## ...But we all need a good cornerman



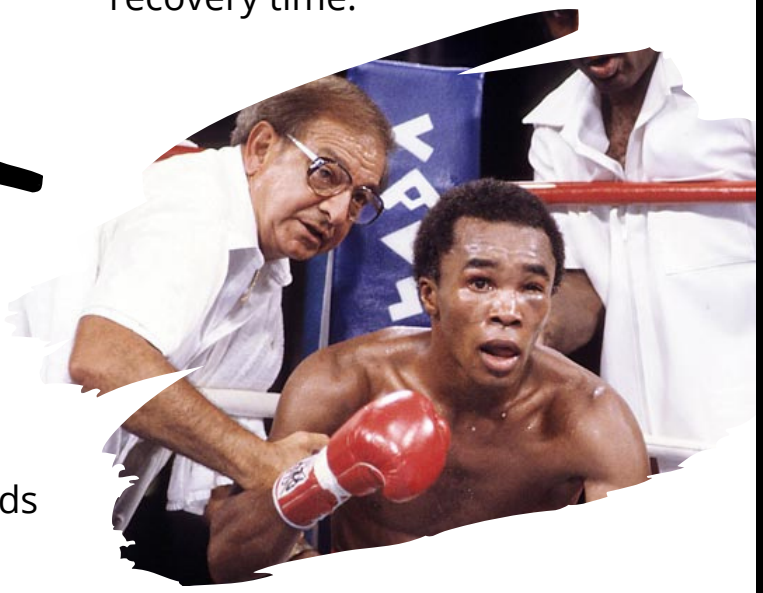
Yes, we need to trust and have confidence in ourselves, and yes, when we're in the ring we are the ones throwing - and taking - the punches, but we need to be able to know when and how to accept help, advice and support from others.

A good cornerman can make all the difference in the ring, and in life. They can see things we can't see in the heat of battle, can offer a broader - and sometimes wiser - perspective. They can bring skills and attributes to the fight that can make the difference between winning and losing.

Take Angelo Dundee, best known for his work with two of the greatest to ever lace up the gloves - Muhammad Ali and Sugar Ray Leonard. Dundee is remembered for two defining moments that demonstrate that even the very best need help sometimes.

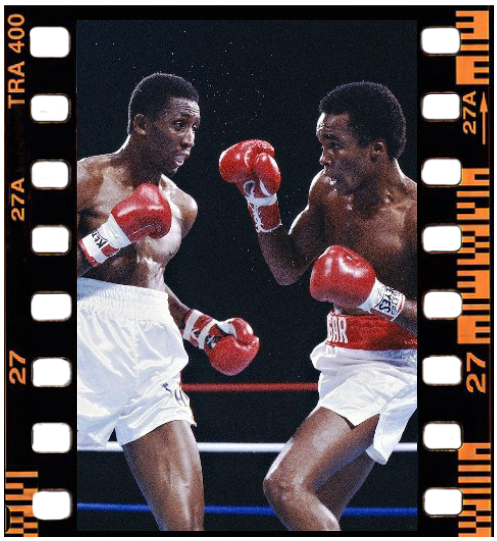


The tear in Ali's (then Clay) glove that Dundee "*helped along a little bit*" after the soon to be champion was dumped on the seat of his trunks by Henry Cooper's famous hammer, buying him crucial recovery time.



The admonishment between rounds in Sugar Ray's epic encounter with Thomas Hearns, "*You're blowing it now son, you're blowing it,*" lighting a fire under Leonard that lead to him turning the fight conclusively in his favour in the very next round.

