

THE BOY FROM BURNBANK

Burnbank was a small Lanarkshire mining village which is now part of Hamilton. Yet inside two decades this nondescript place gave birth to two of the biggest legends of Scottish sport of the 20th century, First was the football player and later manager, Jock Stein, whose career spanned over four decades, from signing professional forms with Albion Rovers in November 1942 to his tragic and untimely death while Scotland manager during a World Cup qualifier with Wales in Cardiff in September 1985.

In 1966 Stein was at the height of his managerial powers, taking Celtic to their first league championship win for twelve years (when Stein himself had been club captain) and starting out later in the year on the road which would lead to glory in the Lisbon sunshine the following May when Celtic became the first British club to win the European Cup.

But if 1967 was the year of Stein's greatest success then 1966 was the year in which another son of Burnbank carved his name into the annals of sporting glory. Walter McGowan was born on October 13th 1942, a month before Stein set out on his long and distinguished career. McGowan was the son of Thomas McGowan, a miner who fought under the pseudonym of 'Joe Gans' as a tribute to the great African-American lightweight of that name who rose to prominence in the early 1900s.

Although initially setting his sights on becoming a jockey, the younger McGowan eventually followed in his father's footsteps. He was a successful amateur, losing just twice in 124 bouts and winning the ABA flyweight title in 1961. After that triumph he turned professional with his father – by now known universally as Joe Gans – as his manager.

In many ways McGowan was a throwback to his father's heyday - and beyond that. By the early 1960s there weren't many flyweights left in the UK. Improved diet, better housing conditions and the advent of the NHS meant that the day of the 'wee man' seemed to belong firmly in the past. South Americans and Asians now ruled a weight division that had once seemed a British birthright.

The Welsh boxer Jimmy Wilde had been the first universally accepted world flyweight title holder. Amongst his successors had been Jackie

Brown, Peter Kane and the Scottish duo of Benny Lynch and Jackie Paterson. In the immediate post-war period there was Rinty Monaghan and Terry Allen but since Allen lost his title in 1950 UK flyweights had been a rare breed and world-class ones rarer still. Not many could make the weight of 112 lbs (8 stones or 50.8kg).

Enter Walter McGowan. He won 13 of his first 14 professional fights. His only loss had been to Jackie Brown (no relation to the earlier world champion of that name) in his third fight but he had atoned for that by not only beating Brown in a rematch but taking his British and Commonwealth titles from him as well.

Apart from one bout in London, all of his early fights were in Scotland, at Glasgow's Kelvin Hall and latterly at Paisley Ice Rink. So it was a big change when he challenged for the European title against the vastly-experienced Salvatore Burruni. The Sardinian had won 63 of his 67 fights (with one drawn) and the fight took place in Rome's Olympic Stadium.

The old adage of having to knock out an Italian fighter to get a draw in Italy was frequently cited before the fight. As it turned out McGowan could have no real complaint about losing on points. It had been a fine performance as McGowan fought for fifteen rounds for the first time in his career.

After this McGowan's career seemed to go sideways. Frustrated by the lack of action at flyweight he moved up a division to bantamweight for several fights and even went back to Rome to fight another Italian, Tommasso Galli, for the European crown at that level. That contest was drawn with Galli thus retaining the title. Though in truth McGowan was well ahead on points according to neutral observers. On that occasion a KO might also have brought him a draw!

The fight with Galli had followed a couple of defeats for McGowan – one of which was fair and square and the other a result of cuts when he was ahead on points - and he was developing a reputation for cutting badly during fights, much the same as Henry Cooper. His style and his courage were never in question nor was his box office appeal and promoter Jack Solomons booked McGowan to headline the opening night of the brand new World Sporting Club at London's Grosvenor House in January 1966.

His opponent was yet another Italian, Nevio Carbi, the 7th ranked bantamweight in the world and the fight was to be over ten rounds at that weight. The World Cup Finals draw took place the same evening but Solomons had a trump card to encourage a good turnout when, the day before the fight, he announced that McGowan would not only be facing Burruni again later in the year but this time it would be for the world title.

McGowan conceded four pounds to the Italian but gave an impressive performance in front of over 1,000 paying guests. One of those in attendance was former world lightweight and welterweight champion Barney Ross and the American went on record as to how enthused he had been by the Scot. The fight was stopped in McGowan's favour near the end of the sixth round but it was disconcerting that once again he had been badly cut.

Establishing a date for the title challenge proved problematic as Burruni had non-title commitments to meet, including a fight in Thailand so McGowan was lined up for another bantamweight bout at Grosvenor House against the useful Argentinian Ernesto Miranda on March 28th with a contest for the British and Commonwealth bantamweight titles in April against Liverpool's Alan Rudkin. Burruni was pencilled in for June 14th. It wasn't just Muhammad Ali who had a busy schedule this year.

