

'The Name of the Game is Money'

Jack Bodell will be in the ring next week

Billy Hack went to Rose Valley, Swadlincote and talked to him

They called him "The Swadlincote Swineherd". They wrote he was "awkward" and "ugly" and that, anyway, he could not box. Then, last September, Jack Bodell got up in the ring in the Albert Hall and stripped Golden Wonder Boy Bugner of all his titles, shattering, piece by piece, the manufactured image of the custom-made pugilist.

So Bodell, "the unorthodox Southpaw", got the titles, inherited the mantle of Henry Cooper, and had the pleasure of watching his battered and discredited rival jetting out of the country to try and build a new boxing career in the States.

Hating London

For Midlands Jack, this was a singular triumph. He has always hated London and Londoners, and has never pretended to be anything other than a boy from the pits, an ex-boxer for the National Coal Board. The London fight-game heavies, led by greedy promoters and grubby newshounds, needed a glamour boy with star appeal to launch on the international circuit. As Bodell fitted the bill neither in appearance nor style, they wanted to keep him out.

But Bodell does not mind. After all, he's the champion now. We met him in Rose Valley, Newhall, near Swadlincote, one evening last week. The smokey haze from nearby factories and collieries hung in the sky. Bodell was driving his cattle down the lane. Horses and hens were running free in the field behind his bungalow. There was a Mercedes parked in the drive.

"The trouble with them boxing correspondents, and so on," he told us, "is that they think that everyone North of St. Albans wears gum-boots and behaves like a country bumpkin."

But he likes it when they tip him to lose, "Because in the morning they only have to write how well I boxed, to save their faces." He has not lost a fight for the last four years.

Back to the Land

Bodell seems to be unaffected by the £150,000 he has picked up as a champion boxer. His children were playing nearby when we arrived. He sent them inside before he spoke to us, "I don't want to seem rude, or anything, but the eldest one is six, and he's at school now. He's getting a bit big-headed. He mustn't get the idea he's different. He's just like any other child."

Bodell has spent most of the money he has earned on land. He outlines the edges of the nearby fields with a stick. "That's my land there. And I've got more up the road. I'm buying it as an investment, really. The animals are just a hobby, like. I don't need to keep them. In fact I lose money on it. But it gives me something to do, keeps my mind off boxing for a bit."

He goes in to change for his training session, and we talk to Mrs. Lord, who lives just up the road "Aye, Jack Bodell", she says with unashamed admiration, "He was born and bred among us and he's one of us still. See that white house there, that's where he was born, and I can remember when he was a lad at school. He did well at his boxing even then, but he had no special education mind you. He's a boy from a working-class family, same as we are here. We don't begrudge him his money. He's a good boy, and a strong boy. And deserves it."

Bodell's cousin, Tom, and his uncle Johnnie both live in or around the valley, and both of them were boxers, until Tom got a cauliflower ear and

Johnnie gave up the ring

Upstairs at the Royal Oak

Up the slope, on the main road in Newhall, is the Royal Oak Inn, where Bodell has set up training headquarters for his fight with Quarry next Tuesday. The gym is tiny, claustrophobic and empty when we arrive. Before long Bodell's dour manager, George Biddles, hurries in. He has become rich on Jack's snowball, but he never shows excitement. Is he worried about the Quarry fight? "No, he's a good lad this one. He'll take a lot of beating."

Before long, the gym is alive with sparring partners, the local bookie, ticket agents, and the inevitable trilby hatted hangers-on, who relish the machismo of the boxers' world.

Women are not allowed in a boxing gym. The aura of male sexuality, of exclusive aggression by men with super physiques is protectively shielded from female eyes. When the bar lady wanted to deliver a message for George Biddles, she had to knock, and somebody went out to see her. All the men just barged in.

Bodell strips

Bodell arrives, strips off and weighs himself in. He starts wise-cracking with a group of locals, who have crowded in the door. He climbs into the ring shouting "I'm the awkwardest". "That's what they tell us, Jack" somebody in the crowd calls back.

Bodell's trainer, Les, hurries around with a broken egg-timer. Dave Roden, a tall, badly bruised young boxer from Birmingham, climbs into the ring with the champion. For a few minutes, they pace around like caged lions, breathing deeply. The small crowd draws close. "Are you ready?", Les asks both of the boxers. They grunt out approval over their gum shields, then they're away. Bodell is never troubled, though Roden seems understandably breathless and nervous. He puts up a good showing though, and gains muffled applause.

After a few rounds Del Philips of Cardiff takes Roden's place. Philips seems slight and insignificant besides the lumberingly built Bodell. Bodell lunges at him ferociously, hammering him round the ring. Bodell, the battering butcher, the ruthless, impassioned slogger, raining a torrent of blustering blows, charging and sprawling like a loose limbed bull.

Philips comes out of it very badly, and, after two rounds, slinks to the end of the gym to work out his aggression on a punch ball. For Bodell, it's a gruelling circuit of punching, skipping and medicine balls, "We are trying to build up his stamina, you see", Biddles tells me.