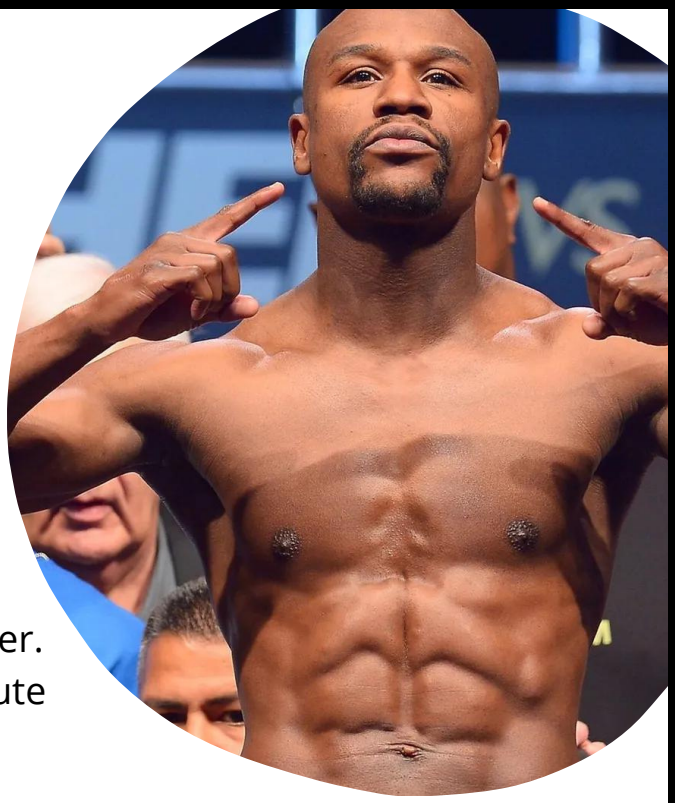
Sometimes even the smallest actions and the simplest words can make all the difference in life.




***Click image for HBO Legendary Nights***
***The Tale of Leonard vs Hearns***

# ROUND 7

## No secrets, no shortcuts



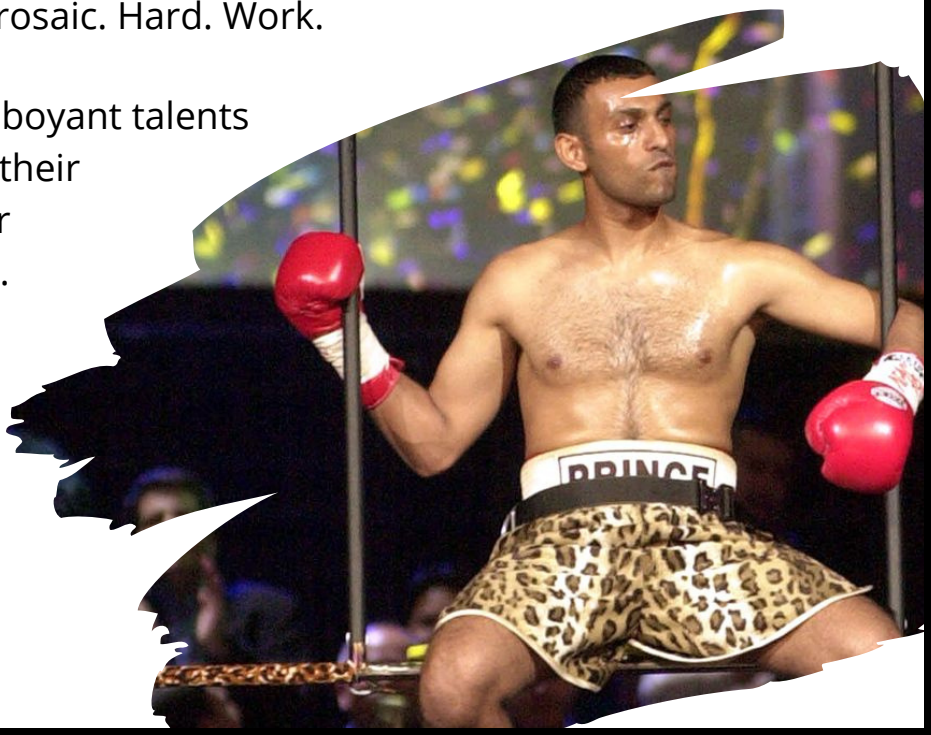
Hard. Work. Dedication.

It's hard to argue with Floyd Mayweather. In boxing and in life there is no substitute for hard work.

For every 'natural talent' we eulogise, what we don't see is the hours, and hours (and hours), of work that has been put into nurturing and developing that talent. Most coaches long for 'the one' to walk into their gym - to take one look and know: that's a future champion.

The reality is far more prosaic. Hard. Work.

Even boxing's most flamboyant talents were not singled out by their earliest coaches for their apparently 'natural' gifts. No. What stood out about Muhammad Ali, Prince Naseem Hamed, Sugar Ray Leonard, to name but a few, was their appetite to learn and to work hard.



