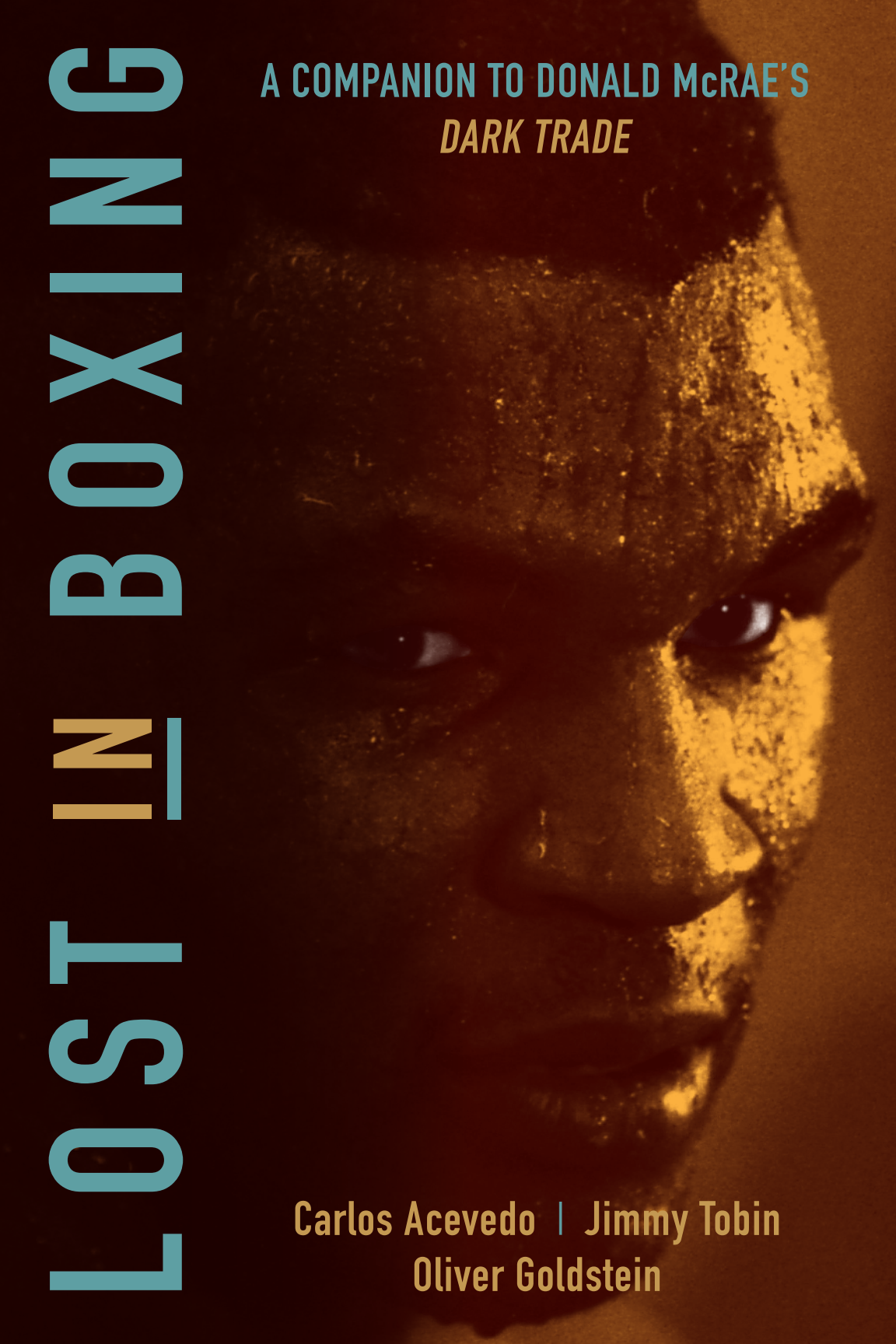
LOST IN BOXING

A COMPANION TO DONALD McRAE'S *DARK TRADE*



Carlos Acevedo | Jimmy Tobin
Oliver Goldstein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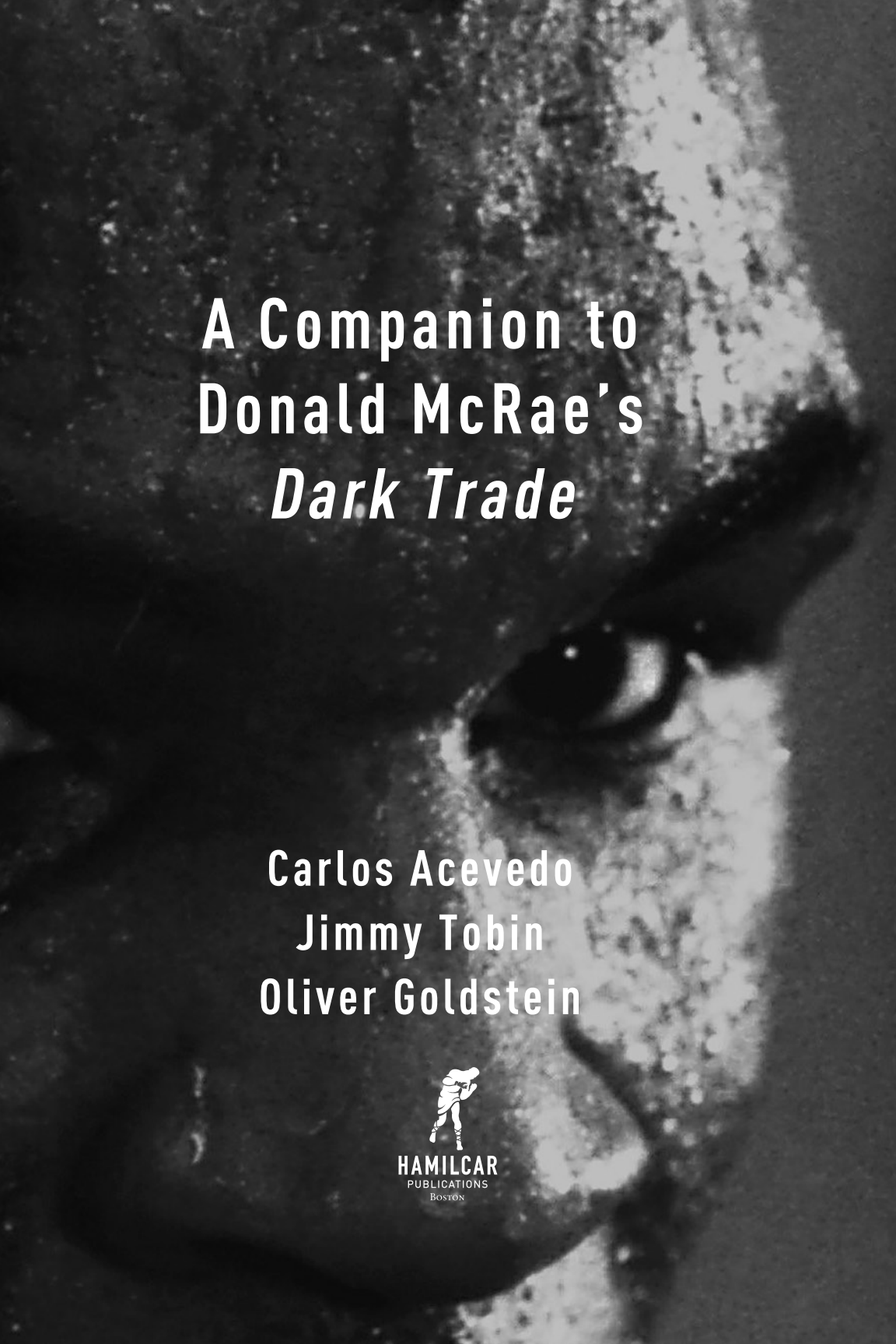

A Companion to Donald McRae's *Dark Trade*