Racism is sometimes inflamed by boxing. Particularly in the classic heavyweight confrontations between Ali and top white fighters. Certainly, some of Bodell's neighbours complained about meeting a coloured sparring partner, running through Rose Valley in the early hours of the morning. But then, as Mrs. Lord said, "He made boxing gestures with his hands, and even though he was coal black and I couldn't understand a word he said, I knew he was alright. He was Jack's friend."

Downstairs at the Royal Oak

But after the training session is over, the real business of the evening begins. Bodell goes to the bar downstairs, followed by most of the

henchmen. Bodell buys beer for everybody, but drinks shandy himself. "I used to be in this game for glory," he says. "But I'm not now. I'm in it for money. Of course, publicity, the right publicity, equals glory which in the end equals money, but it is only the money which keeps me fighting."

Biddles snaps sourly "Money's the name of the game." And immediately, the whole group gets down to dealing in tickets for Tuesday's big fight with Quarry. Bodell has a bundle of a hundred or more. He gives a handful of them to Bill, the Birmingham Greengrocer, who follows him everywhere. Biddles, for some reason we can't make out, has to pay the Greengrocer for them. There is a furious argument as to whether the price is £32 or £31.50. Bodell consults his book. A local journalist quips "I hope Harry Levene knows how much work you're doing for him." Bodell protests that he doesn't get a penny commission on the tickets he sells.

The local journalist starts bartering about the price of photographs. Everyone claims that everyone else owes them money. They all produce rolls of fivers and settle up round the table. Bodell pushes his takings into a carrier bag and drops it on the floor beside him.

Quarry fight purse

In the middle of all this, we ask Bodell how much he'll get from the Quarry fight. Biddles is quick off the mark. "You can't ask that sort of question. It's a private matter between me and Quarry's men. You can't print that. Never mind what it'll be," Bodell confides, "George'll get 25 per cent". Biddles assures him that he's taking 33 and a third. Bodell lets out a stream of friendly, anti-semitic invective, and Biddles just complains that Bodell is mean.

"I get him 200 photographs, 200 publicity photographs. I asked him to sign one for me and one for my Mrs. Just asked him for two of them. Would he give them to me...?" "Bloody managers," Bodell complains, "who's doing the fighting anyway...?"

Only the greengrocer seems happy with his deal, smiling complacently, acting as the buffer between Biddles and Jack, grinning inanely at everyone.

"Cooper beat Bugner"

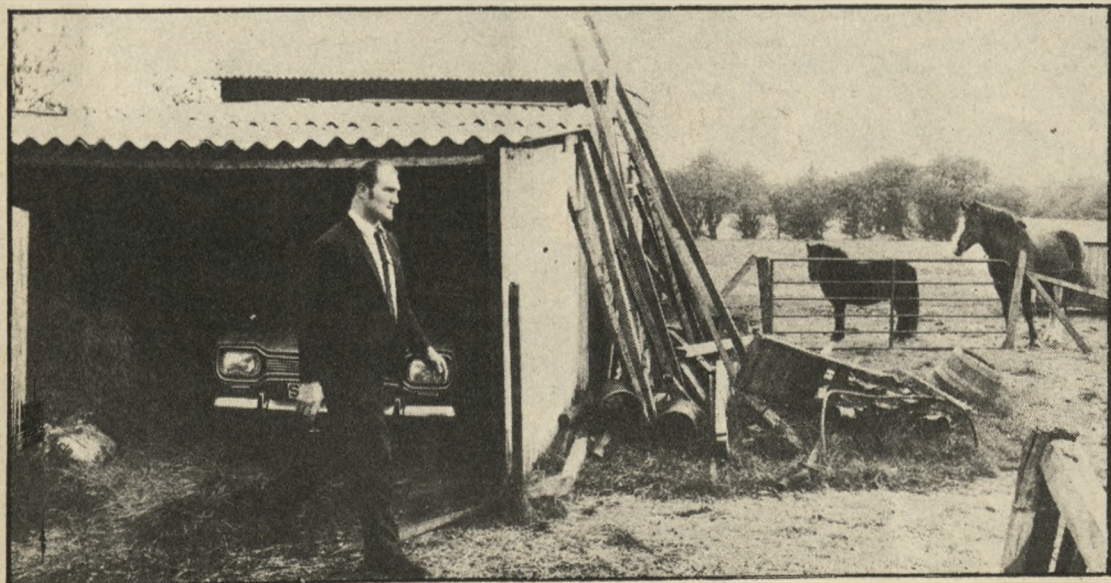
Eventually, we get back to talking about boxing. Bodell believes that Cooper really beat Bugner, "Mind you, I wasn't in the ring, and I respect Harry Gibbs' opinion, but I know who won." He's scathing about Bugner. "I fought him often in the gym, and he never gave me any trouble. Never." But with the Wonder Boy broken, the world is wide open to slammer Jack. He has amazing stamina. Once he fought 10 fights in 64 days. He did two major fights in two weeks this year. After Quarry, he's off to Madrid, to defend his European title against Jose Urtain, on December 17th.

