



LEAVE THE FIGHTING TO

MCGUIGAN

**JIM
SHERIDAN**

**THE OFFICIAL
BIOGRAPHY OF
BARRY MCGUIGAN**



oss his lips at a job
tonight.

Wendy McAuley,
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the iron they can add a second dimension when a boxer is fighting from one eye. Tonight, Paddy Byrne is one of the 'I've seen it all before' school, but deep down he knows it's never the same twice.

'Let's go,' McGuigan says with all the cool of a commando. He's ready. In that moment a burden is lifted. It's too late to stop now. We are sucked down the long corridor by a tremendous noise. Desire made manifest in the shape of one long inexhaustible howl that would be a continuous scream except for the fact that it breaks like waves, each succeeding one crashing into the slipstream of its predecessor. What depth of passion created this roar?

The long corridor to the ring has a life of its own, opening and closing like a demented accordion. Ahead, the peace flag mast-head of this crazy caravan dances on the edge of a whirlpool that constantly threatens to pull us down. Eddie Shaw is a boxer, he fights his way through the crowd. There is no etiquette in hell. Tonight the roar is McGuigan's theme song and the score from *Rocky* plays a muted second fiddle, like a crazy violinist reading from the wrong stand. For 25,000 people at a football stadium in London, McGuigan is not the Great White Hope, he's the only hope.

The swell ends at the no-man's-land where the paying public meet the ringside commentators. Viewed from outer space, McGuigan is the centre of a sparkling necklace as a hundred photographers try to pull reality down to earth in a flash. Reality tonight is a dream come true. McGuigan is getting into the ring to fight for the world title. Ireland is good news for once, and 25,000 people erupt as He Who Never Steps Backwards comes through the ropes. He dances forward. 'Buy land,' said W. C. Fields, 'they don't make any more of it.' McGuigan dances across the ring, each hook and jab a down-payment on this piece of real estate. For fifteen rounds tonight this space is up for grabs. A boo stifled at birth warns us that the other bidder is on the way, and then the boo turns into the sustained applause worthy of this world champion.

Now all the forces are assembled and it's time for the

national anthems. The British national anthem doesn't sit easy on the shoulders of 25,000 Irishmen, but eventually everybody behaves with the decorum invented in the heart of that other great empire . . . for a couple of minutes we are all in Rome. Suddenly from nowhere comes a sound as remote as the theme from *Rocky* was. It's impossible to make it out in the din. Pat McGuigan, microphone in hand, answers this musical quiz with the deadly ear of the born crooner.

But come you back when Summer's in the meadow
and when the Valley's hushed and white with snow

Now everybody knows what it is and Pedroza looks around
in belligerent defiance as the whole crowd join the chorus:

'Tis I'll be there in sunshine or in sorrow
Oh Danny Boy, oh Danny Boy, I love you so.

These are 'the men that God made mad, For all their wars are merry and all their songs are sad'. If Pedroza is pulled in by the deceptively beautiful air then he's lost a psychological round. 'Danny Boy' is a recruiting song for war. It's a brilliant ploy from the Eastwood camp, uniting the crowd in a lull before the storm.

Now each corner has one last trick to play from its psychological armoury. True to form and with a little nod to Carl Jung, Eastwood produces his from a subterranean level. Paddy Byrne lifts the skirts of the ring and the dwarf emerges. They wait till Pedroza turns away and then the little man jumps into the ring. The crowd shouts. Pedroza turns and the look in his eyes is astonishing. It's as if for a moment he allowed his subconscious to think that this was McGuigan. If only it were so . . . Reality returns and the cheekiness of the gesture demands a smile which Pedroza gives with a cool mastery. The MC's announcement of 'My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen' is drowned out, presumably by the gentlemen. It's time for the seconds to get out of the ring. Eastwood feels something tugging at his sleeve. McGuigan looks around. '£5,000, my man at even money,'

says Lyonel Hoyte. Eastwood looks into his eyes. '£5,000, my man will take him out,' repeats Hoyte. Eastwood looks for the green which is nowhere in sight and so he pulls away. Money talks, bullshit walks. There are no more ploys to play.