The Miranda contest was a controversial one. Despite giving away over five pounds McGowan won easily enough on points. But his opponent complained several times about low blows and the Scot was twice ordered to keep his punches high. Confusion reigned at the end of the scheduled eight rounds when both boxers clearly thought they had two more rounds to go. Miranda lost his cool and had to be escorted from the ring by his seconds. Meanwhile Rudkin had fought and won a week previously but he had suffered cuts to his eyes and had to pull out of the planned April fight.

McGowan had actually fought just once as a flyweight since losing to Burruni and not at all in his past nine contests over 21 months. Burruni had fought an incredible 23 times since the pair's last meeting, an average of almost one a month. He had seen a lot more action as a flyweight than McGowan but still had problems making the weight, coming in five ounces over the limit when the boxers squared up to each other again at the Empire Pool, Wembley. McGowan stepped on to the scales four ounces inside the limit. Off went Burruni to furiously try and work off the

excess weight. By the time he returned to the weigh-in he had done so with two pounds to spare.

McGowan's ability to make the weight owed much to the rigorous training schedule devised by his father. This involved five miles roadwork followed by a swim then a spell in a cold tin bath. It was – to the outside eye – a hellish regime but if the boy from Burnbank could lay claim to the coveted world title then his daily ordeal would have been worth it in the end.

'Wee Walter' (5ft 2.5 ins or 159 cm) was the favourite despite his earlier loss to the champion. He was ten years younger than Burrini and had two years more experience under his belt since they last fought. The additional effort Burrini had put in on the day of the fight to make the weight was also a factor which might tell against his stamina the longer the contest went on.

Burrini himself appeared to accept this analysis, going after his man in the early rounds. But McGowan was too wily and too quick to be caught and he was an effective counter-puncher. Burrini could hit harder but McGowan more often and more accurately. In the third round he cut the champion's left cheekbone.

McGowan was well on top. Most scorecards gave him six of the opening seven rounds. In the eighth (also won by McGowan) he suffered a bad cut above his right eye. As the fight progressed the injury worsened and twice the experienced referee Harry Gibbs examined the cut before allowing McGowan to box on.

Nearing the end McGowan knew the title was his provided the cut didn't get any worse and he embarked on his own version of the 'Ali Shuffle,' dancing out of harm's way and jabbing as he did. The scene was set for a dramatic finale.

McGowan came out for the fifteenth determined to stay out of reach for as much of the final three minutes as he could. Burrini knew he was behind and that barring an unlikely knockdown, stopping his opponent on cuts was his only hope. He spent the last round searching out McGowan's right eye. As the contest reached the final minute it was apparent that McGowan's eye was getting worse as blood streamed down his right

cheek. It was now a race against time. McGowan ran the clock down, dodging Burrini's fists until the bell sounded and as it did the Sardinian was the first to congratulate the bloodied Scot on his triumph – before the verdict had been announced.

McGowan was the champion of the world. The latest in a long line of British flyweights to claim the crown. The newspapers of the day feared he would also be the last as the division passed into the hands of men from South America and the Far East.

Those worries could wait a while yet. The new champion had to be allowed to celebrate first then rest a short while before tackling his next assignment – that postponed fight with Rudkin.

McGowan and Rudkin were old acquaintances. They had clashed twice as amateurs with the Scot coming out on top on both occasions. Things were different now as Rudkin had built up a reputation as one of the best bantamweights around. He'd won 26 of his 28 fights and of his two losses, one was very early in his career and the other a unanimous decision in Japan against Fighting Harada in a contest for the world bantamweight title.

The fight was also virtually a home match for Liverpudlian Rudkin, being staged at Manchester's Belle Vue and McGowan also conceded three pounds in weight. So although a close contest was anticipated Rudkin was the slight favourite. What boxing aficionados most craved though was a good contest. This fight came just one month after the Ali-London debacle and British boxing was in need of a pick-me-up. If the big guys couldn't deliver it then it was up to two of the best little men in the business.

Rudkin started the stronger, putting in some telling punches in the early rounds before McGowan got his rhythm going and started to dance away from trouble while delivering some long-distance counter-punches of his own. McGowan wasn't noted for his punching but near the end of the seventh he landed a right counter which left Rudkin reeling. He followed up in the next two rounds with a series of jabs which brought the contest back to level terms.

The tenth was the best round of the fight and evenly matched as both boxers threw rapid punches at each other in the centre of the ring.

McGowan's face was streaked with blood but he fought back to force Rudkin onto the defensive and was still going forward as the bell sounded.

The Scot took the next two rounds as Rudkin's punches failed to find their target and after an even thirteenth it was Rudkin who started the penultimate round on the attack. But Rudkin himself was now bleeding from inside the mouth. McGowan took advantage, scoring with several head shots.

