

Ashley Theophane

There is the easy way and the hard way. In a bid to make his mark in boxing the Londoner went to America to live his dream

LONDON'S Ashley Theophane has not done anything the conventional way. He travelled to America to spar in the bustling gyms and took fights against big names to make his own. Now the British light-welterweight champion, he is making a noise in England.

How did your harsh upbringing on the mean streets of Paddington, and time in the slammer, condition you for a prizefighting career?

It taught me to retain a very small but tight team around me; people I can trust in the low times as well as the highs. I've always been cautious, I make background checks on everything. My background wasn't just hard but poor. Mum had me at a young age and we had to battle for everything we got. That drove me on. I was facing a possible eight years so time 'inside' focused my mind – if I got out and had a second chance, I would make the most of my boxing talent.

I never won anything in the amateurs but knew I was blessed with speed, skills and flair. We were only allowed to visit the gym once a week but, inside my cell, I'd do 1,000 sit-ups and 1,000 press-ups every day, in sets of 50. On my release in 2001, I committed to knocking my criminal activities on the head and focusing on my boxing, boxing, boxing.

Why did you struggle for a break, featuring predominately on small-hall bills, off-TV?

I had to sell a lot of tickets just to get on shows but saw it as investing in myself while I learned the trade. After stopping Alan Bosworth in a British eliminator [rsf 7, January 2007] I expected top promoters to sign me up, but they left me out.

I was nine and two [wins-

HUNGER: Ashley is keen to build on his British title victory over Lenny Daws

losses] when I first went to New York. At Gleasons Gym, I started holding my own in sparring with ranked fighters, gained the respect of the top trainers and earned a slot on *The Contender* series, but couldn't get a work visa in time.

Do US gyms provide a better ring education than British gyms?

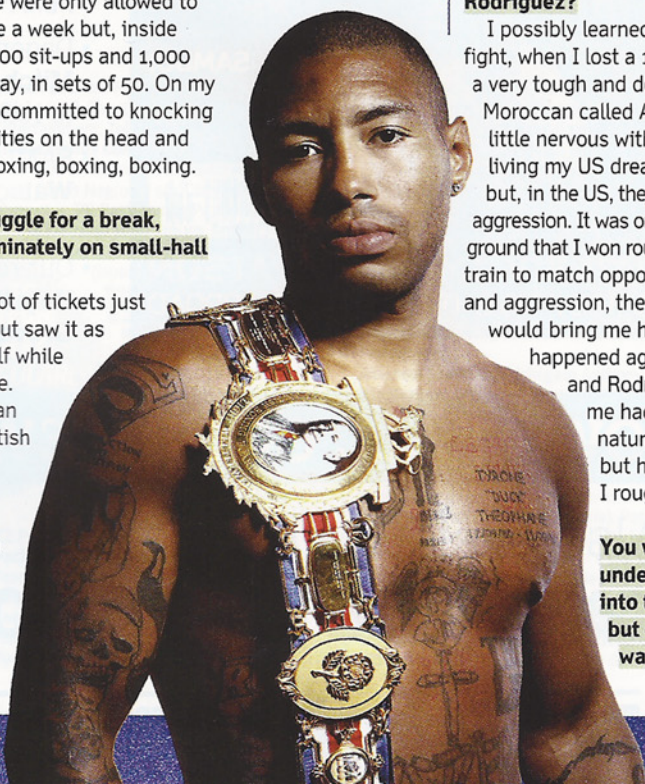
Firstly, as a kid, I never fell in love with British boxing, I fell in love with American boxing and the British boxers like Kirkland Laing, Nigel Benn and Lloyd Honeyghan who succeeded over there. The calibre was always far higher in the US.

Secondly, there's so many unknown but talented European, African, South American and Caribbean boxers there, all with different styles, all desperate to make it. The level of sparring is way, way better. There's also a mad mix of trainers; aggressive ones, technical ones, conditioners... But you can learn things from most of them. I learned as much in the American gyms as I did in American rings. It's been a good experience.

