

The \$10,000 Glass Of Sherry: When Young Griffo Fell Off The Wagon

A CBZ Exclusive By Mike Casey

Just recently I wrote an article on the great lightweight champion Kid Lavigne, in which the Kid spoke with typical candour and humour about his fight with the Australian wizard, Young Griffo. Not for the first time, I came away shaking my head in amazement at Griffo's God-given skills. He might just have been the cleverest boxer that ever lived.

Lavigne tried everything against Griffo. The Kid boxed Griff, fought him, hustled him and, when all else had failed, simply rushed and ripped at him. Amidst all this frenetic activity, Lavigne noticed that Griffo appeared to remain as still and steady as a fulcrum. Without appearing to move, he dodged punches effortlessly and fired back with accurate and stunning regularity.



The Kid recalled with a smile that he never could figure this out. Like Bugs Bunny or some other mischievous cartoon character, Griff always seemed to be in the right place at the right time without betraying how he got there.

So here I come, dear reader, in praise of a genuine Australian genius, which is always a difficult thing for an Englishman to do. The Aussies beat us at a strange game called cricket with quite depressing regularity, which might go some way to explaining why I have followed the saner and less stressful pursuit of baseball since about 1975.

Why was Young Griffo such a wonder? Because few people are born with the outrageous talent and the sheer natural instinct that he possessed. Such was his gift of co-ordination that the managers and trainers of his day were unable to offer technical explanations for his near perfect fluency of movement.

Add to this the very significant fact that Griffo was addicted to alcohol, hopelessly so for long periods of his life, and we begin to see the exceptional man he was. He was very often referred to as a phenomenon, even by writers who didn't fall victim to prosaic and exaggerated outbursts. It was somewhat bitter irony that Griffo's love of alcohol made his fistic star shine even brighter. For while his great weakness would wreck him to the point of privation and drive him into insane asylums, it rarely blunted his uncanny sense of anticipation or his radar-like reflexes.

Was Griffo's great addiction a tragedy? Only he knew that. Alcoholics and binge drinkers constantly veer and stagger between joy and despair, stubborn defiance and contrition. Those with a sublime talent are too often forgiven and tolerated while a trail of destruction piles up in their wake. Their actions hurt many others. Amusing tales of Griffo's drunken rollickings are plentiful, but many of his friends and guardians were hurt and betrayed along the way. We shall come to the tale of the fatal glass of sherry that lost Griffo an estimated ten thousand

dollars in earnings and finally snapped the patience of his good-hearted manager, George Dawson.

In 1936, Joe Humphreys, often referred to as the daddy of all ring announcers, looked back on his great career and named the four greatest fighters he had ever seen. Humphreys' golden quartet consisted of Griffo, Terry McGovern, Kid McCoy and Battling Nelson.

Humphreys described the prime McGovern as the best and most vicious fighter in history. But there was no doubt in old Joe's mind as to who was the cleverest. Griffo was that man, above the stellar likes of Joe Gans, Jem Driscoll and Abe Attell.

Said Humphreys: "That stuff about Griffo standing on a handkerchief and daring anybody to hit him in the face is true."

This was indeed a favourite little practice of Griffo's, which came in particularly handy in saloon bars when he needed to rustle up some cash for drinks.

Humphreys recalls the time when the boisterous Mysterious Billy Smith came upon Griffo when both were out on the town socialising. Griffo was sitting contentedly at the bar and getting nicely oiled.

"Griffo and Smith were on the outs for a time. Smith ankled into a saloon one night and, seeing Griffo at the bar, hurled a spittoon at the Australian. Griffo saw it coming in the looking glass and moved his large head just enough to let it tick his ear. The man was a marvel. He could even slip cuspidors with his back turned."

A Classic No-Hitter

Most of us have heard the famous tale of Willie Pep winning a round without landing a punch. Now let us reflect on the four rounds exhibition in America between Young Griffo and another wizard of the age, Pedlar Palmer. It is something of a shame that Palmer is chiefly remembered now for losing his world flyweight championship to Terry McGovern in one brutal round.

At his best, Englishman Palmer was gifted with outstanding reflexes and was lauded as one of the most accurate hitters in the game. Jack Callaghan, one of the foremost authorities of the age on British boxing, rated Palmer the best boxer of all.

When Pedlar Palmer boxed his exhibition with Young Griffo, both fighters came into the ring in a deadly serious frame of mind, knowing that their reputations could be tarnished by a bad display. Here is how Jack Callaghan described their meeting to writer W Buchanan Taylor: "Those who saw that demonstration saw everything that could possibly be known about the science of boxing.