The final round was fast and furious. Rudkin started well, dominating McGowan and pushing him all over the ring but 'Wee Walter' responded with gritty determination counter-punching to the end. It was difficult to tell which boxer had triumphed over the piece but referee Bill Jones raised McGowan's hand at the end of the fight. He now had five titles to his name, the British and Commonwealth flyweight and bantamweight titles and the flyweight championship of the world.

The verdict didn't go down well with many Rudkin supporters ringside. A crowd surged round the ring, hurling abuse at both the referee and McGowan. The arguments raged all night and in the following day's papers too with reporters unable to agree who had won, some even suggesting it had been a draw. A rematch was definitely on the cards but before then Walter McGowan had a world title to defend. A week after the Rudkin fight it was announced he would fight Thailand's Chartchai Chionoi in Bangkok towards the end of the year with a definite date still to be arranged.

24 hours later came a bombshell from the British Boxing Board of Control. The BBB of C told McGowan that he wasn't permitted to hold titles at two different weight divisions at the same time so would have to give up either his flyweight or bantamweight title. Joe Gans asked the board to extend their deadline till after the Chionoi fight. They refused this request but agreed to give the boxer an additional two weeks to decide which title to relinquish. When that deadline passed without a response the board demanded one of the titles be given up forthwith. The reply from Gans was scathing. *"The BBB of C are responsible for the circumstances: they allowed Walter to box for a title he could not hold. Now they must resolve the situation by changing the rules."*

He had a point. McGowan had been British flyweight champion for over three years and it was inconceivable the board had been unaware of this when they sanctioned the Rudkin fight.

But it was a distraction the fighter could have done without. Not only was he preparing for a world title fight in Asia, he had a warm-up fight with Spanish bantamweight champion Jose Bisbal to take care of as well.

Bisbal's last fight had been a convincing points defeat over ten rounds by Rudkin and the journeyman Spaniard was expected to pose little trouble for McGowan. The Scot was so confident he ignored Bisbal coming in 1.5 lbs over the limit and with a six pounds advantage.

So it proved. McGowan was on top from the first bell and other than taking a left hook to the head in the third round was in little trouble. A right to the head from McGowan in the fourth put the Spaniard down on one knee and another to the nose just before the bell also did damage.

Blood flowed down Bisbal's nose throughout the fifth as McGowan pursued his man, raining down punches from all over the ring. Many thought the fight should have been stopped there and then but somehow Bisbal made it to the bell. His seconds signalled he had taken enough before the start of the sixth and McGowan had the perfect send-off for his fight in Thailand.

The nagging matter of the double titles was resolved before he flew to the Far East when McGowan relinquished his British flyweight title. It made sense. He had won the crown back in May 1963 but had never defended it as there had been nobody in the small and ever-dwindling band of British flyweights anywhere near good enough to challenge him.

The chauvinism of the sporting press reached its zenith in 1966 for obvious reasons but it wasn't just the football fraternity that suffered from this affliction. For weeks before the fight Chionoi was routinely dismissed as 'unheralded' or 'little-known' or some other disparaging description. This was not only unfair on the challenger but showed how little was known in those days about fighters from distant lands.

What the British press meant was that Chionoi was unknown to them. Inside the world of boxing he was regarded highly enough. In 52 pro

fights he'd won 40, lost 10 and drawn twice. All of his contests had been in Asia, with several bouts in both Japan and the Philippines as well as his native Thailand. After all, these countries were where the flyweights were to be found these days.

Nor was he so unknown that a line of form couldn't be drawn. The former Oriental & Pacific flyweight champion had outpointed Ernesto Miranda two weeks before McGowan had done the same – though over ten rounds, not eight. More pertinent than that, his fight before Miranda had been a bantamweight contest against Burruni and he had won that decision unanimously and overwhelmingly. And as well as being the same age as McGowan (three days older) he had fought nearly twice as often. There should have been no one in the accompanying press pack expecting an easy victory against this man on his home turf.

So when the two fighters squared up to each other in the Kittikachorn Stadium in Bangkok on December 30th an intriguing end to a tumultuous boxing year was in prospect. Bangkok had staged big fights before but this was special. So much so that the King of Thailand himself was in attendance. It was difficult to imagine in similar circumstances either the Queen or Prince Philip turning up at the Albert Hall or Wembley.

McGowan started well and put the Thai down twice in the second round. That round proved to be the decisive one of the contest. Not only did Chionoi get back up on both occasions, thus illustrating McGowan's lack of a KO punch, he opened up a cut on the Scot's nose. It looked like the Thai's head had caused the damage, not his fists but there was no suggestion at the time or afterwards of a deliberate butt.

