

Joe Calzaghe: The Pride of Newbridge

“Come on, Joe, let’s go for a run.”

Enzo Calzaghe had no quit in him, and he wanted none in his son. By the estimate of the younger half, though, it was cold and “pissing down rain.” Joe was 15, and if he was going to brave that slop, it would take more than this.

“All right, if you don’t want, but I’m going myself, anyway.”

Minutes later, they were both on the road. When they got back, they were drenched. And each man was made of slightly sterner stuff for the effort.

Enzo

From the start, the friend, mentor, quarrelsome foe, and guiding paternal star of Joe Calzaghe’s life was Enzo – Pietro Vincenzo Calzaghe - a 5’6 fount of life and song who gave Joe his first gloves when he was eight and steered him right, in the ring and out, for as long as he lived.



Born on New Year’s Day, 1949, in the rural village of Bancali on the island of Sardinia, Enzo spent much of his childhood in the unwelcoming post-war environs of the UK. (Not many kids, he said, know what it is to be called *a filthy Italian bastard* at the age of five.) Caught up there in an abusive public school system, he found his first real passion in European football; soon after the family returned to Sardinia, he left school for good at age twelve. During the mid-60s flourish of popular rock, Enzo took strongly to the bass guitar. One night, pushed literally into a spotlight solo by his uncle when they were on stage together in Italy, he got a taste of stardom that would never leave him.

A few years later, his Italian draft service ended, he was roaming Europe, hustling, bartering, “busking” with his six-string to get whatever eats and mood-lifts were available. In time, he headed to Bournemouth on the English South Coast. While Enzo had kin there, the reunion was not all he had hoped. Soon after he was traveling with his friend Phil, a rough-hewn sort who had taken his side in a parking lot dust-up where Enzo had been outnumbered.

With time running on his travel visa, Enzo went back to the Bournemouth Double-O-Egg where he had worked awhile, and got back his shift (“They obviously didn’t work out I’d been sticking my fingers in the till”), putting aside a few quid to see a little more of England. When the time came, Phil took him to the Southampton train station, telling him on the way about his own good times in Cardiff. When they arrived they heard the call for a train headed there, and impulse – destiny, it seems now – pulled in that direction.

This Welsh town, at first, was none too welcoming – Phil scored lodging at the Salvation Army outlet, but Enzo had to settle for a few nights in a kiosk “phone box.” Roused by local constables, he took refuge under a bridge at Tiger Bay. Cold and tired, he just wanted now to get money for a return to Italy.

He and Phil sat one day at an eatery looking at local job ads and took out after one, only to be pointed toward a Wimpy’s outlet that might do them better. They walked through the café door and in seconds, the rest of Enzo’s life began.

“It was like a thunderbolt. From the second I saw this amazing-looking girl pouring coffee, I knew I had found everything I was looking for. I had found my soulmate. If that sounds mad, so be it.”

The revelation was not shared, just yet. Jackie, with “long hair right down to her backside, stunning features, and penciled-on eyebrows,” saw at first, in this forward redhead, a scruffy foreign type she had been warned about. But soon the young strummer and Jackie – “bright, funny, sarcastic, full of gumption” – were in love. While this union of young spirits would meet with some trials, and stretch to the breaking point a time or two, it would endure. And now, during a nine-month stint in Sardinia, Jackie got pregnant with Joseph William, who would be the first of their three. Soon after they returned to Jackie’s native UK, and Joe entered the world in London on March 23, 1972.

Joe Calzaghe

“I had done some boxing training as a kid,” Enzo would say, when Joe’s career was done, “but there was nothing to suggest from my genes that we would have a fighting prodigy on our hands.” Then again, while Enzo might not look like anybody’s heavyweight champion, he was sired by Giuseppe Calzaghe, a laborer with hands big as shovels who carted sacks of cement like they were tote bags at sites where he inspired awe in the men around him.

If there were a single word, said Enzo, to describe his son in action, it was *magic*. At around eight Joe caught fire with the sport, thrilling to fight action and the **Rocky** films and shadow-boxing at times like he was obsessed. Soon Enzo was getting him gloves, and rolling up a carpet for a punching bag. He would wrap tea-towels around his own hands and use them to spar. In time, the living room scrapes got heated, and the older one would say, “All right, maybe we should go outside and make it a *street fight!*” But quickly they were at it again. Enzo could see something in his son that made the bruises worth it. Meanwhile, the kid who got pushed around at school was learning how to make bullying more expensive for those wanting to try it.



By now Enzo and Jackie had set up house in Wales. Enzo had never been a trainer, but he had a great eye for fighters and their moves, and he and his son had a chemistry – not entirely friendly, yet in

the end a perfect working combination. Two missiles of haphazard energy, they would drive each other, in coming years, to the limit, and to the heights. Enzo taught him the basics, and got Joe working early from odd and difficult angles, giving him nuances that would be useful down the line. When he took Joe to the Newbridge gym one day, coach Paul Williams thought he was already a veteran of open class competition.

The gym was a narrow tin-sheet strip of a place with dank corners and no showers that could broil or freeze its inhabitants depending on the time of year. But in this teeming little shack champions would be forged, Joe being the one everybody would remember.

You wouldn't have picked out Joe Calzaghe in his school yearbook as the toughest kid in his class, but soon it would be. He was tireless, his lung capacity seemingly without limit. When he began to compete, he could not bear to lose. Limit, in fact, was something he refused to accept in any form. After winning a Welsh schoolboys' title in 1985 at the age of 13, he was entered into an Amateur Boxing Association championship at 36kg. It was hard for a Welsh lad to win a competition of this kind, and after eking out a win in the semi-finals, Joe was warned not to get his hopes up by the more experienced kids.

