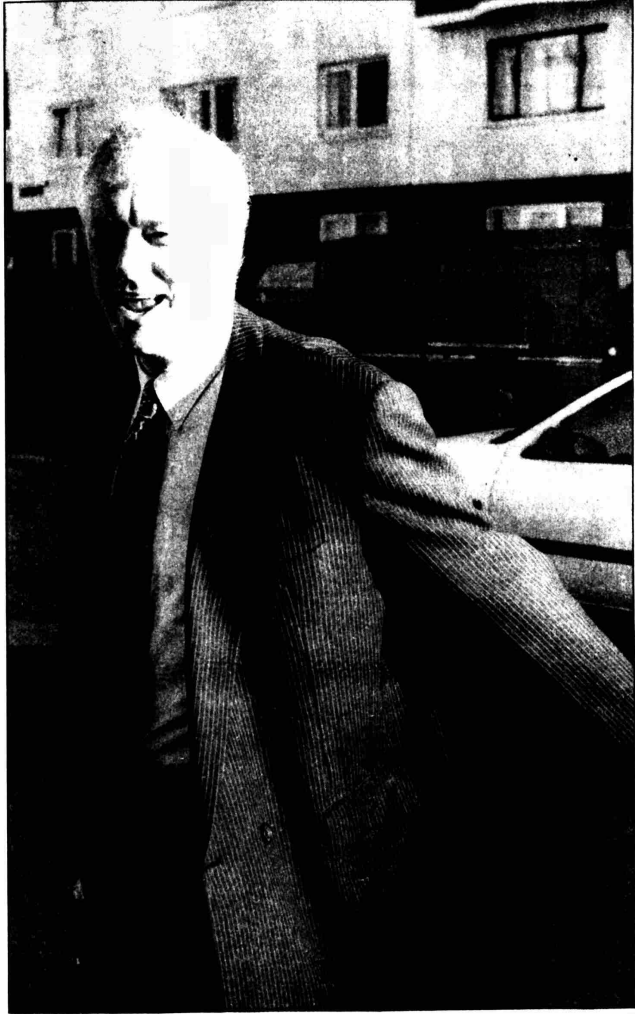


Steve Collins: Phoned referee Ron Lipton, who confirmed his suspicion that he was never supposed to beat Eubank



Barry Hearn: Accused of improper approaches to the referee, allegedly to ensure that Collins didn't win

# Boxing's Millstreet blues

Steve Collins' fight with Chris Eubank was only the undercard of a heavyweight battle which has exposed the sport's seamy side

ONE evening in April 1995, about a month after he had refereed the Steve Collins/Chris Eubank fight in Millstreet, Co. Cork, Ron Lipton answered the telephone at his home in New York.

On the line was Collins, phoning from Ireland with several queries about the fight, which he had won on points to take Eubank's WBO world super-middleweight title.

"He indicated to me that he had some concerns about rumblings about the fight, which he had won on points to take Eubank's WBO world super-middleweight title. He inquired of me if I knew of anything unusual that had happened, did anyone approach me in any manner that would give me concern," Lipton recalled last week during the increasingly protracted court battle between Collins and his former manager, Barry Hearn, who is suing him for breach of contract.

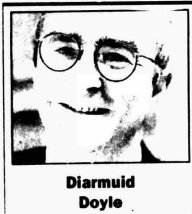
"I told him that there had been an incident, two or three," Lipton said. At the time of his phone call to New York, Stephen Collins, despite being a world champion at two weights (he had previously won the middleweight title), was not a happy man. He was coming to the end of a year-long contract with Hearn, which began on 12 May, 1994, but which had been marked by a series of disputes between the two.

Collins felt that he had not been accorded the respect and consideration due to him as a top boxer, a suspicion which increased in the lead up to the fight with Eubank, who was also managed by Hearn and his company, Matchroom Boxing Ltd.

Hearn had approached Collins a few weeks before the Eubank bout and told him that he wasn't to worry about losing or to be concerned that the WBO might strip him of his middleweight title just because he was moving up a weight to fight for another championship. "The emphasis was on me losing," Collins said. "It was Chris this, Chris that. Nobody expected me to win. Nobody seemed to want me to win. I felt like a small cog in this machine."