"They boxed four rounds and neither man landed a blow on the other. They were the two quickest thinking boxers ever known and the witnesses of the meeting were of the opinion that, barring a slip or other accident, neither would have ever been able to hit the other.

"It's a very sad reflection that Griffo came to a tragic end, prematurely. He was a freak and what you were told by Hugh D MacIntosh and Tommy Burns about his extraordinary powers of co-ordination – the exact working of mind and matter – is quite true."

This must have been music to the ears of W Buchanan Taylor, who had long been fascinated by Griffo. In his rare and fine old book, 'What Do You Know About Boxing?' published in the early twentieth century, Buchanan Taylor bravely tackled the eternally fascinating question: Who was the greatest boxer?

Here is an abridged version of what he wrote: "Several eminent boxers with whom I have talked, and who saw the lad in action, give the palm to Young Griffo, the Australian ex-larrikin, who amazed eyewitnesses with his astonishing abilities in and out of the ring. Yet he never was a champion outside his own country.

"He was a young street urchin when he was picked up and given a chance of a three-round bout in Sydney, near which – Millar's Point – he was born and brought up. Soon after this first fight, he had a battle with the raw 'uns (bare knucklers), went back to gloves and proceeded to win his contests hand over fist.

"I have heard it vouched for that, in his sense of co-ordination of mind and action, he was practically 'simultaneous' in what he did. Hugh D McIntosh told me he had seen Griffo seated at an open air café picking flies out of the air with finger and thumb. This was corroborated by Tommy Burns and it was confirmed by three other patrons of the ring who knew Young Griffo.

"It is true, and well proven, in regard to Griffo's feats, that he used to bet against anybody hitting him as he stood and remained standing on a handkerchief laid out on the ground.

"Griffo was incurable lazy, doubtless from the fact that boxing was no trouble to him and he knew no master. He drank heavily at times and was once found intoxicated in a saloon a few hours before he was due in the ring. A Turkish bath, plenty of massage and slapping brought him to, and when he turned up to fight Ike Weir, the Belfast Spider, a while later, he hit his opponent on 'all points of the compass' as one description has it. Griffo was a ridiculously easy winner."

Drunk

The American boxing public couldn't believe what Griffo could do when drunk. The mind boggles at what he might have done if had had ever been able to take life seriously. There is ever reason to believe that Griffo was every much a 'natural' in his scientific knowledge of the sport as was Bob Fitzsimmons.

As I have written before, Fitzsimmons elicited a form of awe from his boxing brethren that somehow went far beyond the norm and transcended the era in which he fought. Bob was a truly seminal and timeless fighter. Jack Dempsey, Sam Langford, Joe Gans and Stanley Ketchel can be placed on the same pedestal from everything we know. So too can Young Griffo. Consider this question: Even with the passing of time, even with the great improvements made to general fitness and longevity, how much more knowledgeable or faster can today's boxers really become? By how much more can they improve their speed, feinting skills and footwork? Boxing *is* a unique discipline and the limits of technical perfection must surely be finite unless we abandon dope testing and allow the cheats to run riot.

Griffo made people gasp in the way he dodged punches by a barely visible movement of his head. His defence was virtually impenetrable and his array of feints and shifts was vast. Certain people will tell you that combination punching was an undiscovered art in Griffo's era, yet reporters frequently commented (sometimes in near disbelief) on the ability of the Australian ace to fire multiple blows in blindingly quick sequences.

Back in 1910, John L Sullivan's former manager, Billy Madden, took Jim Corbett to task following Corbett's assertion that flat-footed fighters were disadvantaged. Madden cited Young Griffo as a classic contradiction of this theory: "Griffo is considered by many to be one of the fastest and cleverest boxers who ever donned a glove.

"He hit when flat-footed. I saw him fight twenty rounds to a draw with Kid Lavigne when the Kid was good and Griffo was in poor shape. Griffo scarcely moved out of a six foot circle during the battle, until the close when he began to tire."

Madden's reasoning was as follows: "Try yourself, leading at another boxer with your left hand while on your toes, and you will find your head goes forward with the blow, leaving an opening for the other fellow to counter with his right. That is a cross counter. It is what a boxer means by beating his man to the punch.

"Now try the same lead with the feet firmly planted on the floor, left foot and left arm being in a direct line with your opponent's body. The head is back out of the way whether you land or miss."

A light puncher, Griffo laboured in the era when fights invariably ended in draw decisions in the event of one man failing to knock out the other. Yet at his short-lived peak, with his feathery fists and booze-addled brain, he twice drew with the great Joe Gans, fought three draws with George Dixon and also shared the spoils with Kid Lavigne, Frank Erne and Jack Everhardt.