"You'll never win a British ABA title," they said, "you can't win in England. They're brilliant." Such words might have folded another young athlete, but they triggered instead Joe's audacity. Breaking from his corner in the championship round, he overwhelmed his favored opponent, stopping him in 35 seconds, the fastest bout of the evening. ("Apart from winning the world title," Joe would say, "I still regard it as my most satisfying moment in the ring.")

Lose he seldom did – he rang another ABA title in the junior division and qualified for a berth to the Gaelic Games in Nova Scotia that drew fighters from Canada, Wales, Ireland, and Scotland. In with a prodigious young hitter during the qualifiers, he took one to the side of the head that nearly stopped him yet roared back to win it inside the first round. Trailing on points after taking an eight-count in the final, he stopped the other kid late in the third.

But when working out at a local boxing club in Cwmbran early for the 1989 season Joe suffered an injury that would never entirely leave him. After tossing a right hand one afternoon in a sparring session, he felt pain in his wrist "as if a knife had been put through it". After getting the joint X-rayed at Royal Gwent Hospital in Newport, he was told by the doctor that damage to key membrane tissue had brought his fighting career to an end. Yet time, willpower, and makeshift cushioning kept that career intact.

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By 1990 Joe was getting his full growth, going upward of six feet though he could still boil off enough juice to make the "10 stone, seven" (147 pound) welterweight limit. Entered into international competition, he met with mixed results, losing at age 17 to the eventual gold medal winner in the European championships. He vowed that he would never lose again.

Boxing became Enzo's consuming purpose, and he was learning as he went, working with Joe and poring through every musty treatise on the fight game he could find. By the time Joe was done, he would have ABA championships in the junior division, and three more, at 147, 156, and 165, in the open class. But he would stay close to that last figure, retaining a fighting weight in the upper 160s

until the final year of his professional career. Flat-muscled, he would look at times slat-thin alongside shorter mesomorph types, yet in that frame was an undying resilience.

Joe's greatest setback as an amateur occurred not in the ring, but in losing out on the chance to represent Wales in the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. While he was, by all counts, the outstanding amateur at his weight in the UK, he displeased the decision-makers when the time came for a selection. Nagged continually with fragile hands, he missed a key competition and with it the berth to Spain. ("It was," Joe would say years later, "the first time I saw my dad cry" over boxing.)

A Fast Rise in the Pro Ranks

Joe won his third ABA title 1993 and turned pro at 21 that autumn on the first of October. Winning it in a hurry, he sawed through everything else in his path for more than a year in the small arenas of Cardiff, Newport and Walford. In February of 1995, when he cut down visiting Indianapolis journeyman Frank Minton, a veteran of nearly 50 fights, he stood 9 – 0, all knockouts, seven coming in the first round.

Joe got a stiffer challenge five months later in Tyrone Jackson, a rugged number out of Atlanta whose 7 – 9 – 1 record belied the fact that he could bang hard and could walk through artillery fire. It was a contrast of styles and attitudes, Tyrone shaking his head now and again when Joe caught him with a good one. He flexed a grin, taunting the Welshman at the end of Round 1, and again in 2 and 3. In the fourth, Joe blistered him right and left, the referee stopping it with Jackson knocked loopy and still defiant.

Onto the World Stage

That made it 12 – 0. Two fights later Joe was vying for the vacant 168-pound British title at Royal Albert Hall in Kensington against former Olympian Stephen Wilson. A bronze medalist in Barcelona, the Scotsman was a much decorated amateur and 11 – 1 as a pro.

It was an impressive performance from Calzaghe, edging Wilson in the early going and upping the rate until it was a pure drubbing that was called in the eighth round. In April of 1995 he faced highly touted Mark Delaney, 21 – 0, in a contest of two unbeaten. Despite the numbers, it was a mismatch from the opening minute, Joe cat-quick and agile and bidding *good night* to the challenger with a hail of leather in the fifth.



In May of 1996, Joe met up with Irish Pat Lawlor, a colorful figure who six years earlier had pulled off a split decision win over the great Wilfred Benitez. The year following, moving nimbly against a thick-waisted Roberto Duran, Patrick hit another fistic lottery when he caught the 40-ish Panamanian with a right hand near the end of Round 6. The blow landed on what seemed like an already gammy left shoulder, Roberto stooping and wincing. The fight was stopped.

This one, however, gave Lawlor scarcely a moment of good fortune. Himself now a mite thick and moving in low gear, he had no answer to the Welshman, who cut through him like a hot razor.

Late in the second, with Lawlor wandering corner to corner amid a two-handed shellacking, the ref called it.

Joe was now 19 for 19, all but one inside the distance. His entrance into higher profile fights and bigger money was coming none too soon, since he and girlfriend Mandy had now been married about a year, with son Joe, Jr., a recent addition. Three wins later he was matched with Chris Eubank, a former world belt holder with impressive reigns in the past seven years.

Chris had won the WBO middleweight title by stopping the formidable Nigel Benn in 1990, taking the honors at super-middleweight a year later. He defended the 168-pound title repeatedly until losing it in 1995 to Steve Collins, nearly regaining that belt in a rematch with Collins six months later. Now, coming off two knockout wins, savvy and bull-strong, he was 45 – 2 – 2, a veteran of wars with the best in the game. The vacant WBO title was on the line.

Chris Eubank

“And you are ... ?”

The question from this grandly attired fellow at a London hotel, shortly before their fight, was a wry one. It marked Joe’s introduction to the man he would be facing on October 11, 1997, in Sheffield.

Taking it in stride, Joe had a laugh. But the handshake of Chris Eubank left no doubt as to the seriousness of the task ahead. At the press conference the former champion made no bones about it. This would be a battle.



“You have a good record,” he said to Joe when his turn came with the mic, “but you’ve never been into the trenches. I’ve been there and that’s where I’m going to take you.” The words were prophetic.

