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BARRY MCGUIGAN



# McGuigan's Challenge

**Barry McGuigan's career in boxing has taken many twists and turns, but now the former world champion, union boss and TV commentator is turning his hand to promoting. RICHARD FLETCHER reports**

**B**arry McGuigan doesn't make many wrong calls. Exactly 20 years ago, the former world featherweight champion was in Manchester, inside the ropes, hoping to clinch another crack at the big time. Instead he lost, bloodied in four rounds by the Londoner Jim McDonnell, and knew straight away it was time to go. He did, retiring at the age of 28.

As a TV analyst, McGuigan nearly always gets it right. It's not luck. He's an astute, insightful ex-pro who's been there and done it. Now McGuigan, who ranks alongside "Rinty" Monaghan as one of the most popular boxers in Irish history, is trusting his instincts again by electing to join Britain's growing band of promoters — and he insists he's here to stay.

"I have been on the cusp of doing it many, many times over the years," McGuigan confessed. "I remember going to Vic Wakeling when I was working with Sky and saying: 'I've got a couple of guys who want me to look after them.' I write about boxing, I talk about it, I help kids, I've been down at the [Aylesham] amateur club training my son Shane. It just seems a natural progression for me, really.

"The thing I said to myself was: 'I'm getting on a bit. I'm 48 years old. I don't want to be doing this in my dotage. I'd rather do it now, when I can still remember what it tastes like to take a bit of leather in the mouth.'"

He didn't take too much. McGuigan is a brilliant communicator and retains much of the charisma that made him such a huge attraction as a fighter. But he is not taking his next step alone. McGuigan has financial backing and, since January, has been working with Matchroom chairman Barry Hearn (see page 46), who muscled his way into boxing in the late-1980s and, in the last year, has persuaded fight fans to try something new in the shape of his Prizefighter series.

"Barry is frenetically busy," McGuigan said. "He's flying all over the place. Boxing, he has openly admitted, has become part of a package. Gone are the heady days of Chris Eubank. He's had that, gone through that transition. It seems to me, with boxing, the taste

has gone out of the chewing gum, if you like. I want to be able to bring in talented kids so that I can re-ignite his enthusiasm."

McGuigan is already a licensed manager and promoter in the Irish Republic, but is still awaiting official clearance from the British Boxing Board of Control to work in the UK. He hopes to get it by the end of the year. In the meantime, McGuigan is continuing to learn the other side of the trade that won him such widespread acclaim.

On 12 June, McGuigan and Hearn worked on their third show together, at Liverpool Olympia, where the Nigerian-born Londoner Ajose Olusegun added the British light-welterweight title to his Commonwealth championship by outpointing old opponent Nigel Wright in the 12-round main event (see page 55).

