

# IN THE SHADOWS

Former world champion boxer Shannan Taylor has fought many tough fights but none harder than to rebuild his shattered life. It's a battle he is determined to win.

By **William Verity**  
Photography by **David Tease**

**I**t should have been the greatest triumph of my short and otherwise inglorious boxing career. It was in the fourth round of sparring with former world champion Shannan Taylor that I knocked him down with a left jab. He tottered uncertainly at first, shuddering from the blow, before crashing to the canvas. I felt like Cassius Clay in that famous photo before he became Muhammad Ali, standing over a prone Sonny Liston in that triumphant pose after he floored the champion in 1965.

Even my cornerman, the gym manager, was surprised. Just 20 minutes earlier, as he had strapped on my gloves, he gave me (a middle-aged office worker and rank amateur) little hope of survival, let alone success.

"Just jab mate, jab, jab, jab. Keep him away as much as possible. I reckon that's your only hope."

Yet to my dismay, while there was sympathy and concern for Shannan, there was precious little glory for me. "You pillock!" my wife later said. "You could have killed him."

Because, although it was less than a year after Shannan's last

professional fight, when he won the World Boxing Foundation world title, he was a shadow of his former self.

On the night of November 27 2011, he had gone on a bender that began with schooners of Toohey's New at midday and had ended that night at his manager's house, snorting what he thought was cocaine. It turned out to be high-grade heroin that came within a whisker of killing him.

He was found early the next morning, slumped in an easy chair by the spa, his skin so dark you could not make out the outline of his son's name tattooed onto his neck. The paramedic who arrived within minutes of the emergency call had trained with Shannan but couldn't recognise his former coach.

The boxer was severely brain damaged from a lack of oxygen and was just minutes from death. Yet when the paramedic administered adrenalin – a shot that in others would have caused nothing more than a lazy groan – Shannan's instinctive reaction was instant. He sat bolt upright and held his fists before his face

Shannan Taylor  
contemplates  
life ringside.



Although medics gave him little chance of survival (and several news outlets reported his death that morning) it was perhaps that moment that gave the first glimmer of hope.

His friend and former coach, three-times world champion Jeff Fenech would later give Shannan the ultimate compliment.

"If we got jumped by 50 guys there won't be one of you fighting, there'll be two," Fenech said. "He'll fight with you to the death. That's what you want in a friend and it's why I love him so much.

"I say to Shannan: 'Close the book, boxing is done, mate. You've got nothing to prove, you've just won the greatest fight of your life.'"

The first time I saw Shannan, a few years before, he came upon me slowly, like an angel of death. As he approached down the darkened gym corridor, his black hood was draped over his head so his eyes were sunk in a pool of shadow.

He carried himself with the gliding quality of a body at ease with itself; a muscled frame that is both relaxed and ready, shoulders swaying in time with the step, knees bent and thighs tight, fists lightly clenched and swinging, ready for action.

I had come to boxing late, taking up the sport after learning that my father had terminal cancer and would die within a year. Around that time I met a boxing coach and former male stripper with one leg and three mothers (it's a long story). He persuaded me to sign up for a fundraising night in aid of the local gym, which specialised in teaching sport to disadvantaged kids.

"I'll train you every lunchtime," the trainer said. "You'll get free gym



Manning the pads for MF's William Verity.

membership, I'll even give you an old pair of boxing gloves."

So for the following six months I punched bags, worked my way around the weights room, started skipping for the first time (harder than it looks), and learned how to hit and be hit. It wasn't long before the smell of stale sweat was following me and I started to wear deodorant for the first time since my teen hormones had calmed down.

The gym sessions were, however, having good results. I lost only a few kilos in the first weeks, but my body changed shape so my belt buckle migrated from the second hole to fifth. It changed how I walked, stood and met the world.

Then my stripper coach fell out with the gym manager and left, leaving me training on my own until – six weeks before the overdose –



Shannan remains determined to regain his fitness.

I bumped into Shannan and asked him to recommend a coach.

"I'll do it," he said.

"And how much do you charge?"

"I'll charge nothing," he said. "You can write about me in the newspaper."

And so we started training once a week until he almost died. When he came home in January 2012, after 47 days in hospital that included a week in a coma and weeks learning how to walk with a frame, I went to see him and said I was still up for it, if he was.

"How about we do a book instead of a newspaper article?" I said.

So, once a week, we climb into the ring and Shannan teaches me combinations of punches holding the pads; one for a jab, two for a straight right, three for a left hook, four for a right uppercut.

He's taught me the sharp rip with the left to the soft area under the ribs (the "liver punch") that can floor an opponent quicker than any other.

He's taught me the left-right combination that's won him countless pub fights – left to soften them up, then a crushing right to the jaw line. One time he did that and

**"Boxing is a dance – you use the body's movement to launch the punches. Imagine your elbows are cannons firing the shots."**

broke a man's jaw so cleanly the bone fragment dropped into the loose fold of skin around the jawline.

He's taught me how to absorb your opponent's body punch and spring off it to counter-punch with a right to the head. He's taught me the importance of a strong defence.


"Boxing is a dance – you use the body's movement to launch the punches," he says. "Imagine your elbows are cannons firing the shots. That's where your power is coming from. Remember, speed is power."

Unlike some coaches he's not that into weights, he was taught by legendary Sydney trainer George Daldry about the power of cardio work.

It's how Shannan is slowly regaining his fitness. He's only able to complete a 5km run or spar for five or six three-minute rounds. In the old days, he would run up the 5km steep hill behind his house, do 500 sit-ups and 500 press-ups, then run down. And then go to the gym.