The record books tell us that Griffo was outpointed by the great and undefeated Jack McAuliffe at the old Seaside Athletic Club in 1894, an honourable defeat that wouldn't have been a disgrace on any man's record. But many who saw that battle were of the firm opinion that Griffo had the better of Jack. Referee Maxie Moore was a good pal of McAuliffe, so we draw our own conclusions.

Griffo's first two fights with George Dixon – the great Little Chocolate - were tremendous struggles, full of skill and intrigue. The spoils were shared on both occasions, first at Boston over twenty rounds in 1894, and then at the old Seaside Athletic Club on Coney Island over twenty-five rounds in 1895.

Griffo held an eight-and-half pounds weight advantage over George in their first engagement, but the Australian won many plaudits for his evasive skills. Dixon attacked ferociously with his usual blend of skill, speed and skilful hitting, but Griffo was a revelation as he slipped, rode and parried punches like a mischievous ghost.

Griffo had been taunting Dixon for some time before they met in the ring. Dixon was appearing on stage at the Lyceum Theatre in Philadelphia in the winter of 1894. At a Monday matinee, Griffo was occupying a box seat and looking to liven things up. When Dixon made his entrance, Griffo jumped onto the stage, threw a five dollar bill at George's feet and challenged Little Chocolate to cover it. Dixon laughed and Griffo's friends pulled him away.

Later on, however, Dixon and his manager, Tom O'Rourke, encountered Griffo at a local saloon. Griffo told O'Rourke that he was "... only fit to manage niggers anyhow," and promptly received a blow to the face. The friends of both fighters broke up the unsavoury argument.

It was in the second match with Dixon that Griff demonstrated how brilliantly he could perform against all reasonable logic. Trapped in one of his torrid binge-drinking cycles, his preparation for Dixon was almost non-existent. Few believed that the Australian would survive the twenty-five round limit. How he did so, we will never know. Nor will we know how he managed to unleash fast and magnificent combinations that very nearly closed Dixon's eyes.

In the dying moments of the twenty-fifth round, Griffo seemed to move up to a higher plane that few others could even find. Cornered by Dixon's fierce, final rally, Griff slipped and ducked every punch that rained in. The entranced crowd at Coney Island could only watch in amazement. Surely, his great gifts had to be innate, immune to any inside or outside agency. Drunks simply don't fight like that; and most of them, barring a huge slice of luck, would suffer a cracked head from a flying spittoon!

I'm sure that my fellow trawlers of the archives will be familiar with the name of Dan Creedon, the old New Zealand fighter who crossed swords with many battlers of note and contested the middleweight championship with Bob Fitzsimmons.

Creedon agreed to meet Young Griffo in an eight-rounds contest following a fierce difference of opinion that broke out between their respective handlers. The match was laughed at. A middleweight against a lightweight, who might even forget to show up if there was a good bottle of something to be had.

How Creedon must have wished that Griffo had been seduced by a downtown saloon. Dedicated ringside observers kept a count of the number of clean punches landed by Creedon. The count began and ended at one. Dan's sole success, a desperate punch thrown in a purple rage, gave Griffo a cauliflower ear but didn't shut his mouth or dilute his magic. Decades before Muhammad Ali, Griff greatly enjoyed baiting his opponents and verbally questioning their talent.

The \$10,000 Glass Of Sherry

In July 1900, Joe Gans, the Baltimore maestro, finally got one over on Young Griffo and stopped him in eight rounds at the Seaside Athletic Club. The two geniuses had previously battled to a couple of draw decisions, but Griffo was a slowly drowning man by the time of their third clash, his love of alcohol having bitten him particularly hard. It was the year that Griff, who was sailing along pleasantly and relatively sober by his own standards, took a glass of sherry with devastating consequences. It was a moment of weakness that would cost him at least ten thousand dollars in potential earnings.

This was a vast amount of money in 1900. Griffo had been given the kind of earning opportunity that would normally only come the way of the heavyweight champion. All Griff had to do was stand up and fight a string of carefully selected opponents who would not tax him too greatly. It seemed too good to be true and it was. Griffo blew it.

Manager George Dawson was the architect of the lucrative package that would have made Griffo a superstar of his day. John Whitbeck, a Chicago restaurateur and a personal friend of Dawson's, told the story: "When Griffo came to life the second time and demonstrated by his bouts at the Chicago Athletic Association and Tattersall's that he was still a premier in his class, Dawson, who had his business interests in charge, was deluged with offers of matches for him.