The opening round is marked by a combination of speed and phenomenal concentration. Pedroza's concentration is remarkable, given the fact that he is fighting on foreign territory – but then he has already performed in front of the grass-skirted warriors of Papua New Guinea. He has an amazing mind. He goes on his bicycle, shooting out long left jabs and keeping well out of McGuigan's way. The first solid blows are landed in the neutral corner where Dermot McGuigan has parked himself. They came from Barry. Dermot claps. McGuigan pursues the champion for the whole three minutes, but Pedroza wins the round with the effectiveness of his counter-punching.

Round two is much the same as round one, with one small exception. McGuigan, instead of following Pedroza around the ring, starts to cut off his territory. It's like the snake and mongoose, but Pedroza is not hypnotized. He leans down in the middle of the round, staring into McGuigan's headlamps. Fighting inside, Pedroza can use his famed bolo punch which comes from below like an upwardly mobile piston. In this round he also lets loose a strong left hook, but the inescapable fact is that he is not overwhelmingly superior inside. McGuigan has neutralized the Panamanian's greatest asset.

From his commentary position Harry Carpenter is shouting, 'This can never go fifteen at this pace.' The third is the start of thirteen rounds that will make a liar of him. At the opening of the third round Pedroza fights brilliantly, whipping in a punch that is a combination of an uppercut and a bolo. Pedroza is such a craftsman he invents punches. This one lands under the heart. It should have slowed McGuigan down. It didn't. McGuigan keeps coming forward, and now he begins to slip Pedroza's jabs and counters

with his own hooks to the body. The champion is acting as if these are having no effect on him. McGuigan's cheeks are rouged from Pedroza's left jab, but he never looks in trouble. This is not just a physical contest, this is going to be a battle of minds. That both men are in perfect physical condition is obvious from the first nine minutes. At the end of three rounds, nobody is ahead in either the psychological or the physical battle.

At the start of round four, Pedroza hesitates. The bell goes to call them to the centre of the ring and the champion turns back to get his gumshield. It is the first lull in the action. It lasts only five seconds but it's like a blemish on perfection. Is it a conscious ploy of Pedroza's or his unconscious asking for respite? Pedroza has trained himself to go fifteen rounds. He has trained to go three minutes a round – but not like this, this is inhuman. Not since the legendary Henry Armstrong has a fighter thrown as many punches per round as relentlessly as McGuigan. Each one of them is intended to take Pedroza's head off. He knows he is in with somebody desperate to win, fearless and strong. Pedroza is the master tactician looking for time to work out his strategy. He isn't getting any.

Immediately the round opens, McGuigan catches him with a hard right. Pedroza shoots back a left hook and right uppercut. Most people at the ring think they see Barry smile as if the punches had no effect on him. He was in fact grabbing his gumshield in his mouth. McGuigan has two reactions when he has been stung: he grabs his gumshield tighter and he wipes off the gloves on his trunks as if to obliterate all that's gone before.

After that it's as if he's moving the contest on to a higher, more demanding level. It's this ability constantly to bring his performance up to the required level that reminds people of Sugar Ray Robinson. During the fourth and fifth rounds he wipes off his gloves on his trunks several times. Pedroza has only one answer: he must stand his ground. Somehow he has to stop this Niagara pouring over him. In the middle of the fifth, he tries to move Barry back. They

stand toe to toe, exchanging orthodox and unorthodox blows. The kid is brilliant inside. And strong. Too strong. Pedroza decides to get on his bike again. This time he has a slow puncture.

Boxers are so alert physically in the ring that they sense what will later be revealed only by slow motion. At the end of the fifth round McGuigan sensed that Pedroza was slowing; he moved against the ropes in McGuigan's corner, looking for a breather. McGuigan didn't give him an inch. He loaded up to land the big one. When he threw out his long left jab he felt a tear at the elbow. The psychological advantage had been countered by a physical problem. McGuigan told his corner that his arm was acting up. Eastwood said he could beat Pedroza with one arm. He didn't get a chance to throw that arm until the seventh round.