At 40, Shannan is gradually coming to terms with the fact his boxing career is over. Despite the many hits he's taken, he is still standing and the fighter remains remarkably positive about life.

"I get emotional days ... but I'm one of those guys who just believes in getting out and doing it."

Maybe next time we get into the ring, I won't be so lucky. 

*William Verity's biography of Shannan Taylor, The Fighter, is due to be published in 2013.*

### SHANNAN TAYLOR'S WORKOUT REGIMEN IN HIS PRIME

**Monday am:** 10km run; 500 sit-ups; 300 push-ups in sets of 50.

**pm:** 90-minute workout: heavy bags, speed balls, floor-to-ceiling, 10 minutes skipping, 300 sit-ups in sets of 100.

**Tuesday am:** 10 x 200m sprints with 30-second breaks; 500 sit-ups; 300 push-ups in sets of 50.

**pm:** sparring 10 three-minute rounds, 30-second breaks.

**Wednesday am:** 8km run; 400 sit-ups; 200 push-ups in sets of 50.

**pm:** 90-minute workout: heavy bags, speed balls, floor-to-ceiling, 15 minutes skipping, 400 sit-ups in sets of 100.

**Thursday am:** 10 x 300m sprints with 45-second break.

**pm:** sparring 10 three-minute rounds, 30-second breaks.

**Friday am:** 5km run; 300 sit-ups; 100 push-ups in sets of 50.

**pm:** 90-minute workout: heavy bags, speed balls, floor-to-ceiling, 20 minutes skipping, 500 sit-ups in sets of 100.

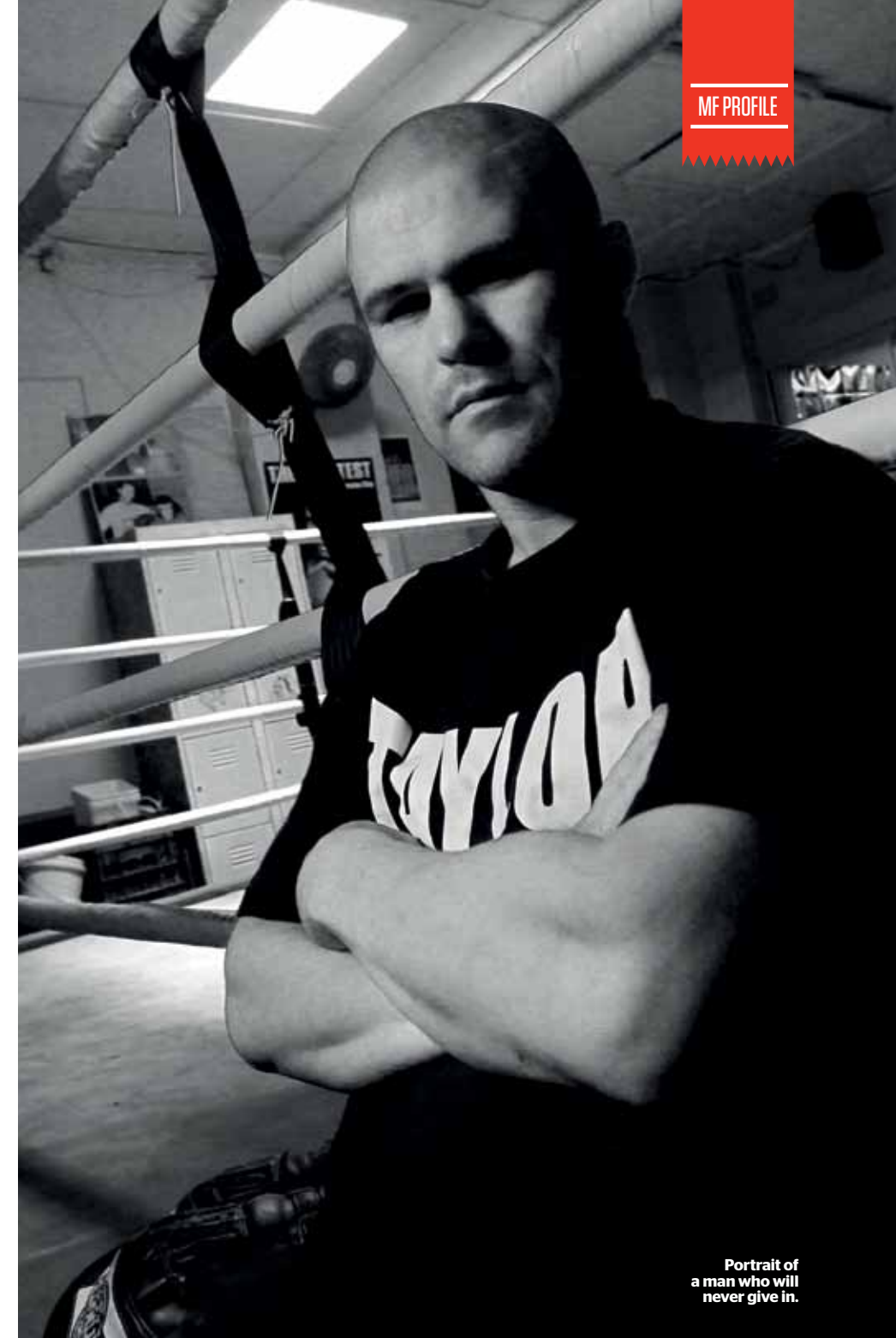
**Saturday am:** 10 x 400m sprints with 60-second breaks. 500 sit-ups; 300 push-ups in sets of 50.

**pm:** rest.

**Sunday:** Rest day.



Mixing it with Anthony Mundine in 2009.



Portrait of a man who will never give in.

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