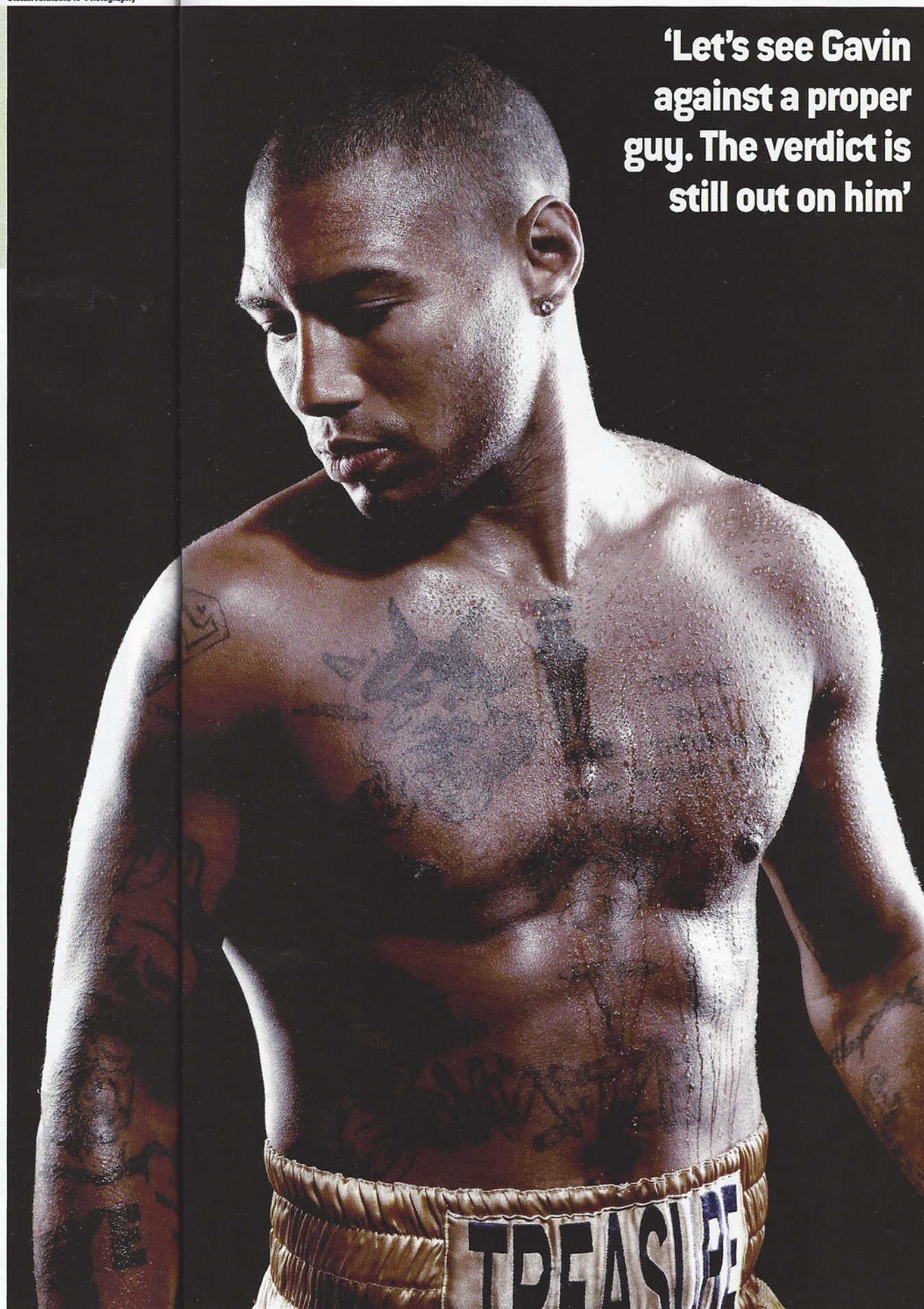
What did you learn in high profile US fights with guys like DeMarcus Corley, Danny Garcia and Delvin Rodriguez?

I possibly learned most in my first US fight, when I lost a 10-round decision to a very tough and determined French-Moroccan called Ali Oubaali. I was a little nervous with the occasion of living my US dream. I had better skills but, in the US, they like to score for aggression. It was only when I stood my ground that I won rounds. I had to modify, train to match opponents for pressure and aggression, then hope my skills would bring me home. That's what happened against 'Chop Chop' and Rodriguez. Delvin and me had sparred and he's naturally bigger than me – but he took me lightly and I roughed him up.

You were a significant underdog going into the Lenny Daws fight but didn't see it that way, did you?



Stefan Johnson/IP Photography



'Let's see Gavin against a proper guy. The verdict is still out on him'

Mystifying. I'd been in with far, far better guys. Lenny's game is all about fitness. I knew if my fitness was cool, my skills were far superior. Though Lenny could've won the belt outright by beating me, I actually think I was hungrier. It was my time to shine.

You're the wrong side of 30, so will it be Britain or the US? 140 or 147lbs?

In the US, they're wary of me now. They know I'm capable of beating their top boys so only try to 'do' me at short-notice.

Before Daws, I was adamant that, win or lose, I'd resume my career in the States. But once that Lonsdale Belt was clasped round my waist, I decided I wanted one for keeps and I'm hoping a top British promoter will show me some love.

I'm a free agent so Matchroom, Frank Warren, Ricky Hatton... come cut me a deal, baby. I'd be up for the European title, too. Paul McCloskey's European challengers seemed weaker than those he fought at British level.

THE KNOWLEDGE

AGE: 30 **FROM:** Kilburn, London **STANCE:** Orthodox **RECORD:** 29-4-1 (?) **DIVISION:** Light-welterweight **MAJOR TITLE(S):** British light-welterweight **NOTABLE FIGHTS:** Lenny Daws w pts 12, Delvin Rodriguez w pts 10, Danny Garcia l pts 10, DeMarcus Corley w pts 8, Ali Oubaali l pts 10 **UP NEXT:** Scheduled to appear on the July 23 Dereck Chisora-Tyson Fury bill on Channel 5 **ETC:** Theophane has engaged in a Twitter war with Anthony Farnell, the trainer of domestic rival Frankie Gavin. That would be an intriguing fight but ambitious Ashley is looking at the world scene.

I've proved I can hang with the best at either weight but I'd prefer 140 because I'm more evenly matched sizewise. If a world title shot was offered at either I jump at it.

I'd love Amir Khan. He's all about speed but I'd deal with that. Marcos Maidana's very slow and yet he nearly took care of him.

Birmingham's Frankie Gavin appears eager to goad you into defending against him. Fancy it?

I feel I could beat him but it doesn't make financial sense to fight him now. He needs to earn his shot in eliminators, raise his profile.

Frankie came over to me at the Khan-McCloskey fight and seemed a nice guy. I've only seen his fight with [Michael] Lomax and he's got skills at a certain level.

Let's see him up against a proper guy. The verdict's still out on him.

LOUIS DANIEL CONTRIBUTOR