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CONTENTS

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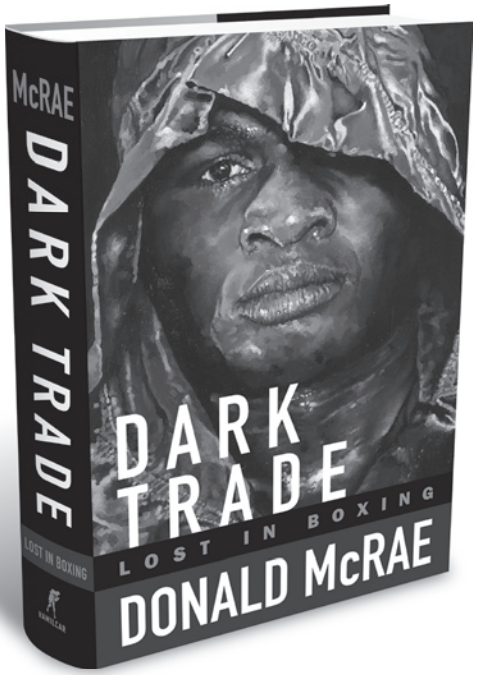

McRae brings to the highly charged, obsessive world of professional boxing a novelist's eye and ear for revealing detail and convincingly recalled dialogue.This is an impassioned book.