This fight taught Enzo, learning on the fly, that there was such a thing as over-analysis. Worried about the disparity between the two fighters at world level, he explained, “I got a huge pile of VHS videos and watched [Eubank] religiously morning, noon, and night and even if I didn’t convey it to Joe, I was panicking a bit.” The upshot of this crash course was that everything he and Joe did on fight day was out of rhythm. They went to the ring with Joe underfed, out of sorts, and overworked on the warm-up pads, and his father beside himself.

At the opening bell, Eubank tried a surprise move, a right hand haymaker carrying disaster with it that missed by a whisker. A minute later he did the same with a left, and Calzaghe electrified the crowd with a left of his own that caught Chris flat, sending him plummeting into the ropes.

Picking himself up, the former champion smiled his acknowledgment, and they settled down until Joe caught fire late in the round, rallying again with both hands. Eubank gave him a nod at the bell, realizing that the kid from Newbridge had come to fight.

As rounds passed, it was clear that Eubank wasn't going anywhere, either. He and Joe were headed onto new ground. Joe, prior to this, had not been more than eight; now, at the pace he and Chris were setting, he was wearing down at the end of six. Here and there Eubank shook him with right hands, Enzo giving his offspring a mad earful when he came back to his corner.

Going into the ninth, Joe suffered cramps and dehydration. Now, in these raw trenches, he saw the wisdom of all those extra hours of work in the gym, all the miles logged in freezing cold and sopping rain when Enzo would push the skinny kid, whom he loved beyond words, further than he thought he could go. On he went, hitting the "wall" like an agonized runner, keeping his mitts in motion.

In that round he shook Eubank with each hand. A neat left in the tenth caught the Ghanan coming in, his gloves brushing the canvas, meriting an eight-count from ref Joe Cortez. At the end of twelve, Chris had done what he'd promised. Exhausted, his right eye a discolored shiner, Joe heard the sweet music of the scorecards – all three by a good margin in his favor.

Reid, Sheika, and Mario Veit

After two homecoming title defenses in Cardiff, he faced his old nemesis Robin Reid, now 26 – 1 – 1, in February of 1999 in Newcastle. The two men bore each other a basic dislike, one that went back maybe to their gym skirmishes, and to Reid representing the UK in the '92 Olympics. Mainly, said Joe, it was about Reid's refusal to give him a shot at the WBO title when Robin had it. Add to which, the British slam-sheets had Reid running him down hard in their columns of late. The press conferences got heated.

Joe, by his own estimate, was subpar on this night, hampered by a weight loss of six pounds shortly before the fight and suffering a broken bone in his left hand mid-way through the action. At the end of twelve, his trademark flurries had won him the fight despite right hands from Robin, now and again, that rocked him to his soles. The final point spread was curious, two judges giving it to Joe 116 – 112, and the third going with Robin by the same margin.

In June, plagued again with hand trouble, Joe went twelve again in lackluster fashion with personal mate Rick Thornberry. He now faced a point of crisis when promoter Frank Warren insisted that it was time to end the partnership of father and son that had lasted some 20 years. Enzo, thought Rick, had taken his son as far as his own limits allowed. It was time to hand off the reins.

The partnership, in fact, was chaffing each man to the point where they no longer wanted to share the same gymnasium. Enzo, on balance, with happy with life day to day. He and Jackie were in a good place, and his younger fighters – by now Team Calzaghe sported young talents like Gavin Rees and Bradley Price – were thriving. But he could not continue with Joe as things stood.

Still, he was not prepared for a story by Colin Hart that ran in the UK *Sun* the morning of August 4th: "Joe Calzaghe," announced Hart, "has sacked his father as trainer, just as he enters the most important phase of his career." He went on to describe the long-time association of Joe and Enzo from the day that the fighter had laced on his first gloves. He noted Warren's difficulty in facing the inevitable where father and son were concerned.

Enzo was not upset with the scribe or the promoter, but with the way he was now getting the news, without his son telling him what was up, face to face. He also did not appreciate taking the rap for Joe's recent so-so outings. The problem, he believed, was not that Joe needed new surroundings or new direction – rather the problem was Joe himself.

Days later Enzo was sweeping the gym floor when he heard the door creak and in came his son.

“Hi, Dad,” he said. “Listen, don't worry about all that stuff in the papers. I don't want to leave you as my coach, I just think it's best if I bring in another trainer to work with as well.” Enzo had his answer ready: He was a father first and a trainer second, and whatever Joe wanted was OK.

No more got said then, but a couple of days later, it all poured out, with Enzo doing most of the pouring. The real trouble, said Enzo, aside from ongoing lack of communication, was not that their partnership had gone stale, or that his son needed someone to take him to a new level. It was rather that Joe was fighting essentially like a *champion*, and not a *challenger* – fighting like a man who had everything he wanted and did not need more.

While Joe didn't like hearing it, soon things were on track. But there was work to do. By now, his hands aching, he had not sparred in the better part of a year. Warren wanted to pair him with American Omar Sheika, a Palestinian kid out of New Jersey, 20 – 1 with bad news in each hand.

Warren's idea was to stage the fight on the 4th of July, which would add to its appeal on the US side. Joe, at this point, had faced several opponents when he was sub-par, but Sheika was another story. Though he wanted the fight, a nagging elbow problem, stemming from the chronic injury to his right wrist, persuaded him that the risk was too great.

It was not the first time they'd had this conversation, and Frank was done accommodating. He reminded the fighter of Brits who got through their careers with similar problems and made do with what they had. It was time, he said, for Calzaghe to decide whether he still belonged in the business.

Then came a welcome discovery: Joe found soon afterward that quitting his rounds of golf near his home took away the pain. He told Frank that he would fight, if it could be pushed back a month. So for the third time, the fight was reset, a deal being struck for August 12th at Wembley Conference Center.

Ill will had been brewing between the two for some time. Sheika, by now taking the Welshman for a coward, was swearing that he would *kill* Calzaghe when they met. He had a bunch around him who rejoiced when he would put his fist, during a public workout, through a poster of Joe and repeat his vow. At the weigh-in, the two fighters eyeball to eyeball, Omar's boys were calling out like toughs on a Bowery street-corner that the Welshman was scared. When Joe was making his walk, the challenger yelled down at him on the way. He jawed at him at ring center and again as they traded last words while backing away to their corners.

