



Sucker punch: Chris Eubank roasts as Steve Collins lands a left hook on the then-champion's chin. By the end of the fight Eubank would have lost his belt and Collins would swiftly wear out the public's appreciation of his effort

PHOTO: ILLUSTRATION

Who's the antihero now?

One was reviled, the other fêted. Chris Eubank rode in on a Harley to fight a man who claimed to have been hypnotised to feel no pain – now Steve Collins's demise has seen him overtaken in popularity by Eubank



Paul Howard
Chief Sports writer

WHAT'S interesting looking at them now in their middle years is the neat role reversal they've undergone. In the 10 years since they stared each other down across an illuminated square of canvas in Millstreet, they've performed a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree do-si-do, so that they're now standing in opposite corners to the ones they were in that night.

Chris Eubank, who was the pantomime villain back then, is popular beyond his vanquisher's wildest dreams. Eighteen months ago, he signed copies of his autobiography in Easons on O'Connell Street. The line of people waiting to meet him stretched down the street like a bread queue in 1970s Poland.

Ten years in the public eye – that included appearances in *Celebrity Big Brother*, chewing gum and coffee commercials and a cameo in a Nassem Hamed documentary, where he stalked the cameraman around the room, reciting Rudyard Kipling into the lens – wore the head edges off the public's resurgence for him. Chris Eubank became lovable.

The years have been less

kind to the man who best him on that unforgettable St Patrick's weekend in 1995. Steve Collins should have enjoyed a lifetime at the country's bosom for what he did that night. Instead, as the wadding of middle age settles around his waist, he's become close to invisible, his profile hurt by his image problem.

He could never have believed retirement would be tougher than boxing. In the years since he quit, he's visited all the soup kitchens and drinkshouses of the soul – drinking, depression, divorce, court appearances and allegations of domestic violence, which he's always denied. His brother claimed a year ago he was back labouring on building sites.

What always seemed to be eating Steve Collins was the Irish public never warmed to him. He was too cocky to be loved. His victory in Millstreet was followed by the inevitable *Late Late Show* invitation. Before he went on, his friend, the comedian Brendan O'Carroll, reminded him that, in Irish entertainment, your career lived or died by how you performed on the show.

All Collins had to do was to be himself but he thought he knew better. He told Gay Byrne, more than once, that he was the "best boxer in the world. And maybe of all time. There wasn't anyone who could beat him. It came across as just a bad Muhammad Ali impersonation, showing none of Collins's wonderful wit and warmth and charm. A woman phoned the show and told him

live on air that if he threw any more bouquets at himself we wouldn't be able to see him for flowers. There was an interminable silence and it felt for one awful moment that the audience was about to break into applause. They didn't have to. There was a sense the woman had spoken for the country. Collins had lost his audience.

Eubank was a far better loser than Collins was a winner. He was never the same boxer again, but as he pulled away from the sport, all those rummy pretensions – the monocle, the jodhpurs, the juggernaut cab he used as the family runaround – came to be seen as ricks in an eccentric. He was genuinely but lovably bonkers.

Barry Hearn, who managed both fighters, tells the story of taking Eubank to see Barbara Streisand at Wembley. Five minutes before curtain, Eubank left his seat in the front row to answer a call of nature. When he returned, he stood at the top of the aisle, preening himself, until everyone in the arena noticed. The audience got on their feet and clapped and cheered him all the way to his seat. The walk back to the front row took longer than one of his famously protracted ring entrances. When he sat down, he tapped the floor manager on the shoulder with his cane and said, "Inform Ms Streisand she may commence."

But the real punchline, according to Hearn, is Eubank Collins to step in. By his own admission,

though. It was more than just a fight to him. Ten years on, he doesn't want to talk about it. He said some kind words about Collins on the *Late Late Show* when he was in Dublin to promote his book but the impression is he still regards him as what he called him in the summer of 1995 – a creep.

"Chris doesn't want to talk about Steve Collins at all," said his publicist this week. "It goes back to an incident at a fashion show in Dublin a few years ago. Chris tried to shake his hand but Steve refused. Chris took it as an insult. He's a gentleman, you see. So he's not interested in discussing him at all."

The fight is rightly remembered as a classic, their utter abhorrence of each other giving it all the intensity of *All-Frazier I, II and III*. In 1994, at the King's Hall in Belfast, Collins went to Eubank's dressing-room to congratulate him on his victory over Ray Close. As Collins walked away, Eubank turned to Ron Davies, his pug-faced trainer, and said, with his earshot, "Easy money."

But nobody ever earned easy money fighting Collins. He'd been hard-schooled in America, taking his knocks from teak-tough middleweights like Paul McPeak, Tony Thornton and then, for many the transcendent moment of his career, narrowly losing a world title challenge to the great Mike McCallum.

Eubank was supposed to fight Close for a third time but Close failed a brain scan. Hearn asked Collins to step in. By his own admission,

but which turned nasty when Collins explained why he'd come in fancy dress. He was proud of his Irish roots, he said, unlike Eubank, who denied his African heritage by dressing like an English country squire.

Playing the race card was one of the many stupid miscalculations he made that year when he found himself suddenly in the glare of public attention. "Because I don't walk around in my bare with cape wrapped around me, I'm ashamed to be African?" Eubank said, then stormed out, stopping only to tell Lord Mayor John Gormley what to do with his offer of a tour of the city and to promise the media a fight to the death.

"It made me hate him intensely," Eubank wrote in his autobiography, "which is the gravest mistake to make as a boxer."