—Joyce Carol Oates, *Los Angeles Times*

When I started covering boxing in 1996, one of the first books I read to educate myself about the sport was Dark Trade*—and, to this day, Donald McRae's book has stayed with me. No collection of boxing books is complete without* Dark Trade.

—Steve Kim, ESPN.com

Over twenty years ago, Donald McRae set out across the United States and his adopted home, Britain, to find deeper meaning in the brutal trade that had transfixed him since he was a young man. The result is a chronicle capturing not only McRae's compelling personal journey through the world of professional prizefighting, but also the stories of some of its biggest names—James Toney, Mike Tyson, Evander Holyfield, Oscar De La Hoya, Naseem Hamed, and others.

McRae brilliantly exposes the hopes and fears and obsessions of these legendary fighters, while revealing some of his own along the way. What he shares with them most, he comes to realize, is that he is hopelessly, and willingly, "lost in boxing." In this new edition, released in the United States for the first time, and including a new chapter, it's clearer than ever why *Dark Trade* is considered one of the finest boxing books ever written.

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INTRODUCTION

For the first half of the 1990s, Don McRae was virtually embedded in boxing, a subterranean pursuit rarely illuminated by even the dimmest of spotlights. McRae wrote personal and intimate portraits of some of the most significant—and complicated—fighters of the era. Among those McRae profiled were Mike Tyson, Frank Bruno, Chris Eubank, Oscar De La Hoya, James Toney, Roy Jones Jr., Evander Holyfield, Naseem Hamed, Michael Watson, and Nigel Benn. These dispatches formed the basis of *Dark Trade*, a revelatory work whose narrative focuses on the inner lives of athletes in a business underscored by danger and deceit.

In some ways, McRae was fortunate to have picked the 1990s to pursue his ambivalent love. The '90s were a pivotal turning point in boxing. The technological advance of pay-per-view (a quantum leap over the cumbersome closed-circuit methods previously used for marquee events) not only maximized profits for superfights, it also accelerated corporate takeover of a largely unregulated sport, leading to what we have today: conglomerate fiefdoms each presenting boxing based on vertical integration and a content-provider model for multiplex channels and platforms. That means that the free-for-all atmosphere of even twenty-five years ago—when fighters were mixed and matched with each other far more often—barely exists now. As fighters sign exclusive contracts with fewer and fewer entities, they are removed from the dues-paying playing field

and elevated to marquee status at the whim of men in Brooks Brothers suits on Sixth Avenue. The demarcation line between world-class and run-of-the-mill has been erased over the years, until men who would have been toiling in bingo halls, high school gyms, VFWs, armories, Holiday Inns, and casino barges in, say, 1993, are now headline mainstays regardless of skill or appeal.

This sudden tech windfall of the 1990s led to a mad scramble not only for pay-per-view loot but for the means to springboard into position for it. Where few mega-events existed in the 1980s (the unwieldy and costly outlay of closed-circuit prevented second-rate fights—and fighters—from being given the gratuitous star treatment so common today), the '90s produced the first crop of professionals looking at potential regular million-dollar purses. Big money, added to the already intense pressures intrinsic to a blood sport, created a new dynamic and, perhaps, a new kind of fighter. Don McRae was there—in Las Vegas, New York, Los Angeles, London—to catalog the dreams, hopes, and fears of daring young men in search of distinction.

Lost in Boxing revisits some of the central figures of *Dark Trade* at varying stages of their careers. These are snapshots, taken in some cases from the distance of decades, that aim to contextualize specific moments or achievements of each fighter. While the real-time narratives of *Dark Trade* have an immediacy and, at times, a desperate poignancy that a retrospective can never hope to duplicate, there are still compelling moments to be found in what McRae has called "a brutal and strangely beautiful world."