Up to now, Joe for the most part had held his piece. But when the bell released him, he made his statement, burning through the New Jersey challenger with shots that created a whole new dialogue. In the fourth, upping the *ante* after a clash of heads stung each fighter, he jolted Sheika with a hellacious uppercut, the bell sending Omar to his corner with a cut above the left eye.

Now it was on, full bore – the American waded into Joe in the fifth, throwing shots, true to his word, that had homicide on them. But the round turned into a showcase of Joe’s ability to one-up his opponents at times like this. He rammed Sheika with his jab, adding a left hand from underneath and coming back with the hook, payback in every strike. Omar was now cut over the right eye, his face a crimson catastrophe as Joe landed again with both hands, ref Gino Rodriguez calling it over his protest late in the round.

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Joe dropped to the canvas in ecstasy, the weight of three unhappy outings lifted. In April of 2001, he defended against Mario Veit, a rangy 6’4 German with a record of 30 – 0. On the face of it, Mario figured to be a handful. But Joe had sensed that he was unsure of himself when he saw Mario sitting at ringside for the Sheika fight. By the time they stepped into the ring at Cardiff’s International Arena, he could see he was right – the German fighter’s worry had turned to “pure, naked fear.”

Sensing that Veit would be unsure of himself when the bell rang, Joe came out winging. Shots to the body had the challenger on the defensive. A left hand clout on the face dropped him. A duplicate left did the same, and one more sally, right and left, drove him into the ropes where referee Mark Nelson stopped it.

Two fights later, in April of 2002, Joe faced a tough Yank in Charles Brewer, a savvy 6’1 veteran, 37 – 8, who had been on the short end of a split decision with German IBF champion Sven Ottke in Magdeburg a couple of years earlier. Like Joe, he was a southpaw, though converted to an orthodox stance. At the end of twelve clean and hard-fought rounds, it was Calzaghe by a unanimous decision in what was arguably his best performance to date.

The Hard Taste of Canvas

The coming months brought three more challenges from the US, the most serious being Byron Mitchell, 25 – 2 – 1, a heavy-handed number out of Alabama. A two-time WBA champion at 168, he numbered Frankie Liles and Julio Caesar Green among his knockout victims. Like Brewer, he had suffered a split decision loss to Ottke, also on Sven’s home turf at Max Schmeling Halle in Nuremberg.

Joe and Byron met on June 28th in Cardiff, the only fight that Calzaghe would have in 2003. It represented, in the minds of some, the most dangerous task he had faced to date. As it approached, said Enzo, “I was keen [that] Joe box, not fight or brawl on the inside and stand toe-to-toe,” but once the crowd got into his son, it was another story.

The two men skirmished in the opening minute, inside and out, Mitchell getting home with a couple of bruising right hands to the body. At about mid-way, Joe stung him with right and left, and two left hand wallops to the head had the American in a fog. With a packed house at the International Arena in a frenzy, he went all out until the bell.

Joe rose for the second round sensing a quick finish. Hell broke loose when he reached the American with hefty shots to head and chin: Mitchell responded with a wicked volley downstairs, and then – they didn’t call this dude *The Slamma from ‘bama* for nothing – he brought up a right hand on the chops that twisted Joe sideways, sending him to the floor for the first time in his life.

Up quickly, trying to digest it, Joe looked frantically to his dad and got back the same look. Suddenly it was Mitchell wanting to end it. If anyone doubted that Calzaghe had the right stuff, now came a surefire answer. Rising from his knee, he went back into the fire.

There came a blasting exchange, Byron ripping him right and left to the body, and Joe firing back. A blockbuster left caught Mitchell as he came forward, dropping him face-first into the ropes, the Welsh crowd shaking the rafters. He was up and ready for more, but Joe beat him to it. A left hand had the American on his heels and wavering. Another volley drove him into the ropes and referee Dave Parris called a halt just before the three-minute mark.

Three fights later Joe stopped Veit again – a better go than last, this one in front of a German audience. But the result was similar. He dropped Mario with a left hand in the fifth, stopping him with a shotgun assault in the opening minute of Round 6. In September, after a twelve round decision win over Evans Ashira in Cardiff, he was 40 – 0 with a new challenge looming from across the water.

Moment of Truth: Jeff Lacy

“A short mound of cannonballs,” someone once said when describing George Benton, a renowned trainer and one-time middleweight contender. The biggest star emerging from the Sydney, Australia Olympic games of 2000 was a 165-pound fighter built along that same line.

Jeff Lacy scored a knockout over his first opponent in the competition. He decisioned the second before being outslicked by a veteran Russian in the quarter-finals. But in that span of time he had made an impression. Designed by nature for the paid ranks, he figured to go a long way.

The US media went into gear: Jeff, it was said, had registered on impact-sensitive machinery a punching power exceeding that of his teammates, including the ones at 178 and 200 and in the super-heavyweight open. He made his debut on April 2, 2001, in a televised bout in Columbus, Ohio, wrecking a fighter named Jerald Lowe with a left hand whack to the body in the first round. A month later he blasted out 8 – 5 – 1 journeyman Tommy Attardo, dropping him in the second with a right hand and flattening him in scary fashion with a left.

By November of 2003, “Left Hook” Lacy was making mincemeat of contenders. He picked up several title straps, receiving his first world honors when he won a vacant IBF championship by knocking out Syd Vanderpool in Las Vegas.

Two months later, Jeff scored a win in a bruising 12-rounder against Omar Sheika in Las Vegas. In August of 2005, he did what Joe had not done, putting away Robin Reid inside the distance. Reid, hard as iron, had never been dropped until this night, when he went down four times. Uppercuts from Lacy, left and right, floored him near the end of the seventh round, and a halt was declared in Robin’s corner where he sat dazed yet game, awaiting the bell for the eighth.