Herbie Hide, also managed by Matchroom, was due to fight for a world heavyweight title several days before Collins took on Eubank. A training schedule was drawn up which would allow both Hide and Collins to benefit from the training of Freddie King but, according to Collins, Hide often ignored this. He would turn up for training at times scheduled for Collins and demand that he be given at least a few minutes of his own time. "It was obvious that I was getting kicked to the side again," he said.

According to Lipton, Matchroom's prejudice against Collins continued in Millstreet, this time accompanied by an air of menace and threat. During their transatlantic phone call on that April



Diarmuid Doyle

evening in 1995, Lipton and Collins discussed the details.

WHATSOEVER happened to him in Cork that St Patrick's weekend in 1995, it is clear that it has left 51-year-old Lipton upset and bitter. Despite several business commitments and a sick son in New York, he agreed to fly to Dublin last week to give evidence on behalf of Collins. And though scheduled to appear for just one day, he stayed for three, as counsel for both sides quizzed him carefully about the lead up to the fight.

Lipton described the atmosphere in Millstreet as the "most intense" he had ever encountered at a boxing match, which, in the light of his experience, is some claim. A three-time Golden Gloves champion in his amateur days, he has been a sparring partner to several world champions and is a good friend of Muhammad Ali. He has refereed 25 title fights in the last 10 years and amongst the boxers on whose fights he has adjudicated are Evander Holyfield, Oscar De La Hoya and Roy Jones, whom he described (while Collins nodded in agreement) as "pound for pound the best boxer in the world". An immensely proud man, he referred on several occasions in court to his high reputation in boxing circles. He is in the habit of distributing positive press and television comment about himself to his colleagues in the boxing world.

Lipton arrived in Ireland a few days before the fight and went straight to the Agahad Heights Hotel, a few miles from Millstreet, just over the Kerry border.

One night, he was sitting in the lobby when he was approached by four or five men, "who stood around the couch and asked to speak to me." According to Lipton, the men warned him that he was in Ireland "for one thing only": Eubank was the attraction, not Collins, the men said. The implication was that they would prefer an away victory. Lest he be under

any misunderstanding about what they were about, one of them said: "Hey Yank, don't forget you're very far from home."

Lipton's unease increased as the fight approached and he experienced "a series of heinous events." His hotel room was "illegally" entered, his rule book taken and his clothes cut up. "Terrible things were going on," he said.

According to his evidence, he spent the night before the fight talking to the police. He felt that his life was under threat. As a result, he asked for and received a Garda escort to and from the ring on the night of the fight, the only time in his refereeing career he had ever needed such protection.

Lipton met Barry Hearn on several occasions in the lead up to the fight and, although he described him as a "gracious host" (as promoter of the event, Hearn would have organised several pre-bout entertainments), some of the encounters were not particularly pleasant.

On the day before the fight, while Lipton was on his way to a weigh-in ceremony, Hearn approached him. "He put his arm around me, pulled me into him and said: 'Tomorrow night, watch Steve Collins. He is a dirty fighter. Watch his use of the head.'"

Lipton wasn't concerned by this approach as much as by the identity of those accompanying Hearn, whom he recognised as being the people who had surrounded his cousin in the Agahad Heights. "I wasn't aware that he was Steve Collins' manager so I took it [the

**The referee's unease increased as the fight approached. His hotel room was 'illegally' entered, his rule book taken, his clothes cut up. "Terrible things were going on," he said. According to his evidence, he spent the night before the fight talking to the police. He felt that his life was under threat**

approach) with a grain of salt," Lipton said. However he did tell Hearn that he was unhappy about what had transpired in the Agahad Heights.

The following night, shortly before the fight, Hearn again spoke to Lipton. "It was a brief conversation, repeating what he had said the night before: 'He's a pro. He's good at getting away with that kind of stuff.'"

Hearn is to be recalled to the witness stand to answer the claims about his alleged approaches to Lipton. Judge Philip O'Sullivan told the court on Friday that he would be ignoring the evidence in relation to the men who had threatened Lipton in the Agahad Heights, "because it cannot be proved that they were there at the behest of Mr Hearn."

For similar reasons, he will not be considering the evidence in relation to the illegal entry of Lipton's room.

ACCORDING to his evidence, Lipton was unsure about what to do about the threats and break-ins. In his eyes, there were only three people involved in the fight whom he regarded as decent: Collins, Eubank and himself. "The rest was a sewer."