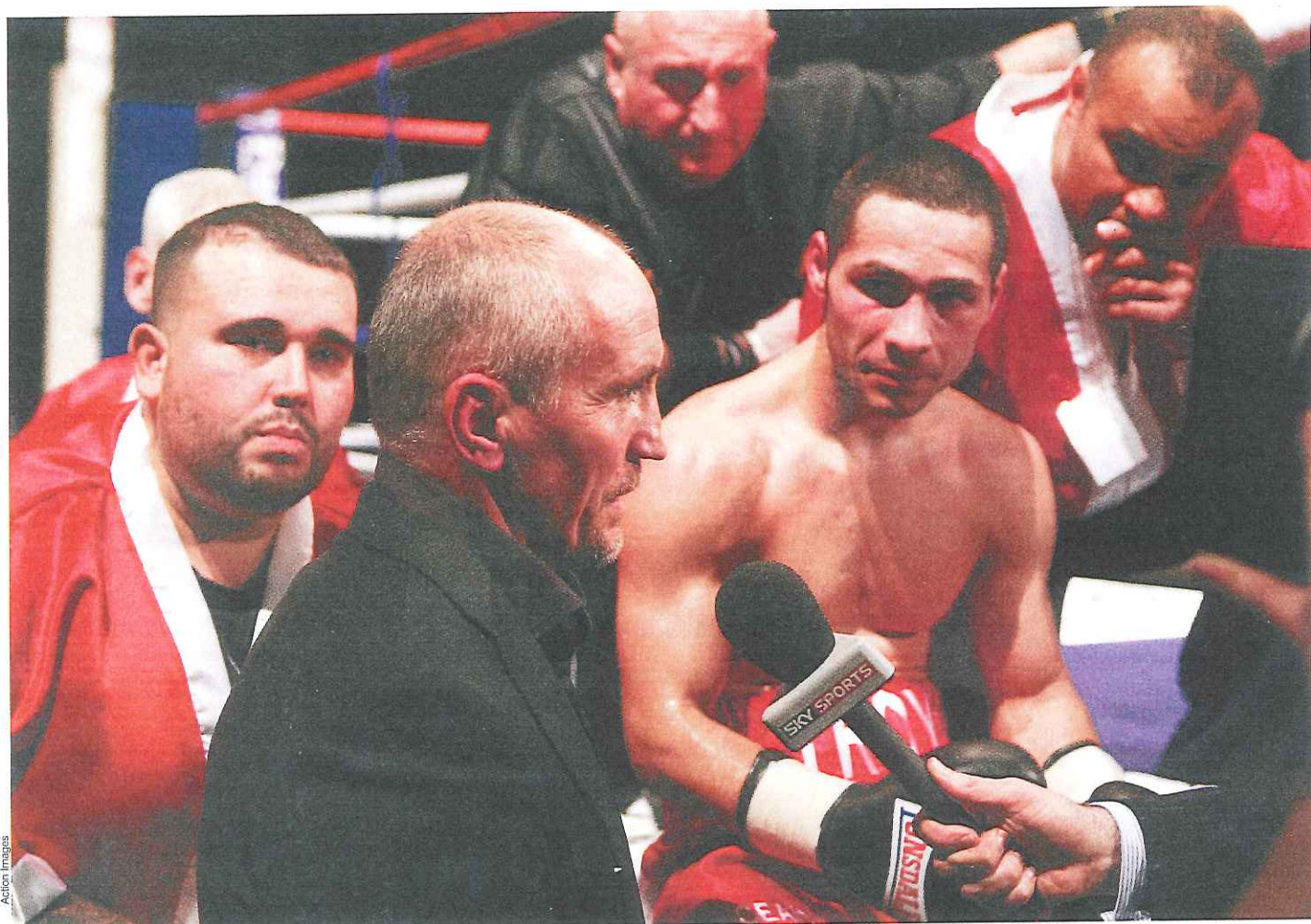
McGuigan's first two signings, Belfast super bantam Carl Frampton and Coventry super feather Troy James, both appeared in scheduled four-rounders on the undercard. Frampton, a multi-nations gold-medallist in Istanbul in April, won impressively on his paid debut, stopping the Hungarian Sandor Szinavel in the second, while James drew with the Teesider Chris Riley.

McGuigan rates both his acquisitions highly, but left me in no doubt about Frampton's potential a few days before the show, purring: "I believe he's *sensational*, really, really exciting."

But McGuigan is not just in it for himself. Although he is committed to finding and developing the champions of the future, there is a philanthropic element to his nature that convinces you whoever comes under his wing will be well looked-after.

The wheels are already in motion. "The idea is to promote all over the country, wherever the fighters are most attractive, where we can make it easy for their fans to come and see them," McGuigan said. "Barry's done this a lot of times and, ultimately, I want to bring talent to his stable. I've got two and I'm negotiating with another two. It's very exciting for me, I love dealing with the fighters. I've already discussed with Troy what he's doing outside of boxing. He's very seriously considering an Open University degree in sports science at Loughborough. I want to take care of them outside the ring." ▸





VAST EXPERIENCE: McGuigan the promoter brings to the table knowledge gleaned from years inside the ring and in front of the TV cameras

You would expect nothing less of McGuigan. Connecting with fighters is one thing, but his personal experiences have also lent him an innate understanding of human nature. "There are lots of people who claim to be experts," McGuigan said. "I have a lot of knowledge on the game and I get the majority of the fights right, but none of us know everything."

"You're learning about individuals. That's the thing, individuals differ. There are no two fighters the same. Some kids lack confidence. They outwardly look confident, but inwardly are very nervous and apprehensive. So you learn about individuals and you learn about dealing with kids, how to get the best out of them and how to give them sensible, levelheaded advice — and encourage them to make the right decisions and ultimately try to give that onus to them."

"When the bell rings, I walk down the stairs. He's on his own. But I don't want my fighters making bad decisions. I want them to make the right decisions outside [the ring], to live well, control their weight in between fights, enjoy it and have a great time."

"Ultimately, I want them to say when their career's over: 'I really got the best out of myself and I had a fantastic time.' So many fighters end up being bitter and upset and thinking boxing robbed them of everything they

had. You give your life to this game. It's a very cruel, tough, nasty business. People say: 'Yeah, I understand, I know what I'm getting into.' But a lot of the time they don't."

McGuigan's passion for the welfare of fighters is no secret. In 1993, he was instrumental in the formation of the Professional Boxers' Association (PBA) with Colin McMillan and Nicky Piper, later becoming president of the fighters' union. Although his new role has led to him resigning that position, McGuigan says he will continue to implement the PBA's principles in spirit.