In November of 2005, the American demolished tough veteran Scott Pemberton, 29 – 3 – 1, putting on a show that made him the # 1 super-middleweight in the eyes of nearly every scribe in the business. A right hand dropped Pemberton late in the second round, and another right felled him like a busted mast on the high seas, the ref calling it just inside the bell.

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Jeff vs. Joe was a matchup that abounded in accusation from the time each man signed. Lacy, said conservatives in the UK, was an over-amped Olympian yet to prove his worth. “Stay at Home” Joe, said the other, was an overprotected Brit who had not seen what America really had to offer. The Welshman, Jeff maintained, was a “slapper” whose comeuppance was due.

This much-wanted collision had already been delayed, adding fuel to the Lacy side, when Joe suffered a broken hand against Evans Ashira in their Cardiff bout. Sour words had followed.

“Joe Calzaghe,” said Jeff’s promoter Gary Shaw, “is a disgrace. I don’t believe this injury is legit.” Joe, he insisted, had never wanted any part of his fighter. “There are some fighters,” he added, “who are willing to fight anyone, any time, and there are fighters who just don’t fit in that warrior category. Joe Calzaghe is one of the latter.”

Now came a point of crisis. When Joe re-injured his left wrist late in training, he was certain that the fight would be a mistake. He told his dad he was backing out.

There followed a frantic exchange, Joe insisting that he had no chance with Lacy, and Enzo saying that he had it all wrong. And besides that, if Joe pulled out now, there would be no more chances.

Even if it were true, Joe pleaded, he was not fit to go through with the fight. “I can’t physically fight with one hand. He’s too good.”

“No, Joe, he isn’t. Don’t think that. He is made for you. If you box the way you [can], he won’t be able to touch you. You will out-box him and out-think him from the first round. You will destroy him. It will be the easiest fight you ever had.”

“Are you serious? Have you seen how hard he hits? Did you see the Robin Reid fight?”

“Are *you* serious?”, replied a dead certain father. “Get your head out of your arse and wake up ... He can’t touch you. Jeff lacy is not even in your league.”

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Since Lacy figures in each man’s *memoir* from the opening chapter, it is clear that this fight had special significance for father and son. Jeff, at the time, was by far the most formidable of Joe’s American opponents, and this fight would be decisive in gauging what Joe was worth as a fighter.

Watching Jeff manhandle Reid, Joe himself had gotten caught up in the frenzy. Yet he put his faith now in Enzo’s judgment and went ahead with the final weeks in the camp. Both father and son began to feel the rightness of what they were doing, win or lose and going for broke. Through it all, Enzo never doubted the rightness of his course. Having seen Jeff in action, he would say later, “I thought he was extremely limited, nothing more than a bully.”

Joe had reservations, but by fight night he shared his father’s conviction. “Lacy,” he said, “could hit and he had a body on him ... that made me get up in the morning.” Wound tight in the late

stages of camp, he barely slept. Yet at fight time, stepping out of his dressing room after a cold shower, he would recall, "I just felt invincible ... it's the only time I've ever felt this way."

They met in the wee hours, accommodating US television, at MEN Arena in Manchester. While the venue might favor Joe, American media were spring-loaded for a Lacy win. Jeff himself, while not a menacing type outside the ring, was in warrior mode, promising to wreak havoc. He entered the ring with a street edge, black ballcap set backwards, a dark jaguar ready to leap.

A moment of truth was fast coming. Up to now, there had lingered the notion that Joe was a flashy fighter, but one who packed little power. This tendency to tap and peck, in fact, had evolved in large part to save his hands the trauma. But it was also something of a lure: Essentially he was not a light-fisted fighter, but a cunningly *erratic* one, hard to figure yet able to deliver the goods when needed. "I pick a point," he would say late in his career, "at which to fire three or four rapid-fire shots, *bah-bah-bah-bah*, and these baffle opponents, and then *boom*, hit the guy with a harder punch, a big one." This time, he would get his weight on his shots, making every punch count.

At the bell, they studied each other at a distance, Calzaghe finding the range a few times before they tussled in close. What became obvious very quickly was that Joe was good at reading Jeff's intentions, rocking and rolling with his every move. In the opening minute, Lacy got home with a right hand to the body as Joe retreated. Joe broke out of a clinch with a smart hook to body and head.

At about the half-way point, there came a revelation. Lacy drove him into the ropes with another right, and Calzaghe met it with a left uppercut that stunned Jeff, turning him all at once, like a lanced bull, into a sad piece of confusion. Joe continued to score from angles Lacy did not expect with a speed he could not fathom. What was more, he could manage on the inside, riveting the American downstairs, then stinging him again from the outside with each hand.



In the final minute Lacy got home a right to the head and got back that same jarring left from underneath. At the bell, Calzaghe paused, eyeing the American for a second, then raised his hands as a punctuation mark on a round that had just shaken Jeff Lacy and the boxing world.



From that point there was no letup. A sullen Lacy came trudging each round, looking for a chance to unload, yet beaten to the punch and confounded by every gesture that Joe gave him.

By the end of five, Jeff was leaking like a bad faucet, blood seeping from his nose, hacked over each eye, flecks of red now hitting ringsiders when he took a shot upstairs. (Gary Shaw sat shell-shocked, in the words of one British commentator, as it continued, the sixth round ending with audible cracks on the challenger's head.)

Near the end of the seventh, Joe rifled him with left hands that had third man Raul Caiz taking careful note. Though Raul let it continue, the rest of the fight was a spreading landslide, a two-handed banging with Jeff taking it like an anvil. The icing came in the twelfth, a hard left catching him as the fighters collided, the impact sending Lacy down for the first time in his career.