It had a far more unsettling effect on him, he said, than Collins's claim he would be hypnotised for the fight. The

Tony Quinn effect was grossly exaggerated and Collins took a step away from him when people started forgetting who it was who actually bested Eubank. Quinn did little more for Collins than any decent sports psychologist would have done on him, teaching him visualisation techniques, one of which made him think of Donald Duck every time he heard Eubank's voice.

But the idea Collins would be conditioned not to feel pain was too much for Eubank, who three years earlier had left Michael Watson in a vegetative state. The night before the fight, he told Hearn was pulling out and had to be talked out of going home.

All sorts of sinister things happened in the background that never came out until Collins and Hearn parted ways in the Dublin High Court two years later. The night before the fight someone broke into the referee's hotel room and cut his clothes to shreds. The implication was someone was trying to influence the result, but whose way was never clear.

Eubank entered the ring on a Harley and left it just over an hour later to chants of "On your bike, on your bike, on your bike."

Collins fought in a gear that Eubank had forgotten existed during three years of soft fights. For every punch he landed he found two in his

face. In the eighth round, Collins felled him with a body shot. But as Eubank demonstrated against Watson, he was at his most dangerous when he was hurt. In the 10th, he sent Collins sprawling backwards across the ring and onto the seat of his pants with the best punch of the fight. But he failed to follow up. "I didn't want what became of Watson to happen again," he wrote in his book, "so I froze ... That mistake cost me my cherished title."

Whether Eubank could or couldn't have finished Collins off is a debate that will rage forever. In his defence, Collins had an ironclad jaw and was smiling at his corner at the point where he hit the ground, suggesting the punch surprised him more than it hurt him.

It doesn't matter now. Collins won the battle. But Eubank can look back at 10 years remove and say that he won the war.

A few nights before their spiky press conference in Dublin, Collins sat down in the kitchen of his home in Castleknock and wrote a little speech. "Chris Eubanks," he wrote, deliberately misspelling his name to annoy the champion, "has never lost a professional boxing bout. He is both loved and despised by millions of people. But in order to achieve greatness, he has to experience defeat, he has to be able to handle it and return again."

In 41 words, Eubank's future scarily foretold. But not his own.

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All Steve Collins had to do was to be himself but he told Gay Byrne more than once he was the best boxer in the world



Ignoring the stark realities of Athens

The Olympic review spent too much time dealing with the views of blazers whilst ignoring the problems drugs create for athletes

Paul Howard

GARRET FITZGERALD had an analytical mind that, when he was Taoiseach, used to frustrate the hell out of ministers who didn't share his obsession with fine print detail. There's a story – apocryphal surely – that he once brought a cabinet meeting to a stunned silence with the words, "That's all very well in practice but how does it work in theory?"

The phrase could have been the subtitle to the *Athens Review*, which was published this week. There are few joyous things in life that survive the chill hand of the focus group and Wharton Consulting's 87-page report confirms the government's new policy to bureaucratise sport to death.

The Olympics, according to the thrust of the report, are no longer about taking

part. Had Wharton been hired by the Olympic movement a century ago, then it's a fair bet that Baron de Courbertin's famous speech would have mentioned such things as "stakeholders", "sport-specificity", "strike-rates" and other marketing buzz phrases that make your eyes glaze over.

The Irish Sports Council say that Olympics athletes will in future have to justify their grants in much the same way that the out of work have to justify their social welfare cheques. The Olympic Council of Ireland, meanwhile, is promising that the team for Beijing will be even smaller than the one for Athens, as if Irish people qualifying for the Olympics is a problem that has to be stamped out.

We have truly lost the run of ourselves. What, you might ask, do the athletes think of all this?

What indeed. The team that investigated Ireland's performance at last summer's Olympics did so without talking to very many athletes at all.

Forty-nine people competed for Ireland in Athens. Wharton Consulting spoke directly to 10 of them. They weren't even a representative sample either: only one track and field athlete, for instance, but two mountain bikers.

So why didn't the Irish Sports Council get the full and frank opinions of more athletes for 640,000 of your money? According to the report, they sent questionnaires to every member of the team. Less than half replied. Less than half actually quite good considering the questionnaire was 24 pages long and contained 170 questions.



Sonia O'Sullivan: opinionated

phoned up and asked for their views on the phone or in person? We're not talking Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods here. This desk has mobile numbers for just about all of them. Yet Wharton somehow managed to produce their report without having conversations with bright and opinionated people like Sam Lynch, Geoid

Towey, Jamie Costin and Sonia O'Sullivan.

So what were they doing if they weren't talking to athletes? They were talking to officials. Eight people from the sports council. Eleven from the Olympic council. Four from the Irish Amateur Boxing Association, who had only one boxer in Athens. Three from Swim Ireland, who had two swimmers there, neither of whom was spoken to.

If a transition year student produced a report based on such a small and unrepresentative sample, you'd send it back. But what's contained within the covers of the *Athens Review* is no official policy.

When you talk to technicians and blazers instead of athletes you get a slightly skewed view of sport. The report concludes that centres of excellence and stricter

grant criteria are the way forward. Had they sat down with more athletes they might have discovered the more inconvenient truth that the single biggest factor determining who wins medals at the Olympics and who doesn't is drugs.

We, of all Olympic medal-winning nations, should know this. A year ago, Cathal Lombard proved that it's possible to go from being a good club runner to the fastest white man over 10,000m in the world if you can get your hands on the right gear.

What do athletes like Lombard feel about the pressures placed on them to attain A qualifying standards that have been distorted by athletes taking drugs? Do they believe it's fair that their grants are based on how they perform relative to other athletes who are clearly cheating?

We should be asking do we want to carry on playing with these people, not how we can get closer to them. That's why over the next 10 years we'll produce two Michelle Smiths for every Sonia O'Sullivan.

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