"Not hard matches but easy exhibitions with a sparring partner and guaranteed purses ranging from \$300 to \$1,000. Every athletic club of note in the country wanted him. The peculiar conditions under which Griffo entered the ring made a big advertisement for him, and letters and telegrams poured in from all parts of the country. Right after his appearance with Young Kenny at Tattersall's, engagements had been booked for the time up to the end of April this year, which would have netted him \$10,000, and there was a chance for a lot of profitable dates between them. Then some fool friend of Griffo's insisted on him taking a glass of sherry and it was all off.

"All the sporting fraternity knows how he went to pieces and how Dawson, in disgust, had to cancel all the \$10,000 worth of engagements. No pugilist, aside from a heavyweight champion, had such an opportunity to reap such a golden harvest. Those \$10,000 engagements were only a beginning. If he had kept sober, Griffo could have virtually coined money for two or three years to come."

George Dawson had gone to great lengths to drag Griffo from the depths of his drunken despair and give him a fresh start. Dawson had visited Griffo in the insane asylum at Dunning and found him to be surprisingly sane and coherent. There was even a comical side to the visit as Griff gave him a simple message: "For Heaven's sake, get me out of here. I'm not crazy but I will be if I'm kept here with this mob of lunatics much longer."

Dawson arranged for Griffo's discharge and stumped up a \$3,000 indemnity fee to the county to cover any damage that the supposed madman might commit upon his release. But things quickly went wrong after a quiet period in which Griffo behaved himself. He was introduced to polite society and kept away from temptation, but the genteel life was not for Griff. The call of the streets and the rough-and-tumble saloons quickly beckoned. He started his old tricks of all-night binging followed by contrite apologies and then greater indiscretions.

George Dawson, utterly exasperated, told friends that giving money to Griffo was akin to throwing it in the sewer.

John Whitbeck scathingly remarked: "Young Griffo is a degenerate of the worst type. It is absolutely impossible to keep him in respectable condition. Given five hundred dollars tonight, he will be broke tomorrow, and no inducement, not even the guarantee of \$10,000 for twenty minutes' work with the gloves, would make him forego a drinking bout with the lowest of levee characters."

The Final Deception

Three years on and it didn't seem possible. Young Griffo was back in the saddle, as dry as he ever could be and in excellent shape. The rejuvenated Griffo was being described as a physical marvel, having apparently regained all his magnificent skills and innate reflexes.

Everyone had written him off, due to what was politely described at the time as his ‘excessive dissipation’. Griffo had become a physical and mental wreck and his chances of being a top flight fighter again had been thoroughly discounted. He had seemed to change managers as frequently as he could empty his glass at the bar.

Now he was in the care of Sam Tuckhorn, who announced that Griffo was ready to tackle any lightweight in the world. Tuckhorn’s claims were not lightly regarded, for they had the considerably weighty support of Lou Houseman, who knew everything about the fight scene in Chicago and had seen the new Griffo in action.

Said Houseman: “I saw the clever little Australian put through a course of sprouts the other day, and the manner in which he carried himself was astonishing. He appears to be, if anything, faster than he ever was. His footwork, his assault and defence are perfect. Men weighing forty pounds more than ‘the feather’ were handled like novices.

“The boy looks good. His hair has turned a bit gray – small wonder – but his eyes sparkle and his step is young and springy. I saw a certificate in which the doctor states positively that the boy’s heart is as healthy as any he had ever examined, and that there was not a physical flaw to be found anywhere.”

No less impressed by Griffo was the boxing reporter who wrote: “Griffo had his first bout in more than two years a couple of weeks ago in Peoria, Illinois, with Jack Bain. That Griffo was as clever a man with his fists as ever entered the ring, there has never been anyone to dispute, but that he would be able to go in and set a fast and furious clip for eight rounds and finish fresh and strong was more than the most hopeful expected.”

It was the opinion of many experienced ringsiders that Griffo was the greatest natural boxer in the world. He boxed wonderfully against Bain and exhibited powerful and accurate hitting.

Perhaps the most glowing tribute, however, came from referee Lynch who said: “I have refereed all the matches that have taken place in Peoria and I have attended almost all of the big fights, and I unhesitatingly say that I consider Griffo the greatest boxer I ever saw. He is the personification of cleverness and aggressiveness, and I think he has a chance with any man of his weight in the world.”

Young Griffo, with all the honeymoon verve that comes from the first flush of sobriety, announced that he had cut out ‘the cup that cheers’ after torrid periods of insane asylums, depressing privation and the hobo life.

It didn’t last of course. A drunk never sees the dark side of the moon when he surrenders once more to the old pangs. Somewhere in the archives there is a vivid picture of a dishevelled Griffo sitting on a doorstep, wearing that shredded and haunted expression that a hard life eventually carves into a man’s face. He looks old, but he probably isn’t.

He rests now beneath a simple gravestone in the Bronx.

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