Towards the end of the sixth round, a strong right to the body catches Pedroza. His knees buckle momentarily. Pedroza is hit with a strong overhand right. He stumbles and then looks to the ground as if he missed his footing and slipped. This man never gives out hurt signals. This is the technique Ali used against George Foreman until the champion ran out of heart. McGuigan's heart is as big as Loftus Road.

There's no faking the reaction to the right McGuigan hits Pedroza with at the end of round seven. His legs give out from under him and, before he can bring up his instinctive right arm in defence, McGuigan's left glances off it and sends him to the canvas. The champion has been humiliated. He recovers as best he can, getting up at three and acting as if an unruly banana-skin had just entered his life. McGuigan comes scything his way across the ring, a figure of Death. Pedroza escapes the harvest. He is the coolest man in Loftus Road.

In McGuigan's corner Gerald Hayes is banging the canvas, screaming, 'Feint and throw the right hand.' McGuigan's feint at the end of the seventh was worthy of catching a world champion. He fainted with his head as if

he was going to throw a left to the body and then followed up with the big overhand right. Before Pedroza hit the canvas the crowd was on its feet.

The eighth round is Pedroza's best of the fight. He keeps McGuigan at bay with long left jabs and extraordinary counterpunching. Towards the end of the round he exchanges short sharp punches with McGuigan. This man is not going out without a fight.

At the start of the ninth round Pedroza catches McGuigan with a good right. He punches and boxes the same cool round as he did in the eighth, but then lightning strikes again. In almost the identical spot in the ring, McGuigan hits him with another right. McGuigan follows this up with a right to the temple and suddenly Pedroza looks like a Rip Van Winkle who has just woken up with his legs full of pins and needles. He stumbles across the ring. He lurches and tosses, miraculously avoiding the raging torrent that is McGuigan. Somewhere in his head, bells are ringing and blows are falling from all angles. At the end of the round Santiago del Rio is in the ring protesting to Mr Christodoulous that Pedroza has been hit after the bell. He holds up three fingers. Pedroza stands in the centre of the ring and then arches his back like one of the Scots Guards outside Buckingham Palace and heads back to his corner. This proud man is still featherweight champion of the world.

Pedroza slips at the start of the tenth round. He looks at the floor where the dwarf had sprinkled his gold dust as if to say, 'So that's why I've been falling in the same spot.' He has his mind trained so that it is impossible to lose, but his body will not obey. The tenth to thirteenth rounds are purgatorial. In each of them the champion boxes with the fervour of redemption, only to have his potential salvation snatched away at the end.

Pedroza tries his best shots in the thirteenth, hitting McGuigan with a long left and then a strong right hand. McGuigan hits him with another powerful right. By now Pedroza knows the reaction to that particular weapon: grab

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tight and hold on for dear life. He reaches out and grabs McGuigan with both hands. With pure animal strength McGuigan shrugs him off like a sack of potatoes and hits him with left hooks for his trouble. The referee raises his hands to stop the fight and puts them down as quickly again. Hope is deferred and Pedroza survives the round. At the end of the round Pedroza's corner gives him something that looks like ammonia to revive him.

At the start of the fourteenth Pedroza blesses himself as though it is the last, and then spends most of the round hanging on, determined to go out on his feet. Late in the round Pedroza is crouched low, trying to avoid McGuigan, when suddenly he sees his chance. He shoots a long straight right through McGuigan's guard to the chin. It is the hardest punch he has thrown all night. It is too late.

When Pedroza goes back to his corner at the end of the fourteenth round he sees Eastwood raise three fingers. He is three minutes away from losing his world title. In his corner, McGuigan is asking Eastwood, 'Are you sure I'm ahead?' Eastwood answers, 'You're as far ahead as from here to Belfast.'

Both men touch gloves at the beginning of the fifteenth round. Pedroza behaves with decorum and nobility. He is making his final exit with style. McGuigan ducks and weaves in close to Pedroza. This is what a normal fight looks like in round one.