At the end of that round, the scores (with Joe getting docked a point late in the fight for an infraction) read 119 – 108 twice and 119 – 105. Joe still hadn't fought in America, but he was now for real on each side of the Atlantic.

* * * * *

In October Joe went twelve rounds, again at the MEN arena, with Sakio Bika, a granite-hard Cameroon fighter out of Australia. Bika had lost a chance to win the WBC title in a fight with Marcus Beyer in Germany when a head-butt opened a severe cut on Marcus that resulted in a technical draw.

Grueling, now and again unseemly, it was a wrenching, bludgeoning event much of the way, a soiled anticlimax, at times, to the one at this venue seven months earlier. The champion fared well in the early going with his pinpoint jab and straight left hand, but soon the tactics veered outside usual bounds. A skull-ringing butt in the fourth round opened up Joe over the left eye. Though Sakio missed some, a winging right hand counter, now and again, would make the champion wince when he recalled it. Joe visited the canvas from a low blow in the twelfth, yet finished smartly and left no doubt as to the winner.

While the fight is mentioned usually in passing in discussions of Calzaghe's career, it was a tough go, in which the African showed that he was one of the most durable in the division. He would fight on, his career spanning another eleven years, winning North American and Australasian titles, and managing victories in his last two fights at the age of 38. In 44 bouts he was never stopped.

Mikkel Kessler

A bigger challenge now loomed for Joe, a neo-Viking named Mikkel Kessler, currently the WBA and WBO champion at 168. A slick number out of Copenhagen, he had dynamite in each hand and stood now 39 – 0 with 29 wins inside the distance.

Offering fans a combined mark of 82 – 0, this was the greatest piece of matchmaking that Europe and all of boxing, maybe all of sport, had to offer. Each man lived up to it. As Joe made his entrance before 50,000 fans, Enzo thought back upon his days of busking and scavenging, saying to himself, "I used to sleep right outside this stadium in a phone box." Small wonder that he would recall this night as the pinnacle of all his time in the Sweet Science.

From the opening gong, this one was fare for the sporting *connoisseur*. Joe nicked the first round, seizing a bit more of the initiative. Mikkel began to find his rhythm in the second, jolting the Welshman with a right hand. He nailed him again, but good, in the third, and the Calzaghe drive kicked in, though the Dane was not giving an inch. In the fourth, Kessler shook Joe again with right hands, uppercut and overhand, shots that might have felled another fighter.

On it went, close in the exchanges, Kessler's power compensating for what he lacked in quantity. By the ninth round, Joe's output was unrelenting, and the scorecards were showing it. Mikkel, nearly out of gas, managed to land with a few good swipes in Round 12. The scorecards favored the native, 117 – 111 and 116 – 112 twice.



When it was done, the fighters exchanged congratulations on a fight that had been contested hard and clean from the opening bell. There had been no vulgarity beforehand in the press conferences, and there was none after. While the two would not meet again in the ring, each man went on to further success, Kessler ending his career a few years later with 46 wins in 49 contests.

The year 2007 would mark a high point in the careers of both Joe and his father, with Enzo receiving, in recognition of his winning record with Joe, Gavin Rees, Nathan Cleverly, Bradley Pryce, Gary Lockett, and Enzo MacCarinelli, the BBC Sports Personality Coach of the Year Award. He took home, in addition, the *Ring* magazine Trainer of the Year and the related Futch-Condon award, given out each year by the Boxing Writers Association of America.

Meanwhile, weight was becoming an issue with Joe, who had lost by his own estimate some 36 pounds in the 32 weeks preceding the bout with Mikkel. He decided to fight at 175.

America at Long Last – and Bernard Hopkins

Not every great fighter arrives with fanfare on a media fast-track – no one imagined, when Bernard Humphrey Hopkins, Jr., was coming of age, that he was destined for anything but trouble.

He grew up on the hard streets of Philadelphia in the Raymond Rosen housing projects, an area not long on Brotherly Love where he swam early in the city's violent stream, committing muggings by the age of 13. Before long he would bear the marks of three stab wounds, one nearly fatal. At 17, with perhaps 30 arrests on his record, he was convicted of multiple felonies and sentenced to 18 years at Pennsylvania's Graterford Prison. While behind bars he rediscovered boxing, and one day, seeing a fellow inmate lose his life over a pack of cigarettes, he made up his mind to seek a way out of the system. In later years he would attribute his remarkable self-discipline to the time at Graterford.

Bernard entered into the pro scene with little notice, dropping a decision in a prelim fight his first time out. He persevered, winning an array of titles at 160 and 168 pounds before moving to the light-heavyweight division. In his later years he would continue to do amazing things, scoring wins over men like Oscar De la Hoya, Antonio Tarver, and Kelly Pavlik, finally calling it a day when he was stopped by young light-heavyweight Joe Smith, Jr., at nearly 52 years of age. Known in his heyday as The Executioner, he would contribute a regular instructional column to *The Ring* on "Perfect Execution" as he took on the role of *Professor Emeritus* in the fight world.

Right now, in April of 2008, he was coming off an impressive win over Ronald “Winky” Wright, a left-handed trickster who had schooled some of the best in the business. He and Joe signed to meet in Las Vegas, in Joe’s first fight in America. The deal for the fight essentially had been sealed four months earlier, when Hopkins saw Joe and made a bee-line for him in the Media Room of the MGM Grand Hotel in that glittering desert oasis.

While Bernard had come a long way in the world, he would always carry some of North Philly and Graterford inside him. It came to the fore now as the two engaged face to face in a war of words. A sensational chord was struck when Hopkins, after starting away, wheeled and added, “I will *never* let a white boy beat me.” Repeating it like a *mantra*, he added, as he headed off, “I will *never* lose to a white person.”

* * * * *

As Joe would say, when interviewed years later, this was the moment he knew he was going to fight in America, taking his career and his personal fortune to another level. Bernard Hopkins had just done a savvy job of selling this scrap to the world.