Ali next?

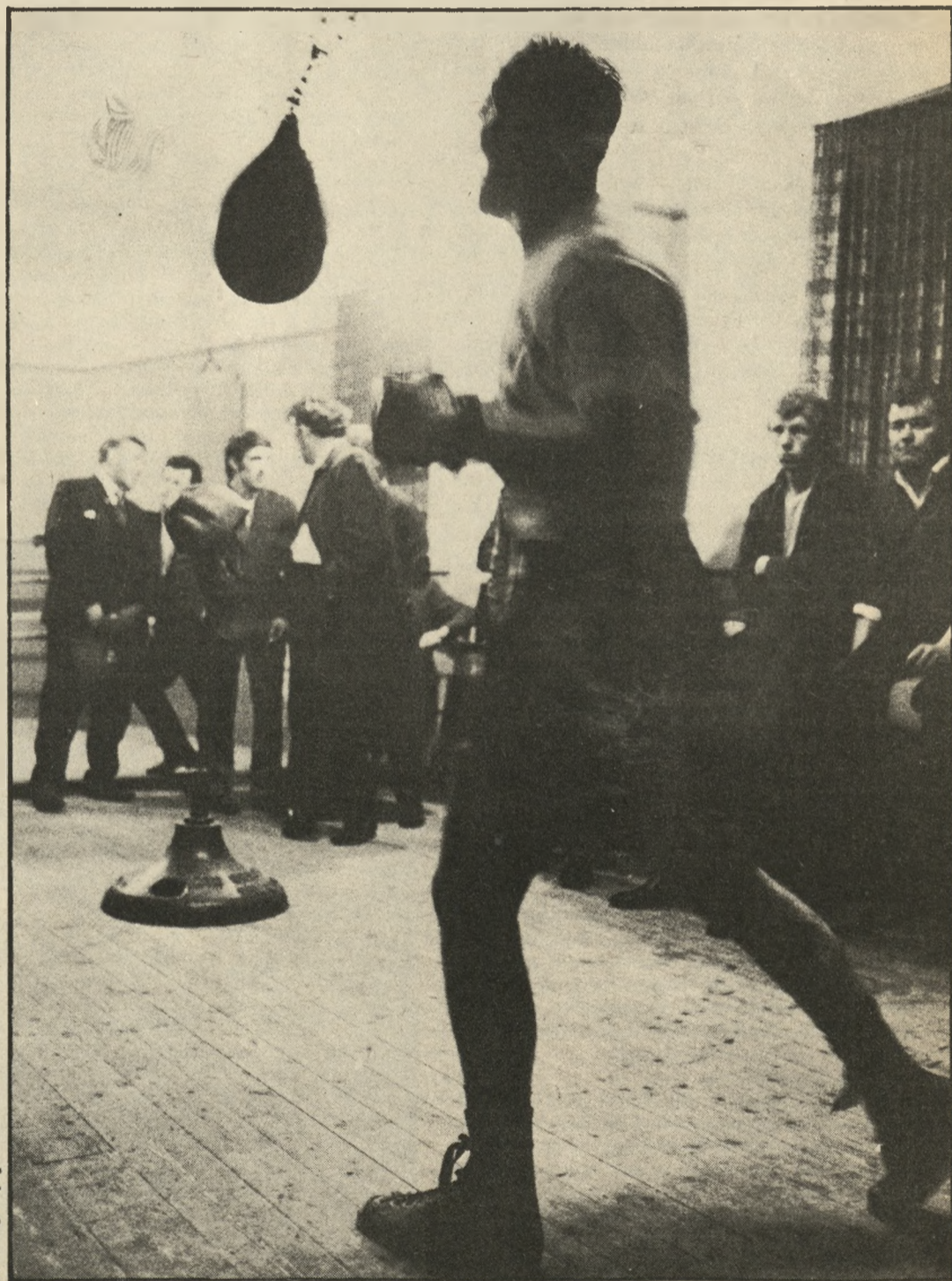
Clearly, Jack has his sights set on bigger things. When we were in the gym, Biddles had told me, "If he wins his next two fights - he'll become heavy-weight champion of the world." But he had trotted it out, incredulously, with the bored inevitability of a manager pushing his boy.

In the pub, we got closer to the heart of the matter. Biddles is dreaming of a £100,000 purse for an Ali fight. "Split 60, 30, 10 that'll do me very nicely thank-you." Bodell agrees.

Meanwhile, everyone knows that Quarry is Jack's hardest fight to date. Even the local bookie has made Quarry the odds-on favourite, and Jack's at evens. The bookie is probably right. Quarry is way above the dull Drover, precious Bugner class. But even if the Bodell dream is shattered next Tuesday, and Biddles stops thinking of the Ali purse, the people of Rose Valley, will still be right behind their hero.



Down on the farm with Jack Bodell



A Work-out at the Royal Oak