Although McRae was not a participatory journalist, per se, his proximity to fighters (including dressing-room access to James Toney and a house-call to Chris Eubank) allowed him to be more than just an interested—indeed, fascinated—observer. He was, in a sense, a collaborator with his subjects, who are disarmingly frank when faced with their affable and empathetic interlocutor. Even Oscar De La Hoya, a man hypervigilant about maintaining a squeaky-clean image for the public and publicists alike, reveals psychic distress.

Surprisingly, perhaps, given the unpredictability of boxing—its world-within-a-world subculture, after all, is predicated on violence and moral ambiguity—McRae never suffered blowback from what some might have considered trespass. He did not even get his nose bloodied,

inadvertently, of course, in a sparring session with one of his subjects (as George Plimpton did against Archie Moore). Nor did his experience writing *Dark Trade* parallel those of his less fortunate predecessors in subjective journalism. Think of Paul Gallico, trampled by Jack Dempsey in a suicidal challenge to go one round with "The Manassa Mauler"; or Hunter S. Thompson, trounced by the Hells Angels, whose lives he had been documenting; or Nick Kent, whipped with a bicycle chain by a deranged Sid Vicious in the street; or Bill Buford, pummeled by a riot squad during a melee at a football game in Sardinia.

In the end, this is surprising, considering the fact that James Toney once tore off a neck brace worn by aging *New York Daily News* beat writer Michael Katz, and that Mike Tyson was feverishly abusive not only to the press, but to its equipment as well. "You ruin people's lives," Tyson once told a gathering of reporters. "I'm a sucker even to be talking to you guys. I should be ready to rip your heads off."

Two of the most erratic boxers with whom McRae spent time, Toney and Tyson, are the main stars of *Lost in Boxing*. In "Them Bones," James Toney achieves his world-title dream at twenty-two, fighting as an underdog on the road; more than a decade later, in "This Is the Future," he is an aging ex-champion trying to recapture past glory, again with the odds against him. Tyson is also a young man in "The Savage Within," which chronicles his spectacular and often profane rise to crossover stardom in 1986, when he was on his way to becoming the richest athlete of the "Greed Is Good" era. "Episodes in the American Berserk" captures him in 1991, against the mercurial Razor Ruddock, no longer a dominant force (or even heavyweight champion, for that matter) but with a seemingly unbreakable stranglehold on the American consciousness.

There is also Oscar De La Hoya, the former teen heartthrob with an envious/ruinous left hook, whose charmed life turned out to be far less charming than depicted in the '90s, when Madison Avenue concerns (and pay-per-view dollars) forced him to masquerade as The Boy Next Door. Although De La Hoya was a *Brady Bunch* knockoff with knockout power, he also had a penchant for liquor, alcohol, and sorrow. Not the least of his many concerns as a budding young superstar was the love-hate relationship he had with the Mexican afición. In "The Hotstepper," he must prove himself to them against soft-spoken, Jalisco-born Rafael Ruelas, the sentimental favorite. Years later, the former "Golden Boy"

finds himself in a déjà vu moment when Fernando Vargas challenges his essential "Mexican-ness" leading up to their bitter showdown in 2002, as told in "Vendetta."

Evander Holyfield might have been the least controversial figure encountered in *Dark Trade* (considering his record of fathering children out of wedlock, his public swooning at the hands of a faith healer named Benny Hinn, and long-standing suspicions concerning performance-enhancing drug use, that says a lot), but in the ring, "The Real Deal" was seldom anything but electric. His breathtaking struggle against Michael Dokes is the subject of "Earn It," where both men willed themselves past their physical limits in the name of—what exactly?

On the other side of the Atlantic, oddballs such as Naseem Hamed and Chris Eubank dominated the U.K. scene in the early to middle '90s. Here they pop up as well, Hamed, more obnoxious than any five-foot-three man has a right to be, in "the Edge of Derision," and Eubank, a bewildering figure whose comical aura is grotesquely undercut when his grudge rematch against Michael Watson ends with Watson maimed in "Idyllic Masquerading."

Finally, the enigmatic Roy Jones Jr., considered a super-athlete for years, is glimpsed during a slow and often disappointing development stage when there was still a kitsch/camp factor in boxing. (Today, even the lowest-rent club fights are streamed or televised, accompanied by the usual disproportionate hype, handclapping, and horn-blowing.) Fighting often in the prizefight backwaters of the Florida Panhandle, Jones, at one point, even poleaxed an imposter. "The Future Now" details how he finally outstripped both a mediocre start and the imaginations of hardened boxing observers and what they had thought possible.