"I want to treat my fighters as best I can and give them all the advice that I can," McGuigan said. "But these are hard economic times. In the period since the setting-up of the PBA, I've learned that a lot of fighters are their own worst enemies. A lot of them just don't take advice and will not be told. You do your best and you offer them your pearls of wisdom. You counsel them and you plead with them, and you do your best to ensure that they do the right thing."

"But ultimately, fighters will do what they want. I've learned that over the years, they simply won't take advice and guidance. You have to accept that. You can't lead people's lives for them. All you can do is offer the advice. If they don't take it, there's nothing you can do about it." ➤

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BARRY MCGUIGAN



# The career

**B**arry McGuigan rode a wave of personal and public emotion during his eight-year career, winning an established version of the world title along the way and bridging political divides in trouble-torn Northern Ireland.

At the height of the hostilities in the early-1980s, McGuigan became an ambassador for peace, attracting a huge following that included both Catholics and Protestants. As he rose through the ranks, McGuigan drew packed crowds to the 10,000-capacity Kings Hall in Belfast after having many of his earlier fights at the smaller Ulster Hall, which held 2,000.

"I tried in many ways to set an example because there was so much bloodshed, trauma and tragedy," McGuigan told me from his Kent home. "I felt during that time they had nothing to cheer about. Coming from a mixed marriage, I wasn't going to create the need for people to feel threatened when they came to my fights.

"I wouldn't wear the green, white and gold [of the Irish national flag]. People knew who I was and knew where I came from, so I just wore the United Nations colour of peace. It was difficult because you were almost being forced down a route, but I wouldn't do that, I wouldn't accept that."

McGuigan's greatest night came outdoors at Loftus Road, the Queens Park Rangers Football Ground, in west London, on 8 June 1985, when a crowd of around 27,000 saw him capture a unanimous 15-round decision over the vastly-experienced Panamanian Eusebio Pedroza to win the World Boxing Association featherweight title.

At 32, the taller Pedroza was making his 20th defence in a reign that stretched back to 1978. But the 24-year-old McGuigan, who traded on a high-pressure style, put Pedroza down in the seventh and went on to win by scores of 148-138, 147-140 and 149-139. The fight was watched by more than 19 million viewers on BBC TV in Britain and shown live in America on the ABC network.

The reaction to McGuigan's victory was almost unprecedented. Hundreds of thousands jammed the streets of Dublin and Belfast to celebrate his homecoming. Clones, McGuigan's hometown, was also awash as 15,000 locals turned out to greet their hero.

But McGuigan's reign was short. He retained his title twice, once in each capital, stopping the American Bernard Taylor and the Argentinian Danilo Cabrera, before facing the young Texan Steve Cruz, a late substitute opponent, outdoors at Caesars Palace, Las Vegas on 23 June 1986.

McGuigan started fast, but couldn't impose himself and tired in the blazing heat, with temperatures approaching 110 deg F. Cruz came on late, flooring the champion once in the 10th round and twice in the 15th to snatch a close unanimous decision, with two judges having McGuigan only a point behind. McGuigan, utterly exhausted and dehydrated, was carried from the ring on a stretcher, poignantly blowing a kiss as he departed.

But his supporters hadn't seen the last of him. After a difficult two years away from the ring, which included dealing with the death of his influential father, Pat, McGuigan returned as a super feather under Frank Warren in April 1988.

McGuigan looked refreshed as he hammered out a fourth-round stoppage win over the Mexican Nicky Perez at London's Alexandra Palace. Two months later, he repeated the trick against Brazil's Francisco Tomas Da Cruz. Both fights were shown on ITV.

It was after his next fight, against the Argentinian Julio Miranda in December of the same year, that McGuigan recognised the first signs of decline in his fighting. "I remember having him in real trouble in the third round and I just couldn't put the finishing touch to it," he recalled.



THE GREAT NIGHT: 27,000 on site and 19 million TV viewers saw McGuigan win the title

"It took me eight rounds before I stopped him. I just thought 'the magic's not there any more'. I trained every bit as hard. Jimmy Tibbs was a fantastic coach, I really enjoyed my time with him. But I just think the sparkle had gone."

But McGuigan fought on. With another world title challenge on the horizon, he accepted an eliminator bout against the Londoner Jim McDonnell in Manchester on 31 May 1989. In the second round, McDonnell caught McGuigan with a left-hander, cutting him badly over the right eye. It was the beginning of the end for the Irishman. McGuigan tried to battle on, but the injury was too serious and the fight was stopped in the fourth. McGuigan never fought again.

"He was probably a round up on me, but I wasn't getting into the fight," McGuigan admitted. "Then I got that hideous cut."

McGuigan says his career didn't end quite how he had envisaged. "It fizzled out," he said. "It didn't go out the way I would have wanted it to go out. I'd rather have gone out on my shield for the title. But I've no regrets, no regrets at all."

