

# The Man Behind The Art

After a brief period as the trainer of Nico Ali Walsh, Richard T Slone, a protege of both Joe Frazier and Emanuel Steward, tells **Declan Warrington** how he is again focusing full-time on the art that is recognised around the world





WHEN last year Richard T Slone painted Joe Frazier fighting Muhammad Ali to mark the 50th anniversary of The Fight of the Century, it was the first time since Frazier's death he had used his art to express his admiration for the figure he credits with teaching him "how to be a man".

Twenty-seven years earlier, on the occasion of the late heavyweight's 50th birthday, Slone's first ever published piece also focused on "Smokin' Joe", and introduced the remarkable talents until then kept secret from the boxing community he for so long had admired, and which has ever since increasingly lauded his work.

Slone, 48, of Barrow, Cumbria, left England aged 16 to pursue an offer from Frazier to live at his gym in Philadelphia, and ultimately his dream to fight. Over the following 10 years they instead forged the closest of friendships, and though the professional boxing career he longed for never followed, a perhaps altogether more rewarding experience – as confidantes to both Frazier and the similarly great Emanuel Steward, friends to numerous other fighters, and recognition as the most successful boxing artist of all – ultimately did.

It was Steward he first befriended, having written to him as a teenager and made enough of an impression to receive an invitation to assist him when Steward was travelling with Leonzer Barber for a fight with Tom Collins in 1991 at Leeds Town Hall. The seminal first meeting with Frazier followed, by when Slone's independence had already opened some significant doors.

"All of the Brits thought I was American 'cause I had a Kronk shirt on," recalls Slone. "[Gradually] we

did multiple fights; Dennis Andries losing a close decision to [Jeff] Harding at the Hammersmith Odeon; Gerald McClellan fought [John] Mugabi at the Royal Albert Hall. I thought I knew everything – now I realise I didn't know much – but at that time I was on top of the world.

"[I was] liaison, water boy; whatever they needed. I'll never forget one of the things that really impressed me with Emanuel. He left me in his room – the fight purse was there, and all of his gold rings, and he had such trust and faith in me that he just left me there with it. He didn't know me so well; he was a very, very trusting, special person to me. We just had a bond that's unbreakable.

"[Frazier] was promoting [documentary] *Champions Forever*. I was training at the Thomas A Becket Gym [in London]. One Saturday afternoon someone said, 'Joe Frazier's here'. I thought, 'That's bullshit'. He walked through the door in his Stetson hat; everybody stopped, but I kept hitting the bag until the bell was over, and he just gravitated to me. He said, 'That was good; you didn't stop'.

"We just hit it off. 'When you get to 18, if you want to fight, here's my number.' 'Why do I have to wait until I'm 18?' 'Well, you gotta finish school.' 'You can finish school at 16 in England – I'll quit.' 'No, no, no. You must finish school, then I'll allow you to come.' I phoned him, phoned him, phoned him – he phoned me back, and later that year I was there. I finished school – I didn't wait for my results; to this day I have no idea what my results were – and I arrived on my own in Philly.

"I got a call from his secretary about a week before. 'Richard, I know this thing's going down, but I can't sleep at night. This is the worst ghetto in America. You won't make it. You'll be the only

**BRUSH WITH GREATNESS:** His own dreams of boxing are a thing of the distant past, but Slone continues to paint the biggest fights and fighters, such as Errol Spence v Shawn Porter in 2019

white guy in a few-mile radius; there's robberies; crimes; crack cocaine has really taken off. Wait until you're an adult. Please.' I'm sorry, I'm coming."

"At first, I got along with Marvis [Frazier] better. I thought Joe was really hard. But it wasn't long before Joe and I just got along like a house on fire. We had the same philosophies; the same work ethic; beliefs; loyalties. I was an amateur heavyweight. I was short, and not a slick boxer of any sort; Joe liked the hard work.

"I'd call home once in a while. Not as much as I was supposed to have. I wasn't honest with anybody about [Philadelphia], because they'd get scared, and there was no need to be scared, and they'd think I was crazy. Once Joe started believing in me, and once I started seeing results in the gym, I really thought I could go all the way."

Steward retained his faith in Slone to such a degree that they remained in contact to the point of Slone travelling to Atlantic City to work with him for further fights. His artwork, like his boxing abilities, also continued to evolve and, unlike with the fighting ambitions he remained committed to, his unsettled immigration status didn't prevent him from demonstrating that his talent was unique.