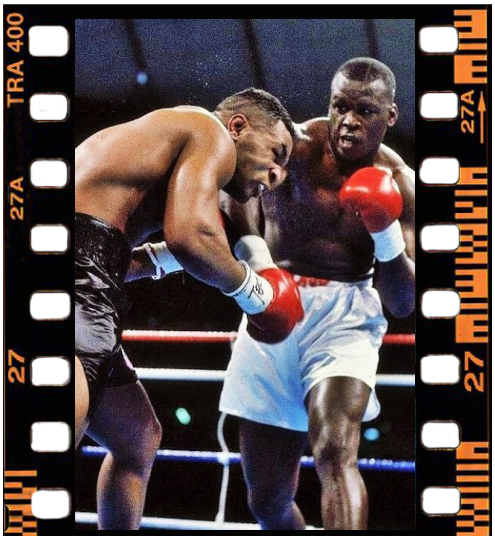
And when the hard work isn't put in? Ask Mike Tyson, under-motivated and hammered into the canvas by 42-1 underdog James 'Buster' Douglas.

Or ask Douglas himself, swatted aside in three rounds mere months later by Evander Holyfield.

Does hard work guarantee success in life? Of course not, success has many ingredients.

But no lasting success is achieved without it.

***Click image for HBO Legendary Nights***
***The Tale of Tyson vs Douglas***



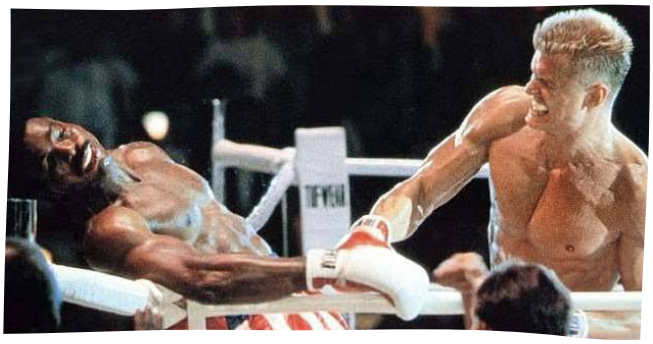
# ROUND 8
## You will lose

(I don't know about you, but I just can't help reading that in Ivan Drago's voice...).

Nobody likes losing, but it's something we must all come to terms with at some time.

We will fail, we will lose, and we will taste the bitterness of defeat.

Of course, you might think of exceptions (Floyd Mayweather, although Jose Luis Castillo and Oscar De La Hoya may like to argue otherwise), but we can't win them all.



And we must learn to accept defeat with dignity and with grace. Of course, we won't like losing, but there is much we can take from it - we can use it as powerful fuel for learning, growing, and raising our game in pursuit of redemption.

Boxing doesn't build character so much as reveal it, and how we handle our defeats in life says a lot about who we are.

We can choose to acknowledge our losses as lessons and conduct ourselves with class, or we can stand on a table with our sock off or say that our suit was too heavy.

Nobody likes a sore loser.

***Click image for highlights of Castillo vs Mayweather 1***

# ROUND 9

## *I didn't hear no bell!*

Life, like fighting, is hard.

The price of stepping into the ring is that you are going to get punched. Hard. The price of living is that, sooner or later, life will knock you on your ass.

But it's not our falling that defines us, it's how we rise. And even in the most seemingly hopeless of situations, we can find a glimmer of hope. Something to believe in. The one punch that can turn everything around. Faith in that one moment where everything can change. As long as we stay in the fight, as long as the final bell has not tolled, we are not beaten.

Diego Corrales embodied this spirit. Entering the 10th and final round of his unforgettable war with Jose Luis Castillo, his performance - along with his opponent's - was assured of a place in the history books, win or lose.

When he hit the canvas for the second time in the round, nobody could have predicted what was about to happen. The fight looked over, but Corrales had other ideas.

With a series of devastating shots, Corrales changed everything, forcing the referee to call a halt to the unforgettable contest. From the jaws of certain defeat was snatched the most improbable of victories.

That fight will never be forgotten, and nor should its lesson - however titanic the struggle, the fight isn't over until the sound of the final bell.

Until then, keep on punching.

***Click image for Corrales vs Castillo 1***

# ROUND 10

## It can all change in an instant

Life is full of uncertainty but one thing is guaranteed - things will change. Even the most dominant of champions will be an ex-champion one day.

The course of history can hinge on a split second. For nine rounds Michael Moorer put on the performance of his life. He was punch perfect against George Foreman, controlling the fight behind his jab and landing every shot in the book at will. Only three more rounds stood between him and a successful first defence of his world heavyweight titles.