Six months later, McDonnell got the fight many had wanted to see McGuigan in — against the great Ghanaian Azumah Nelson, who then held the World Boxing Council championship in the 130lbs division. McDonnell fought valiantly before he was stopped in the 11th.

McGuigan conceded: "He would have been too good, no question. I'd have loved to have taken it. But you can't look at my record and look at his, and say it would have been nip and tuck. It could have been. I know my style would have created real problems for him, but I'm not for one minute saying I would have beaten him."

Before hitting the big time, McGuigan suffered terrible private anguish when his 12th opponent, the Nigerian Young Ali — real name Asymin Mustapha — died after spending five months in a coma following their fight at the World Sporting Club in Mayfair in June 1982.

"Never a day goes by when I don't think about that fight," McGuigan confessed. "I think about what might have happened had I stopped, which I was going to do. I didn't want to box any more. It was a terrible tragedy and I still feel very sad about it all. I often wonder whatever happened to his wife and family. It's a tough business. We all take chances in life. It's very difficult for me. You have to learn to live with it."

**RICHARD FLETCHER**





HIGH HOPES: McGuigan predicts great things for former Irish amateur star Carl Frampton, his signing who turned pro last month

With TV companies cutting their budgets, McGuigan accepts there is now far less money on the table for promoters. ITV is expected to pull out of the sport again at the end of the year and, at time of writing, the future of pay station Setanta was in serious doubt.

"Television in general is in disarray," McGuigan said. "RTE in Ireland have said they can afford to pay the big stars for another two months. I think it's a global issue. It is a difficult time at the moment, but boxing is hugely popular. It's a fabulous sport to watch. It is the most riveting sport in the world bar none. The audiences that we've attracted over the years are huge."

"I got 19 million on the BBC when I fought for the world title. I don't know how many people were in the country in 1985, but that's a huge percentage. We don't watch TV the way we did years ago. Most households have two or three televisions now. That's part of it. We don't have the huge numbers watching fights, but still, when there's a big fight on, people watch it. I do think it's not just boxing suffering. It's every sport, bar football. But you've got to come back again. Bear in mind, Barry has a TV deal with Sky, not me, and things are changing and moving. Who knows what the next few months brings?"

The promotional scene in Britain has undergone a drastic shift in the last 10 years. The established forces have been challenged by the boxers themselves, although not always successfully. Prince Naseem Hamed and Audley Harrison both tried to run their own affairs while they were fighting and, more recently, David Haye, Joe Calzaghe and Ricky Hatton have set up separate promotional companies in their names.

Despite his standing, McGuigan is adopting a more cautious approach, but says the influx of new promoters can only be good for the game.

"I don't know whether those guys will survive or whether that will continue to be the way, but I don't want to set up on my own because I don't have enough knowledge [and] I don't have enough connections," McGuigan admitted. "I set up with a guy [Hearn] who's established, who's got great credentials, has been there a long time, is very level-headed and has got bags of experience. That's the first thing."

"The second thing is, I think there can never be enough

competition. Competition is good for any business. I think it's good for the fighters and it's good for the game itself. It gives more kids an opportunity. It's good for the TV companies. If you've got one promoter pouring out fights, invariably standards will drop. If you have a whole load of guys and competitive fights, it's far better for the television companies. They've got far more choice and therefore the viewer's going to get a better fight. It's going to be more entertaining."

McGuigan is reserving judgement on the motives of the big-name fighters who have crossed over into the business side of the sport. "I don't know that it's altruistic yet," he said. "Time will tell. They certainly have had great experience themselves and success themselves. Obviously, they want to make money, but times are tough and there isn't a great deal of money out there to begin with. You have to be in there for the long haul. Time will decide whether that is the case."

"My attitude is, I know I'm not going to make a bundle of money right away. I've got to develop champions and that is my intention. I want to produce a conveyor belt of champions that's going to take me through for a long time to come in the future. That's what I want, not something that's a flash in the pan."

McGuigan was anything but that in the ring and you can be certain he will be working just as hard to make his mark outside it. But that doesn't mean he will be putting his son, Shane, under any more pressure to succeed, despite the 19-year-old's considerable amateur achievements in Ireland over the last three years.

"To be honest, I'm leaving it entirely up to him," McGuigan said. "It's a difficult thing being the son of somebody famous, and it's the same thing with him. He gets measured very harshly. He will make up his own mind. Whatever he decides to do, I'm not going to make a decision for him. If he wants to stop now, he can stop now. If he wants to continue on and do whatever he wants to do, that's his decision. He's a big boy. He's a lovely kid, very hard-working. He trains very hard and he's come a long way in three years. He's won the national senior novice title, the Ulster senior title in Ireland, the Irish under-21s and he should have won the Ulster seniors this year."

If the young McGuigan does decide to take it further, one thing's for sure. Dad won't be far away.