The three minutes go by on a wave of euphoria. McGuigan is on his way to the world title, but somewhere deep down in him is the fear the verdict might be given against him. Close to the end of the fight he lunges at Pedroza with a Saturday-night special. The distance he misses by is a measure of Pedroza's class as world champion. The bell goes and Pedroza hugs McGuigan. The Eastwood camp are in the ring. Daniel McGuigan watches as Sean McGivern and Ross Mealiff in the company of the whole Eastwood entourage lift McGuigan shoulder high. Pedroza is acknowledging McGuigan as champion, but when his

team get into the ring they quickly raise his hand in a last, empty, professional gesture.

Like the Ali-Frazier epics, this fight defies mere professionalism. It's as if the divorce proceedings are over and McGuigan and Pedroza can become friends. There is no doubt that the old champion respects the pretender to his title. The announcement that officially confirms McGuigan as world champion is lost in a huge roar. Possessed young men hurl themselves at the ring as if they could levitate over the hunched journalists. They rise on the substantial backs of the penmen and engulf the ring, searching for McGuigan in an entranced fit.

As McGuigan realizes that the title is officially his, he looks to his brother Dermot as if seeking proof that he won't wake up from this dream. Dermot rubs his head, and for the first time in months I see the fact that Dermot is the elder brother manifest itself.

The TV announcers are trying to get to McGuigan. He thanks everybody, starting off with Mr Eastwood. This man is champion of the world and all the McGuigan charisma starts to come out. He begins to say something about Young Ali: 'One thing I've been thinking about all week. I want to dedicate the fight to the young lad who fought me in 1982.' Suddenly McGuigan starts to falter. It's as if the words 'young lad' have opened up a well that lies too deep for mere words. 'I want to dedicate it to him,' he continues bravely, and then before the eye of the camera he runs ahead of the tears, 'I would not like it to be an ordinary fighter who beat him . . .' he says before the tears take centre stage, 'but the world champ.' He has ended in a flood of emotion with the humblest possible affirmation.

Back home in Clones, Irish Television are asking Katie McGuigan if she is proud of her son. 'I'm happy,' she says. 'Pride is not a word I like. Just say I'm happy.'

Amidst the milling crowds McGuigan is led back to his dressing room. Davey Irvine congratulates him. All the rest of the boxers on the bill congratulate him. When he has gone into his own dressing room I ask Davey Irvine

how it went. 'I pauses. 'Or was went. That's it tough enough. Davey Irvine is jealousy in his v who has finally

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how it went. 'Beaten,' he says, 'in the third round.' He pauses. 'Or was it the fourth? That will just tell you how it went. That's it. That's me finished. I'm retired. I'm not tough enough. I hurt too easy.' The amazing thing about Davey Irvine is that there is not an ounce of self-pity or jealousy in his words. He appears as happy as a man can be who has finally resolved some inner truth about himself.

Paddy Byrne comes in and goes straight to Peppy Muir. 'There's your money,' says Paddy. 'I don't know if there's any point in fighting out there, but there's your money anyway. It's bedlam.'

Peppy Muir looks at Paddy and then says, 'I want to fight. I want to be able to say that I fought on the McGuigan bill.' As McGuigan goes upstairs to meet the world's press, Peppy Muir goes out to fight a lonely fight with Simon Eubanks.

I have been with these boxers for two months now and the amazing thing is I have never felt any aggression from any of them. I don't mean aggression towards me, I mean aggression as part of their personality. It's as if they leave all their aggression in the ring. The world of the boxers themselves is a closed silent order where they can communicate with each other with a simple nod of the head.

Upstairs, at the heel of an enormous press throng, one of Gerry Cooney's people keeps asking rhetorically, 'Who trains this guy? I want to meet the man that gets this kid into that condition.'

Brian Eastwood tells him, 'You'll never meet him. We only stop McGuigan getting fit. That's our job - to stop him training too much.'

Cooney's man keeps shaking his head and saying, 'I wish I had fighters like that.'