The drama continued in the same vein when they two men met during a press kickoff and Hopkins declared, to loud approval, that on fight night, “every red-blooded American is gonna be happy with the outcome ... I’m gonna be kickin’ this British ass.”

Joe, by and large, was braced for what he got, and found Bernard amusing. His dad, too, kept up a friendly appearance most of the way. But shortly before the fight, he came unglued when Hopkins suggested that Enzo would be the source of his son’s downfall. He would leave Joe in to take a beating, said Bernard, much as Felix Trinidad’s father had done seven years earlier against him when “Tito” was in trouble.

As Enzo would admit, years later, this one hit a nerve. “I never wanted Joe,” he said, “to feel I depended on him and people perceiving me that way was ... one of my main insecurities.” Years earlier, when Joe was on the way up, he had endured the slights of the press, which had him riding the wave of his son’s success when he did not merit the position he held in that camp.

Right now, to make it worse, he was coming off losses for two of his men, Gavin Rees and Enzo Maccarinelli, whom he had taken to world titles. Suddenly he flared, jabbing at Hopkins, telling him what he was in for, when he met Joe. “I know how to beat you. I’ve watched you, only once ... on video. That is all I needed to realize how to beat you.” (After Enzo had let go of all that was in him, Bernard made the scene dissolve into laughter when he said, “I am more scared of *him* – I’m more afraid of him than Joe!”)

So now, April 19, 2008, it was Show Time, American Style – and quite a show it was. While Enzo thought Bernard would be easy to solve, father and son got an awakening in the first minute, when a

Hopkins right hand flush on the nose sent Calzaghe to the deck. Joe recovered, and set himself to getting back the two-point deficit he would likely suffer for that spill.

By the fourth round he was finding his rhythm and beating Hopkins to the punch, winning the contest of output, at least, even if he was getting tagged hard on occasion. Repeatedly he scored with quick flurries, now and again landing a jarring left to the head, in and out before Bernard could even it up. In large part it was Joe's rallies, a tossed salad of *pitter-pat* with an occasional straight left or a right hook downstairs, offset by Hopkins' right hand counters, one of which had Joe tottering and nearly on his tail late in Round 7.

In the concluding rounds Joe came on strong, again with the busy fists, clawing his way into the lead, it seemed, even if not by a wide margin. By the end he had registered 232 punches, more than anyone else had landed on Bernard during his long career.

But Punch Stat, as any veteran observer knows, is an imperfect gauge of which man has fared better at the last knell. While Enzo thought they had won, he knew it was close. There was that knockdown in Round 1, and almost a repeat of it six rounds later. And this was Las Vegas, not Cardiff. By the time Michael Buffer took the microphone, said the older Calzaghe, "I was bouncing around, a bundle of nervous energy. It was a split decision, and heart in mouth time." Never had he felt this way at the end of one of Joe's fights, lacking a gut sense of who would get the nod.

Judge Adalaide Byrd, not always known for objectivity, and a fellow Philadelphian, saw it for Bernard 114 – 113. The next card was 115 – 112 for Joe. And the last one was 116 – 111 ... "for your winner ... by split decision ... from Newbridge, Wales ..."

Hearing those words, Enzo lifted his son into the air. Joe was now 45 – 0, and he had conquered the world stage. There were few hills left to climb.

Finale at the Garden: Roy Jones, Jr.

Maybe there was one. Twelve years before Sydney, the Seoul Olympics in South Korea had shown the world a phenomenon – the kind that comes along, if fans are lucky, once in a decade.

Touched, it seemed, by the gods, Roy Jones, Jr., would fly through that competition, then dominate a Korean opponent for three rounds only to find that he had won silver, not gold – a double-take moment, even in a sport known for judging errors and occasional bald-faced robbery. But Roy turned pro and hit the ground running in May of 1989, winning the 160-pound title four years later with a decision over Bernard Hopkins. In November of 1994, he out-slicked fellow *savant* James Tony, unbeaten in 46 fights, to establish himself as the best man *pound for pound* in the business.

Some began to think he was the best in any era. While time, and late career losses, would fade his image in some quarters, he dominated the competition during his best years, turning bouts with ranking fighters from 160 to 175 pounds into lightning-fisted, comically one-sided displays.

On March 1, 2003, he climbed way over his going weight to pull off a win over WBA heavyweight champion John Ruiz. But spiking back down to 175, he had met with mixed results since – after a tougher than expected fight with Antonio Tarver, he was flattened by Antonio in two rounds six

months later. In his last six fights, he was 3 – 3, suffering a knockout loss to Glen Johnson before losing on points to Tarver in their third fight. Now, in the autumn of 2008, he was coming off three wins, most recently in a twelve round bout with Felix Trinidad.

On November 8, 2008, Madison Square Garden brought together two immortal talents. Roy insisted that he was back to his old form, and that Joe was not in his class. He was now 39, and Calzaghe, though the press made less note of it, was himself 36. Yet each man, on any given night, could work wonders, and the motivation factor made this something to see.

In the first round, it looked like the older man was right, when Roy unleashed a right hand and Joe toppled. In fact, though hidden from the view of referee Hubert Earle, this was a right hand coupled with a forearm that had Joe stunned and bleeding from the bridge of his nose. But it got Roy off to a hot start.

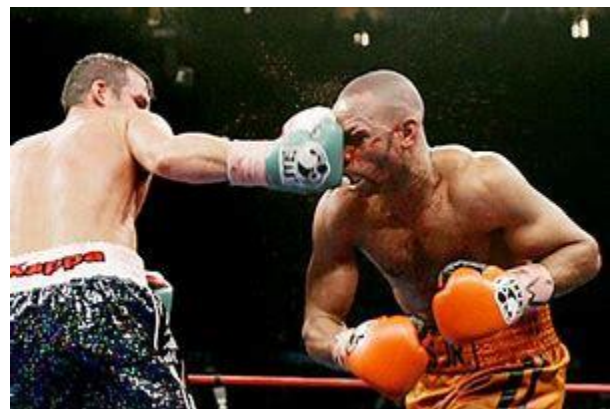
And it was the last time he would look like a winner this evening.