The new edition of *Dark Trade* updates the lives of some of these captivating figures, long after their best days, in the ring, at least, have passed. There are also new fighters who reveal themselves to McRae, who understands an inexorable truth about the Sweet Science: "The ring was a bleak place in which to dream." *Lost in Boxing* is merely a postscript to that bleakness.

Carlos Acevedo
New York City
April 2020

Them Bones

The Night James Toney Won His First World Title

Carlos Acevedo

Nobody expected James Toney, a 20-1 underdog with a low profile but a perpetual scowl, to win. Certainly not Michael Nunn, the glib IBF middleweight champion with a 36-0 record and five successful title defenses under his belt. A flashy stylist in the ring, Nunn was also a master trash-talker. With a street-regal air, Nunn belittled Toney every chance he got. When told that Toney was quoted as saying he preferred violence over sex, Nunn stepped in with a low blow. "If you've ever seen James Toney," Nunn said, "you can see why he feels that way. The man is ugly. Who is going to go out with an ugly man like that?" In 1991, however, his grandiosity seemed out of place. Once thought to be the heir apparent to Sugar Ray Leonard, whose on-again, off-again Seniors Tour appearances had finally come to a violent end a few months earlier at the hands of Terry Norris, Nunn had seen his star flicker, then dim, like a fluorescent tube on the fritz, since he won the IBF middleweight title in 1987.

Despite the undefeated record, despite his standing on pound-for-pound fantasy lists, despite the championship, Nunn was increasingly being viewed as a disappointment. His recent impressive KO run (which included stoppages of Frank Tate, Juan Roldan, and Sumbu Kalambay) was over and so, it seemed, was his peak. He was booed lustily during a listless majority decision over Iran Barkley in August 1989, a fight that left even his promoter, Bob Arum, dispirited. "Technically, I guess he won," groused Arum, "but who gives a damn? He's boring."

(At ringside for Nunn–Barkley sat Roberto Duran, whose opinion of "Second To" was delivered with typical disdain. "He shows me nothing," Duran sneered. "When he gets hit with a hard punch, he just wants to run." Against Toney, however, Nunn, oozing arrogance, would unwisely choose to shoot it out.)

Eight months later, Nunn followed his close call against Barkley by going twelve excruciating rounds with welterweight titlist Marlon Starling, again lulling his way to a majority decision. His last title defense, against the remnants of ex-welterweight kingpin Donald Curry, took place far away from the American sporting mainstream, in Paris, France. Across the Atlantic, at least, Nunn was safe from catcalls and heckling. And now he was headlining the inaugural pay-per-view produced under the nascent TVKO banner against an unknown who oddsmakers had installed as a proverbial overlay.

Between profane insults, Nunn also needled Toney based on, of all things, geography. "The boxers from Detroit, New York, Philadelphia, and places like that always think they are tougher than they are," Nunn told the *Quad-City Times* a few days before his dreams would be shattered by an upstart he could never bring himself to respect. "Toney is a typical Detroit fighter. A lot of talk but on Friday night he has to get in the ring with me." As far as big cities went, Nunn was only half right. Although Toney lived in Ann Arbor, he also spent blue hours roaming Detroit, where, in the mid-'80s and early '90s, *life was weighed on the scales of a triple beam*. In 1989 the erstwhile Motor City, probably as famous then for the apocalyptic infernos of Devil's Night as it was for the Ford Taurus, ranked second in the nation per capita in homicides. One of those casualties happened to be Johnny "Ace" Smith, a drug dealer who managed Toney early in his career, gunned down in a drive-by shooting.

Until Toney signed for his title shot against Nunn, he was best known for scoring a narrow decision over rugged Merqui Sosa on ESPN. Unlike Nunn, who fought on national television at the tail end of the 1980s boom (Nunn first appeared on NBC in 1986, when he gavotted his way to a decision over Carl Jones), Toney was relegated to the Michigan circuit during the waning days of the Detroit boxing renaissance. Toney was not an Olympic Trials finalist; he did not have 176 amateur bouts; nor was he fit to debut at the Showboat Hotel & Casino in Las Vegas. Instead, his early days as a struggling prizefighter are a pop/pulp time capsule into

whistle-stop boxing in the late '80s and early '90s: Galaxy Promotions, Kronk red and gold versus sporting-goods duds donned by professional floppers, PASS Network, *Tuesday Night Fights*, Styrofoam cups overflowing with Budweiser, Zubaz, The Detroit Boat Club, mullets, ring card girls in bow ties and tuxedo tops, acid-wash jeans, bloodstained terrycloth. Once in a while, under the management of the ill-starred Smith, Toney found himself scuffling in the prizefighting netherworld of Memphis, Tennessee. But when Toney hooked up with former publicist and writer Jackie Kallen, he began a breakneck schedule that led to a championship within two and a half years of turning pro.

