

BOXING

They start even in Dublin

says **DICK YOUNG** of
the **NEW YORK DAILY NEWS**

IT WAS at the airport in Vegas the other day. Two white men and two black men stood near the United counter, talking intently. "Remember now," said Steve Eisner, to the smaller of the two blacks: When you get back, keep those bums away from him." He grinned. I mean those friends of his."

"I will," said Andy Hudson. His face split in a smile, revealing a large space where ten teeth once lived.

"Stay straight!" said Chuck Nary, to the bigger black man. Al Lewis nodded and grunted. They shook hands all round using the thumbs-up handgrip of the soul brothers, something college kids belonging to fraternities did in the long ago to show they were hot stuff.

The two blacks walked to one gate. Al Lewis's co-managers went of to another. On the DC-10 to Chicago, where it would connect with a plane taking him home to Detroit Al Lewis settled back in his seat and drew the belt around him.

"I'm gonna beat Clay," said Al (Blue) Lewis. That is his name. Al-Blue-Lewis said as if it were one word. He has been nominated as Muhammad Ali's next

victim. He calls him Clay, the way most everyone in the fight game does, black or white. It is no sign of disrespect. Only intellectuals and newspapermen call him Muhammad Ali.

Of all the stiff Al has been knocking over monthly for the benefit of Top Rank's Theatre network, Al-Blue-Lewis has the best chance of getting lucky. He is a banger, and he has no fear. He likes Ali, or a reason we shall see later, but he is not in awe. More fighters seem to be afraid of Al-Blue-Lewis than of Muhammad Ali. Blue is the guy Buster Mathis once paid 6,000 dollars rather than fight.

Buster had run out on the bout with Blue and was suspended. To regain his licence he was told he must meet the obligation. After all, it had cost Lewis money to train. Mathis had a good money shot with Ali if he could get the licence, but if he fought Blue, he'd get belted out, and there would go the Big

One. So the people handling Buster bought off Lewis for the 6 G's.

FOR 97 DOLLARS . . . AND THE MAN DIED

That's more money than Blue usually gets paid for fighting. "I'm the poorest professional you ever see," he says. Blue hasn't been able to get a fight this year, and here it is half over.

He has had 30 bouts, some of them for as little as 50 to 125 dollars. "I once was supposed to fight Burt Brownfield a four-rounder for 50 bucks," he says. "In the main event Buster Mathis was getting 1,000 dollars to fight Vic Brown 10 rounds. Brown was a southpaw, and Buster didn't want no part of him, so they asked me would I switch opponents for another 75 dollars. Hell, for 125 dollars I'd fight him if he had three left hands. It was my fourth pro fight and I was broke, man.

One of the earliest fights Blue Lewis had was when he was 16, on the corner of Hastings and Brewster, Detroit's toughest neighbourhood. The fight was for 97 dollars, which is the amount of money the man had on him when Blue and a few of his buddies beat him up. The man died.

Blue got 20 years for unarmed robbery and 35 more for murder, too. He was eligible for parole, at the very earliest, after 12, he says, which means he would still be locked up, but something happened. The prison at Jackson had a race riot, bigger in numbers than at Attica, he says, and he helped cool it. Everybody up there listened when Big Blue talked. His reward was a special parole after having done

"five years, six months and two weeks." He recites it that way.

While in prison, Blue had picked up a boxing magazine. There was a story about Sonny Liston and how he had been in big trouble with his fists, and how he had used the same fists to become heavyweight champ. "Why not me?" said Blue Lewis.

A large part of the answer will come on July 19, in the huge outdoor stadium at Dublin, where an Irish promoter has put up 250,000 dollars for Ali and 35,000 dollars for his opponent. "I don't know how to count to 35,000 dollars," says Blue eagerly.

"In 1968," he recalls, "Clay did me a helluva favour. I had only 11 pro fights, but when he came to Detroit to fight some exhibitions, he gave me a chance three rounds at 100 dollars a round. I was fresh out of prison, and it gave me a name for myself. I said that if they



Al 'Blue' Lewis . . . evened the score.

ever gave him his licence back I'd go anyplace to help him."

The chance came. Ali, training in Miami Beach for the first Quarry fight, needed sparring partners. Blue Lewis phoned him from Detroit. "C'mon down," said Ali. Blue hit Ali in the ribs, and they took x-rays. The next day, Angelo Dundee invited Al-Blue-Lewis to leave camp. Blue figures the favour was repaid, and now they start even in Dublin.

● This article by one of America's top sports writers appeared in the New York Daily News on July 1.