He painted a picture of the WBO, under whose auspices the fight was held, as being full of dodgy characters who weren't beyond plying referees and judges with "drink, prostitutes and girls" in order to secure a victory for their favoured fighter. This happened in



Lipton leaving court PATRICK BOLGER INPHO

Millstreet, too, according to Lipton, although he didn't specify the beneficiaries.

He did, say, however, that Hearn had phoned him while he was still in New York and offered him a fight in Sun City if he agreed not to referee the Millstreet bout. Lipton refused.

Lipton said it was clear that certain people within the WBO didn't want him to referee the fight. He referred particularly to the WBO's chief of officials, "Wiso" Fernandez, as somebody who liked to award himself title fights, and who had wanted to do the Millstreet bout as well.

There were "some people" in Millstreet "who had an agenda to see Steve Collins lose," Lipton said. "Even Ray Charles could see that," he added. In the days before the fight, he noticed a "familiarity" between, on the one side, WBO officials like Fernandez and on the other, Hearn's entourage. In those circumstances, Lipton felt it would be futile to complain about the threats to his safety for the arrival of John Montano, the fight supervisor. He arrived on the day of the fight and was immediately informed by Lipton about his version of events. Lipton has never since been appointed by the WBO to referee a fight.

AT one point it seemed as though he wouldn't be refereeing Collins versus Eubank either. When he arrived in Millstreet on the night before the bout for the routine rules meeting, all was chaos. One of the first things he was told was that there was no fight, that Eubank had decided to pull out because he feared meeting "a hypnotized Steve Collins."

This was a reference to Collins' decision to employ Tony Quinn, whom he described in his evidence as a "sports psychologist," in order to build up his confidence.

Collins had felt so undermined by Matchroom's concentration on Eubank that he wanted to employ somebody who would "not allow outside distractions to derail me." For Quinn's services, he made a down-payment of £15,000. But, as Lipton discovered on the night before the fight, Eubank wasn't happy with this. In his evidence, Hearn painted a portrait of "whimpering" Eubank adamantly refusing to have anything more to do with the fight and in this, at least, he was in agreement with Lipton.

From the moment he walked into the rules meeting "there was no normalcy," Lipton said. "There wasn't a rules meeting, in fact, because there was no fight. There was an aura of doom over the meeting from the outset. His [Eubank's] people were yelling at him, but he was very adamant about not going on with the fight. They seemed to me to be not convinced with his reasons for it and the

entire time was spent trying to convince him.

"He broke away on occasion. It seemed something like a temper tantrum. He'd break away, walk away, they'd bring him back. And I just sat there in stunned silence."

It was not until about 1am on the morning of the fight that Hearn finally persuaded Eubank that, for his credibility at least, he should proceed with the fight.

But by then, the events, the dramas and the alleged interactions which have been played out in the High Court for the last month had occurred. The fight became the undercard to the heavyweight legal battle that may still have a fortnight to run.

WERE Lipton in any doubt before he came to Dublin about just how important a witness he is, Friday afternoon should have put him right. Having spent two days talking about boxing, he was suddenly asked by Paul Gallagher, counsel for Barry Hearn, about an incident in 1982, during which he had assaulted a Mr Klein.

Lipton explained that a group of about 30 people had burned a cross on his lawn and entered his house. In his efforts to defend himself, he said, he used a baseball bat and a gun. Muhammad Ali flew out from California to act as a character witness in the ensuing court case, he said, and he had not been convicted.

Under further questioning from Mr Gallagher, Lipton revealed that there were currently six criminal charges outstanding against him in New York. These, he said, related to incidents in which he had been attacked and was acting in self-defence. On one occasion, three men, one of whom was "the former boyfriend of my girlfriend" attacked him while he was out driving. They ran his car off the road and one of them held him by the throat while the other held his gun. He had managed to hit one of them and make his escape, he said. He told Mr Gallagher that he was out on bail on the charges but had, nevertheless, been allowed to leave America.

Colm Allen, counsel for Stephen Collins, complained that the questioning of Lipton was an example of "Mr Hearn emerging from the sewer in which he habitually resides." The line of questioning, he said, was "scurrilous and shameful and comes as no surprise given its source, the seamy, sordid Mr Hearn."

It has been that sort of case. Hostilities resume on Tuesday, when Stephen Collins continues his evidence.