Then, everything changed.

In round 10 Big George landed a pulverising punch that separated Moorer from his senses, writing himself another page in the history books as the oldest man ever to win the richest prize in sport, at 45 years of age.

Life is a series of moments, and in any moment life can change, for better, for worse. Victory can turn into defeat, and defeat into victory, in the blink of an eye. Fights, and careers, can be over in an instant.

Live in the present moment; appreciate the good times, and bite down on your gum shield during the bad times, always remembering that they too shall pass.

***Click image for HBO Legendary Nights***
***The Tale of Moorer vs Foreman***

# ROUND 11

## *Live to fight another day*

'Quit' is a dirty word in boxing. Whatever happens, a fighter is expected to keep fighting, and to go out on their shield.

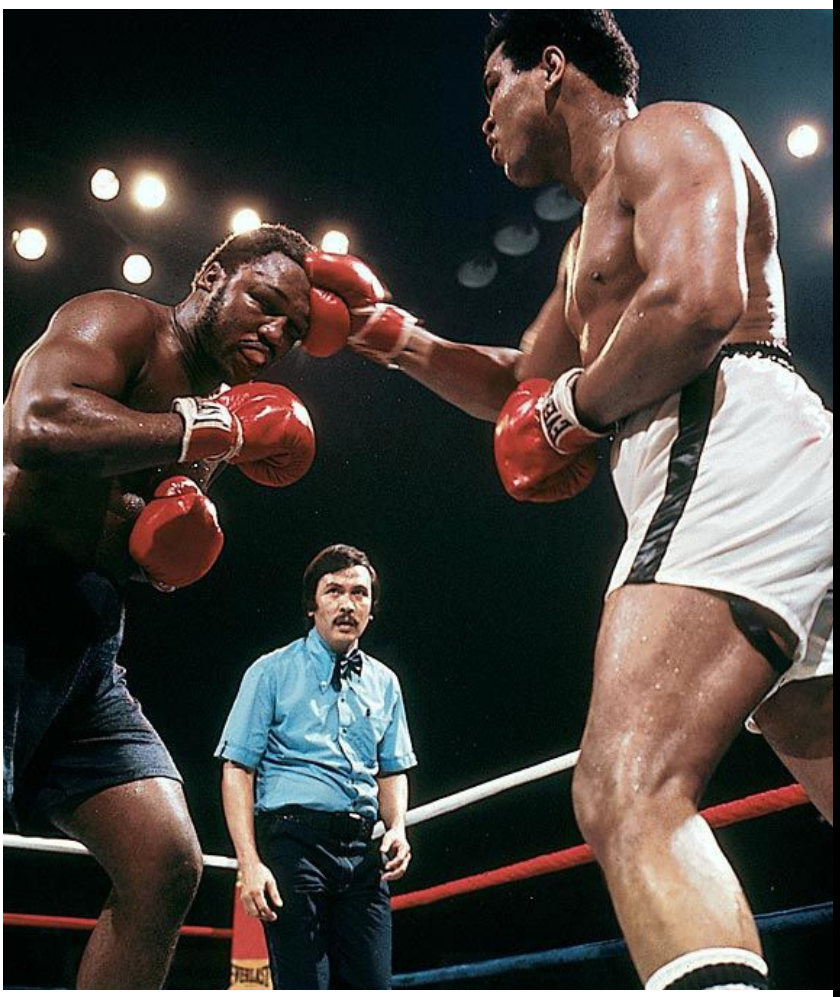
But while perseverance and a fighting heart are essential qualities in the ring and in life, sometimes it's better for cooler heads to prevail.

Sometimes the potential rewards are just not worth the costs that will be incurred. Sometimes we need to accept that today is not to be our day, and regroup for tomorrow.

Courage comes in various guises, and sometimes it comes in accepting that we've given our all and it just wasn't enough. And even in failure or defeat, we can also win.