Ferdie Pacheco, Muhammad Ali's fight doctor, is there. Long ago he recognized the special qualities in McGuigan. He presented McGuigan with his paintings of all the world champions. Ferdie knows talent when he sees it.

McGuigan can never redefine boxing in the way Muhammad Ali did, but he could redefine the definition of sport

in this bloody business. He has the talent to be one of the major sportsmen of the second half of the twentieth century. In the midst of all the congratulations McGuigan has one priority: to get Sandra and Blain back to the hotel safely. In the confusion of the night, Sandra forgot to get nappies. The taxi-driver takes her all over London. All the chemists are closed. When he discovers who she is, he insists on taking her home to get a couple of nappies from his own kids.

There is a huge crowd outside the hotel. Eventually McGuigan arrives. He will not join the party. He goes straight up to his room to have a meal. Pat arrives at the celebration, accompanied by Frank Mulligan, Barry's first trainer. Dermot is there, as hoarse as a man suffering from laryngitis. All McGuigan's sisters are there except Rachel, who is keeping her mother company at home.

With all the hype and media attention, somebody somewhere was bound to have a nervous breakdown. The part of the McGuigan household in which it happened and the time at which it occurred almost led to a tragedy of Greek dimensions. Phil Coulter had just finished singing 'The town that I love so well', in the Holiday Inn in London when Katie McGuigan and her sister, Bridget Rooney, went to bed in Clones. As Phil sang, Katie switched off the lights one by one. The video-cassette of the fight was still in the machine, stopped where the MC says, 'By a unanimous decision,' and the crowd lets out a deafening roar. At the touch of a tired button, that roar had been stilled. The electrical wiring in the house was making its own silent protest at all the demands being made on it. All night it smouldered with resentment and, as if to time its explosion with the maximum damage, it erupted at five-thirty in the morning after the night before.

What by daytime would have been an inconvenience by night turned into a roaring inferno. Upstairs, Bridget turned over in her sleep. With that sense of alertness that comes from sleeping in strange surroundings, she smelt

something amiss. be met by flames yourself fire-drill Katie and Rachel the time Katie had movable memories the world knew possessions that her as her most fire wedding day; go marriage certificate proved you exist Barry's gym, the heart of a legend. off.

The fire brigade come but, by the McGuigan world in two. The brave front as even a crash the roof her world collapse fight without a Arguello, Jim White and pass away. The fire spared, the girl like a treehouse.

Katie did not day as world champion Barry found out at a press conference the rest of the who could speak prolonged abuse carried round the English press, who boxing, told Barry unite Ireland in

something amiss. She walked casually down the stairs, to be met by flames in the kitchen. It was too late for do-it-yourself fire-drill. The only thing to do was to try and wake Katie and Rachel, and get them the hell out to safety. By the time Katie had rubbed the sleep from her eyes all of her movable memories had gone up in smoke. Besides what the world knew of Barry, there were all the other little possessions that made her other children as important to her as her most famous son: gone were the pictures of her wedding day; gone were Rebecca's drawings; gone were marriage certificates, birth certificates, everything that proved you existed; and on its way out was the door to Barry's gym, the fire eating its way unconsciously into the heart of a legend. Now the steps were ablaze. Katie backed off.

The fire brigade were on their way. They hadn't far to come but, by the time they arrived, the private part of the McGuigan world was gone. The fire almost split their world in two. The public shop was still there, putting up a brave front as ever. It would be open in a few hours. With a crash the roof caved in on the kitchen. Katie listened to her world collapse. Two dozen handleless gloves gave up the fight without any resistance. Muhammad Ali, Alexis Arguello, Jim Watt, all watched their paper worlds ignite and pass away. When the water had washed out what the fire spared, the gym stood lonely and abandoned, perched like a treehouse at the bottom of the yard.