McGowan tried to ignore the cut as best as he could and box his usual way, using his speed and movement to keep out of trouble and hit on the counter. But Chionoi proved to be a tough customer. He had a powerful right and an effective jabbing left. He also used his height and reach advantage (he was 2.5 inches/6.35 cm taller) to good effect, landing punches on McGowan when a smaller man would have missed. And from the second round onwards he had McGowan's nose as a bullseye right in front of him. As the contest progressed the cut grew deeper and McGowan's face redder. Fifty seconds into the ninth round the fight was stopped to allow a doctor to examine the Scot's wound and McGowan was declared unfit to continue.

There followed two gestures of supreme sportsmanship which stood in stark contrast to the aftermath of the Rudkin fight. The new champion threw himself at the feet of the old in the middle of the ring and McGowan responded by hoisting his conqueror high and carrying him round the ring. McGowan and his father then knelt and bowed before King Bhumibol. The fight may have been lost but McGowan had won the respect of his opponent, the monarch and the crowd.

Several times in his career Walter McGowan lost fights due to cuts when he was winning the contest. Not so this time. The judges had Chionoi in front. The referee had the Thai well ahead. The legendary Nat Fleischer of *'The Ring'* magazine also had Chionoi leading though only by a point. The only judge to score in McGowan's favour was the famous Scottish sportswriter Jimmy Sanderson and Sanderson, for all his many attributes, was hardly a model of objectivity.

Nor were there any complaints from the McGowan camp. Asked about the alleged clash of heads that had cut his son's nose, Joe Gans said *"It was an accident. It couldn't be helped. Chionoi is a very good fighter. If the referee hadn't stopped the fight, I would have myself."*

In just over a year six Britons had fought for world titles and only McGowan had been successful. Now, a little over six months after his triumph he and his father flew home to greet the New Year in a land without a world champion to its name.

Boxing was in many ways less complicated in the 1960s. True, there were disputes between governing bodies as to who was and wasn't champion but these were minimal compared to the plethora of bodies which make such claims in the 21st century. The constant salami slicing of weight divisions had yet to begin and at national, continental and world level there were only the eight 'traditional' divisions with the flyweights at one end and the heavyweights at the other.

Between those extremes British boxing was well represented in 1966 though perhaps due to the lack of authentic world contenders – McGowan apart – it didn't feel like it at the time. Ironically the year ended with the

British flyweight title vacant when McGowan opted to retain the bantamweight crown.

The featherweight champion was the Welshman Howard Winstone who also held the European title. He fought four times in 1966, winning every fight. Three times in his career he challenged the legendary Mexican Vicente Saldivar for the world title and three times he lost. After Saldivar's retirement Winstone eventually became world champion.

Lightweight champion Maurice Cullen, from County Durham, fought and won five times this year though he was never quite good enough to challenge for the global crown. That was left to his successors Ken Buchanan and Jim Watt.

At welterweight was another Welsh boxer, Brian Curvis. He won three of his four fights in 1966. He had lost one world title fight in 1964 and had signed for another scheduled for November 1966 when a damaged Achilles tendon not only forced him to pull out of that fight but to retire altogether at the age of 29.

The middleweight title holder was Johnny Pritchett from Bingham, Notts. In 1966 he fought and won seven times, five of those inside the distance. Pritchett fought just once outside the UK in his entire career and that proved to be his only defeat and his last fight. He never got the opportunity to prove himself at a higher level.

At light-heavy was another Lanarkshire fighter, Chic Calderwood from Craigneuk. His short but colourful career is deserving of a book all to itself. Stripped of his British title after being sent to prison for assault he regained it on his release with the title lying vacant in between. He won only three of his six fights in 1966, losing two with the other declared a no-contest when rain forced a premature conclusion to his European title fight in Italy against Piero Del Papa. Yet Calderwood had done enough in a explosive nine-year career to earn a crack at world champion Jose Torres in the latter's native Puerto Rico in October 1966.

Torres had taken the title from Willie Pastrano and Calderwood had beaten Pastrano earlier in his career so the Scot had some cause for optimism. There was a pre-fight argument at the weigh-in when Calderwood's manager Tommy Gilmour claimed the champion was one

pound over the limit but the officials refused to reweigh Torres and both boxers were pronounced to be exactly on the line at 175 lbs (12st 7lbs, 79.4 kg).

The fight itself, in front of 12,000 partisan Puerto Ricans in the humid conditions of San Juan, was short-lived. Calderwood never got the chance to put his famed left jab to any good use. Instead, his tendency to freeze in big fights was only too apparent. In the second round Torres caught Calderwood with a thunderous right which sent the challenger to the canvas, face down. The Scot struggled slowly and uncertainly to his feet but by the time he rose he had failed to beat the count. After just two minutes and six seconds of round two Calderwood's challenge was over.

Tragically, less than a month later, on November 12th 1966, Chic Calderwood was killed in a car crash. He was just 29 years old.