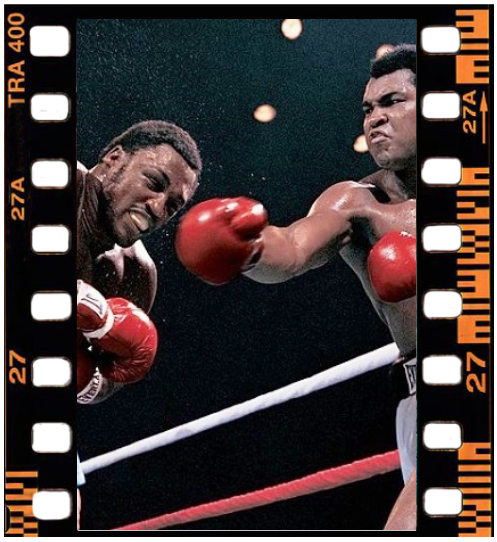
Smokin' Joe Frazier gave everything in his third and final bout with Muhammad Ali, the fabled 'Thrilla in Manila'. At the end of round 14, and with only one round remaining, Frazier was unable to see and had become a can't miss target for Ali's whipping punches.

Frazier was determined to leave everything in the ring, but his trainer Eddie Futch called the referee over to the corner to stop the fight and spare his man further punishment.



Over Joe's protests, Futch told his fighter, "*It's all over. No one will forget what you did here today*."

Frazier lost the fight, but with his eyesight and health at risk, his trainer saw the bigger picture.




The fight went down in boxing folklore as perhaps the greatest battle of all time.

When we give our all we may lose, but we will never be defeated.

***Click image for HBO Thrilla in Manila documentary***

# ROUND 12

## Who you are is more than what you do

Who are you?

The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said, *"He who knows others is wise. He who knows himself is enlightened."*

Self-awareness is a powerful attribute, but such awareness does not come easily. Life is a great teacher, but we need to be alert to recognise and learn its lessons.

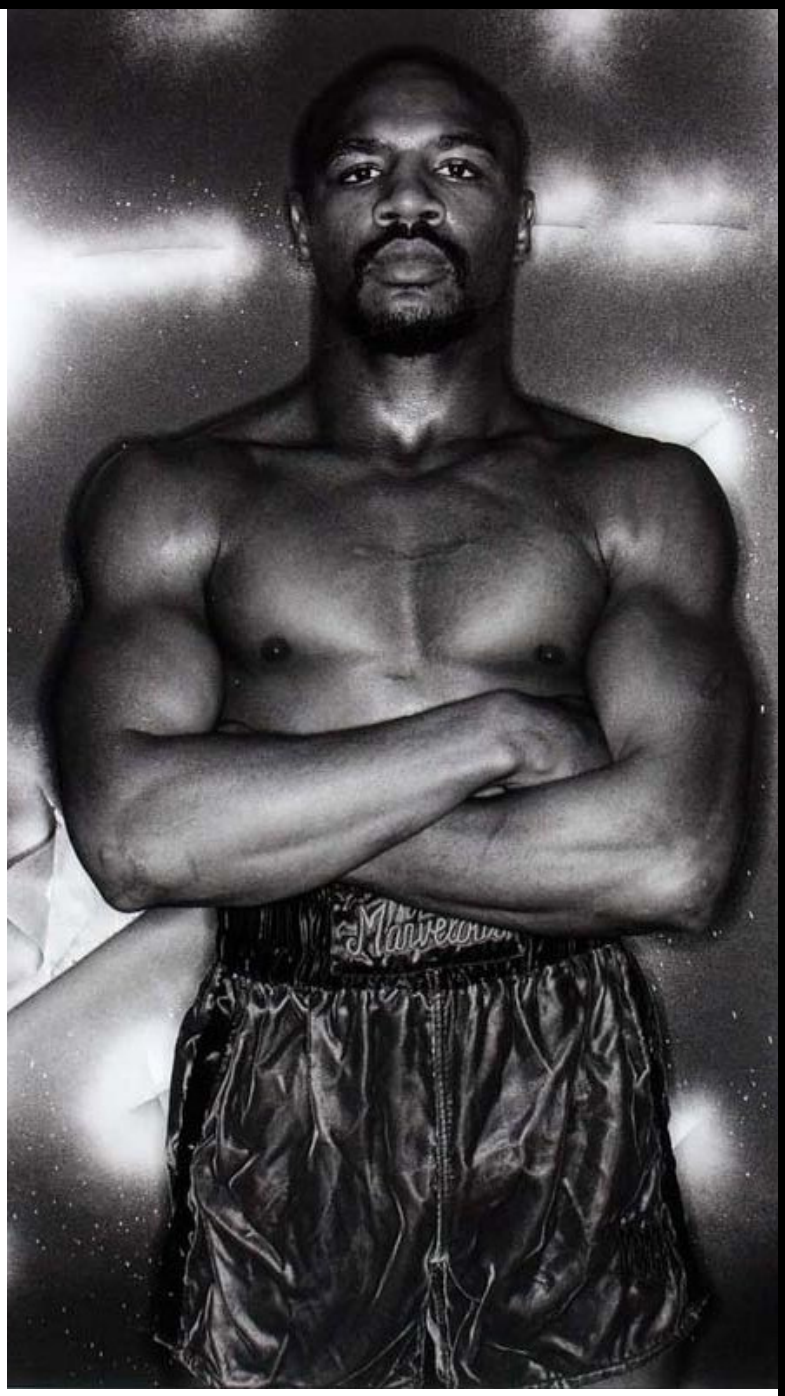
Fighters learn who they are in the heat of battle.