In the second, Joe started to get the better of it, but for one counter right that caught him square. At one point, he leaned into Roy, hands down, as if able all at once to anticipate anything Jones could do.

What came next were possibly the best three minutes of Joe Calzaghe's career. He jabbed Roy, came back with the left and the hook, inside and out, head and body, suddenly owning the ring and everything in it – *swamping* Jones, as one commentator put it, from every angle.



On this night Joe was a little of everything – a mix hectic and deliberate, prodding and pulling the old master into his signature dance. Hands up, hands down, tap, tap, and then *bang*, he would sneak a left lead or knife into Roy's flank with a right hand that seemed to shut down Jones' own left as the fight continued. In the last seconds of the third Roy tried a right hand and missed, then right again, and left, hitting nothing but air – the sheer reversal of a play in which he had long starred, casting him now as straight man for a savvier opponent.



The next few rounds were craftily waged, but with Calzaghe edging it with his unflagging output. It was always hard to hurt Joe as he got loose, starting to see and give a little with punches even when they caught him. Late in Round 6, between Calzaghe flurries, Jones nailed him flush on the mouth with a right uppercut that might have been the hardest punch of the fight. Joe was unfazed.

On a good night, the Welshman never tired. As this one wore on, it was Joe in bigger doses, a left hand in the seventh round slicing Roy, as he turned into it, over his left eye, and another left sending him into the ropes, blood showering half his face at the bell.

When the fight neared its close, Calzaghe pumped his legs like a high school yell leader, euphoric beyond containment as seconds ticked on the final minute of his career. Jones, glad to be still on his feet, was ready for the clang that would send him to the dressing room.

The point spread was enormous, a triumphal note on which to end a career that now tallied 46 – 0. Joe retired from the ring and remained victorious in that further contest facing all fighters who leave at the top. He entered into life’s wider domain and never looked back.

In 2010, seven years after his son had been made a Member of the British Empire, Enzo joined him in the honor. Now done with boxing, he returned to family life full time, with music still in his soul.



“He Kicked My Arse 24/7”

Music, in fact, had been the old man’s love prior to boxing, and it had taught him something about life in wider terms. While he was never, by his own estimate, more than a down-home twanger, Enzo came to see that it was crucial, no matter the level of proficiency, what an artist carried inside him. The Calzaghe boys had magnetism when they played to a live audience because they believed in what they were doing. If you had that, said Enzo, you could hop onstage after the Beatles (par for the course in his formative years) and rock the crowd all over again.

You needed something of this conviction, too, he maintained, in boxing, another avenue wherein faith, as the great Harvard sage William James always insisted, can be the wellspring of fact. Joe’s own style he saw as a kind of rhythmic composition. “I could never understand,” Enzo remarked, “why kids were taught to throw one-two ... on the bag. I would get Joe to throw four, five, six ... at a time ... I always looked at boxing like music, the combinations were the verses and two punches were for the chorus, *bang, bang* ... fight over.”

On September 17, 2018, Joe suffered the deepest loss of his life when Enzo departed this world at the age of 69. Life would never be the same. But the old man had left behind quite a legacy.

“He kicked my arse 24/7,” said Joe recently to Paul Zanon in a piece for the British **Boxing Monthly**, driving his son to be more than Joe ever imagined. It was Enzo who started him on his voyage when he was nine, and Enzo who moved him to face the challenge of the dreaded Jeff Lacy, when Joe was at a low point, with words that still resonate in his heart:

“This fight is going to put you to the next level. This is what you’ve been waiting for all these years. You can beat this guy [one-handed]. Don’t waste this opportunity ... you have to fight and show the world how good you are.”

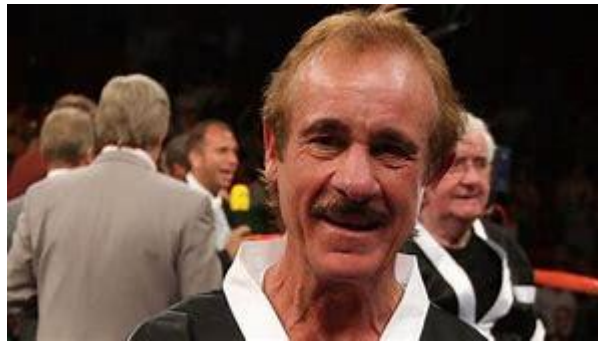
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More than a decade later, Joe continues to make a graceful transition. While he has interests outside boxing, his aptitude and skill set have him in demand within it as well. “I’ve had a lot of world class fighters coming to me asking to manage and train them,” he told Zanon, “but I wasn’t in the right place a couple of years ago.”

More recently Joe has lent his support to efforts to curb bullying in the schools. He has also spoken out about the problems that fighters, and athletes in general, often face with the letdown that comes with retirement from a starring role. Meanwhile, the old Newbridge gymnasium has been upgraded to accommodate new business. His sons Connor and Joe, Jr., are on board and entering into the game at a modest level.

When it came time in 2014 for Joe to receive, on his first ballot, the ultimate honor of induction into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in Canastota, he and Enzo were overjoyed to make the trip.

Yet Canastota, Joe says looking back now, was more for his father than for himself. It has been hard since his father's passing, he admits, yet Enzo's undying love remains with the family – "Dad's looking down ... and making sure I keep the gym going in his memory."



Enzo Calzaghe 1949 – 2018

Note: Most of the quotes in this story have been taken from the autobiographical books *Joe Calzaghe: No Ordinary Joe* (Century Books, 2007, with Brian Doogan) and *Enzo Calzaghe: A Fighting Life* (Great Northern, 2012, with Michael Pearlman).

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