Katie did not want to tell Barry. It would ruin his first day as world champion, but a fire brings hasty news, and Barry found out. Dermot flew home as Barry held the fort at a press conference in the Holiday Inn. He stood out from the rest of the Eastwood camp as he was the only one who could speak without the deep rasp that comes from prolonged abuse of the vocal cords. Hoarse throats were carried round the Holiday Inn like a badge of honour. The English press, with the hyperbole that is an integral part of boxing, told Barry that he had done more than any man to unite Ireland in seven hundred years. No matter which way

you calculate it, they were out by a couple of hundred years . . . but then they were only speaking metaphorically. When Barry mentioned that Blain had asked for champ, the pun was lost on the English. The Irish contingent, anxious to hold on to Barry as one of their own, urged him not to explain that 'champ' is a mixture of potatoes and onions. Everybody wanted to claim him.

Barry had meant to stay an extra couple of days, but he decides over dinner to go home to have a look at the damage. In Belfast and Clones, people will try frantically to cope with a schedule whose pace has been set by fire.

At another table Barry Cluskey is telling tales. He is an old family friend. 'I think they even called Barry after me. I was there the day he was born. After the fight people went mad. One fellow was jumping up and down with a towel in his hands. "I got the towel," he says. "I got the towel. Look," says he, and he holds the towel up in my face. "Look," says he, "it's the towel. The blood and all." Don't be showing me that, says I. I've got his fucking nappy.' Cluskey, in the company of about 25,000 others, had a few jars after the fight . . . This had the effect of dislodging his memory somewhat and he ended up in the Grosvenor House Hotel, insisting that he was staying there. He turned round and saw the former champion come through the door. 'I turned round and there was the head and his entourage. I got a surprise, so kind of spontaneously I started to clap and all the people in the lobby started clapping too. Pedroza just froze on the spot and then tears started to come out of his eyes. Down his cheeks. He saw the cross around me neck and he came over and bent down to kiss it. With that his hat fell off. I stood back in surprise like and there was a momentary pause and I didn't know what to do. I got the feeling like that it might be an insult to him to pick it up for him. He bent down to pick it up and he couldn't make it. He couldn't bend down.' Barry's eyes start to mist over. 'What a champ. One of his people came over and picked it up for him. He couldn't bend

down with his ribs taken. Then he p away.'

By nine o'clock v Sandra is doing l from the fact that McGuigan is talk solid blow. He wa round. It was a ge Then when I swu hand up so I cau with the impact. F I learned a lot fro That's his best a couldn't throw l was hurt. Norma With two upraise 'Then he'd go w didn't grab me, legs begin to bu chin there is a explains its origi The fourteenth. Christodoulous f as if he was going second. Whap. F obvious admirati was the left of venom of one fig represents. Fron

down with his ribs. That's how much punishment he had taken. Then he put the baseball hat on and just walked away.'

MONDAY,
10th June

By nine o'clock we are in the VIP lounge at Heathrow. Sandra is doing her best to keep Blain's attention away from the fact that he is exhausted. Behind his dark glasses McGuigan is talking about the fight: 'I couldn't hit him a solid blow. He was slippery. Even the right in the seventh round. It was a good punch but it didn't travel far enough. Then when I swung in the left hook he already had his right hand up so I caught the top of his glove and he fell over with the impact. He said to me that I'd be a great champion. I learned a lot from this fight. I was better than him inside. That's his best aspect, and I was better than him at it. I couldn't throw long lefts with the pain in my elbow. He was hurt. Normally he would grab me inside like a vice.' With two upraised arms Barry imitates the carpenter's tool. 'Then he'd go whap. Grab. See, in the ninth round he didn't grab me, I went whap whap and I could see his legs begin to buckle. Feel that,' McGuigan says. On his chin there is a lump the size of a bull's eye. Barry explains its origin. 'Do you know what round I got that? The fourteenth. I thought I had him going, I could see Christodoulous from the corner of my eye. He made a move as if he was going to stop it and I dropped my guard for a second. Whap. He hit me a straight left.' Barry says it in obvious admiration. 'It was his best shot of the night.' It was the left of a drowning man delivered with all the venom of one fighting for the people of Panama whom he represents. From the silent nodding of heads one gains the