How will he take a hard shot to the chin? How will she respond to being knocked down? Will a loss shatter his confidence or inspire him to work harder in the gym to correct his mistakes?

A strong sense of identity is essential if we are to maximise our potential. Self awareness - for example our strengths, our weaknesses, our dreams and our fears - is needed in order to create fight strategies and career goals that will give us the greatest chance of winning and being successful.

But beyond the ring, the identity of 'fighter' can be hard to leave behind. Who is a fighter when he can't fight anymore?

Boxing's history books contain a long and ever-growing list of great fighters that fought on far too long, unable or unwilling to face life as an ex-fighter. But the truth is, life as an ex-fighter is far longer than the relatively short career-span of a fighter.



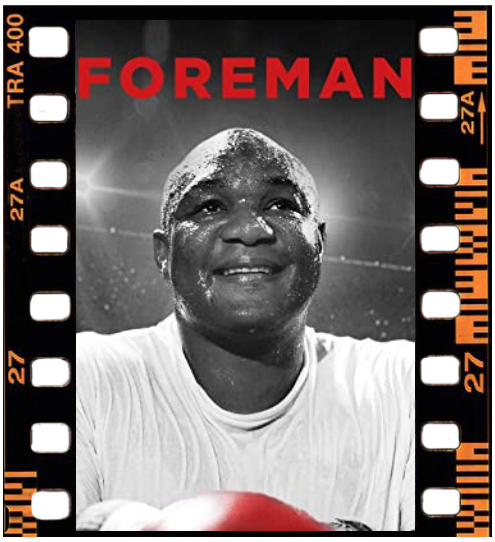
It's important that we don't define ourselves solely by what we do - whether as a fighter or in any other role.

Who we are is far more than what we do, and it is important that we understand this, for someday we won't be able to do the things that make us who we are today.

We need to have a broader, more balanced view of who we are, and of the various aspects of our selves, including: our relationships; our career; our hobbies and interests, and our sense of purpose. Doing so helps us to find fulfilment in various ways and places.

Marvelous Marvin Hagler was one fighter who walked away from the sport and never looked back, resisting the lure of one final payday. A fighter to his core, Hagler nevertheless refused to put on a glove or hit a heavy bag after his retirement, and was able to successfully build a new and satisfying life for himself as an actor.

George Foreman's remarkable life saw him become a preacher, an actor, and the face of the George Foreman Lean Mean Fat-Reducing Grilling Machine - the latter being what he is most recognised for, and what accounts for the vast majority of his fortune.




You are more than a fighter.

To paraphrase Walt Whitman, *you contain multitudes.*

***Click image for Foreman - the film***

# ABOUT MATTHEW

Boxing has been my passion since I was 10 years old, when Rocky Balboa came into my life.

Having been a lifelong fan of the sport I was appointed as a national manager by England Boxing in 2008 (the ABA as it was then known). I spent 11 years working for the governing body, leading national coach and club development programmes, and helping a number of clubs to secure funding.

I am a passionate advocate for mental health, after depression knocked me onto my backside three times. I used my experience to lead the development of England Boxing's Box In Mind programme, which raises awareness and understanding of mental health within the sport. I have also featured in major national mental health campaign launches for Time to Change.

Now, I am a Mindset and Wellbeing coach, specialising in programmes to help people to overcome depression, improve self-esteem and self-confidence, and help people navigate major life transitions, such as retirement and experiencing loss.

You can find out more about my work and how I may be able to help you, at my website Change Your Story.

My bestselling book, ***'Something Changed: Stumbling Through Divorce, Dating & Depression'*** is available from Amazon here.

**Coming soon:** new course, ***Knock Out Depression***

Matthew Williams