Nunn and Toney met on May 10, 1991, at John O'Donnell Stadium, a minor league ballpark (home to the Quad City Angels), right on the banks of the Mississippi River. Before the fight, Nunn further agitated Toney with his weigh-in theatrics. In the future, Toney would become known for his unbridled fury; here, in Davenport, Iowa, was an early glimpse at his simmering rage. After shoving Nunn at the weigh-in, which nearly sparked a free-for-all, Toney erupted. "I'm gonna break your fucking bones!" he shouted. A few minutes after scaling 157 pounds, Toney was hammering against the walls of a stadium hallway, hurling chairs, and bellowing, at the top of his lungs, "I'm going to kill this fucking man!"

In part, his rage could be attributed to street protocols, but mostly it was due to his absent father, an abusive ex–club fighter who abandoned his family when Toney was an infant. "I fight with anger," Toney told *Sports Illustrated* in 1992. "My dad, he did my mom wrong. He left us, he beat my mother up all the time. He shot my mom, left her with a mark on her leg. He made my mom work two jobs, and he just left his responsibilities behind. I can never forgive that. Why should I? . . . I look at my opponent and see my dad, so I have to take him out. I have to kill him."

Against the backdrop of Rock Island Centennial Bridge—illuminated by sodium lamps lining the arches—the two middleweights traded punches in a fight notable for its bruising pace, something Nunn had avoided for most of his career. But Nunn showed Toney no respect during the buildup, and his antipathy carried over into the ring. Indeed, Nunn seemed to underscore his contempt for Toney by fighting aggressively—contrary to his temperament. Against a ramshackle Curry (whose loss to French journeyman Rene Jacquot in 1989 virtually epitomized the concept of a shot fighter), Nunn could pump his rapid-fire combinations without fear.

But against Iran Barkley and Marlon Starling—underdogs, yes, but still relatively intact despite their status as veterans—Nunn alternated between juking, jiving, and joking from bell to bell. Toney, on the other hand, received the Curry treatment. "He is getting carried away with his comments," Nunn said in a media conference call. "I'm going to enjoy punishing this guy. Everybody thinks that since I'm from the country, I can't fight. I've been fighting crocodiles and alligators all my life."

Faster and rangier than Toney, Nunn opened up an early lead by shooting his southpaw jab and running off pesky combinations. For his part, Toney banged to the body when he could, but he had difficulty closing the distance, and many of his arcing shots whistled past Nunn, some of them by mere fractions of an inch. Little by little, however, Toney began to connect more often. In the fourth round, he cut off the ring and forced Nunn to exchange, and halfway through the fifth, he landed a combination that seemed to surprise Nunn, who retreated to the ropes.

If Nunn had underestimated Toney, if he had considered "Lights Out" nothing more than a brash novice prior to the opening bell, surely he must have realized his misjudgment by the fifth or sixth round. Although Toney had yet to develop the relaxed style that would vex so many future opponents, he still had a variety of techniques at his disposal. Toney feinted, rode with punches, caught-and-countered, threw decoy shots, used the shoulder roll, dipped to his left to camouflage overhand rights, sidestepped blows, and stood slantwise to make himself a small target. Above all, Toney revealed an uncanny ability to be dangerous from any position at almost any time. Uppercuts in close, straight rights from the perimeter, bodywork during clinches, left-hook counters while seemingly in a defensive posture, and quick right hands when an opponent missed a lead.

Even in 1991, this unusual skillset was anachronistic, arcana passed down from the 1940s by Detroit sage Bill Miller, who shared some of his secrets in an interview with *The Philadelphia Daily News*: "If I turn my body sideways just a little bit, you haven't got a target anymore, have you? Tuck your chin behind your shoulder, nobody can hit you on the chin, can they? Twist a little bit and bing! If you can teach your fighter to make his man miss, and then to make him pay for missing, he can hardly lose."

(Another edge Toney had was as elemental as it gets in boxing: hunger. To face Nunn, who long ago had hit Daddy Warbucks status, Toney