"We did exhibition [fights] all the time," he says. "Joe took care of me [financially], and I had some jobs, cash in hand, and sometimes bartering. I was here 90 days the first time; I went home once, and I've never been back since."

"One of the survival methods I had was to go to the rich areas of Philadelphia, the restaurants, and do sketches and watercolours and sell them. As I was there, one of America's most popular people, Oprah Winfrey, walked past with her dogs. So, I got to meet a lot of people.

"My first published piece was '94, at Joe's 50th birthday party hosted by Donald Trump. I sold maybe 1,000 pieces of that – there's still a few out there on the internet – Joe really gave me my break, and '96 was my first cover.

"[I lived] on the second floor of Joe Frazier's Gym. We had some old mattresses back there – it was a warehouse, and there were four or five fighters. Back then was the tail-end of the Philadelphia gym wars. I was in the gym daily with Meldrick Taylor, Bernard Hopkins, Michael Spinks, Tex Cobb, Bert Cooper. Our gym was packed. [There were] rats. No hot water, no stove – we had a hot plate. People tried to break in at night; Joe had firearms; there was a few times we had to borrow them, just in case.

"Once Joe got injured in '95, that was a big wakeup call for me, I'd been in the US for years. Having worked Gerald [McClellan's] corner, and seen the state he was in after that – [it] was kind of scary. Watching so many other fighters struggle financially, and getting screwed over by the game, and hearing stories of how treacherous boxing can be... Emanuel seemed like a shining light; he'd got a business; he'd got a structure; so I started spending more time around Emanuel's crew, and promised Joe I'd never, ever box for Emanuel because I had a handshake agreement with Joe.

"I was probably 26 [when I totally gave up on

fighting], but because I don't have a professional record I don't know exactly when it was. There were times I'd take a month off and come back in for two months. Joe always wanted me to fight, until we came to a casino here [in Las Vegas]. 'Joe, I think I'm ready.' 'No, son. Give it up.' My word was I wouldn't box under anybody else. I tried to get Emanuel and Joe to work my corner together, which would have appeased everybody, but it didn't work out. Emanuel was for it, but Joe wasn't so much.

"I [also] turned down some scholarships. Even in Philadelphia, people tried to convince me to quit boxing and focus on art. I had a scholarship at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, which is a really big school. It's hundreds of years old. But I had no interest in that. I don't want somebody to teach me what colour should go where. I hated when Joe would say, 'This guy's a great artist'. I wanted him to say, 'This guy's a great fighter'."

Slone's value to Steward was such that his involvement soon extended beyond fight nights, contributing to him increasingly dividing his time between Philadelphia and The Kronk in Detroit, where he assisted in the training of fighters and even occasionally acted as matchmaker for, among others, Andy Lee and Tommy Hearn. Lennox Lewis became another fighter with whom

Slone started an enduring friendship, and, by 1997, when he was appointed vice-president of The Kronk, he was living in Detroit full-time.

"Emanuel always had a really, really big team, from trainers to staff," he says. "He was an industry. Kronk was a machine. So I fit in very, very well, and eventually became vice-president. Emanuel was the president. At some point I left Philadelphia; went and stayed with Emanuel. I always kept my room in Philly; a lot of our training camps with Lennox and Naseem [Hamed],

and even Wladimir [Klitschko], would be in the Poconos, which is only an hour-and-a-half outside of Philly, so I'd go back at the weekends and hang out with Joe. I never could get Joe to go to a training camp.

"When I said I was going to work with Emanuel, he said: 'You're just like the rest of those sons a bitches. Now I teach you how to fight, you're going to hit the door.' Joe had groomed so many great fighters, and they all left. He thought I was another letdown who was going to make money and leave him behind – I couldn't do it.

"Joe didn't want to deal with the people in boxing anymore. He was happy enough living the simple life and doing it his way. I was there when he was dying, at a very hidden location. Some of his family weren't even allowed to see him before he passed away, and Joe wanted to see me and make sure that if something was to happen to him, I would be one of the few who would carry him. He always gave me the utmost respect; I've got written notes where he's called me his 'white son'. He didn't say 'I love you' much, but I was fortunate he told me that, and I believed him.

"I was filing voids with Emanuel, and helped some of his fighters turn professional in Philadelphia because of some of my connections, and I also gave him some tips that Joe gave me in training that he used with some fighters, and

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vice-versa – I'd take some stuff from Kronk, back to Philly, and work on that. Absolutely [the wars in the Kronk were as is suggested], but I can't say they were any harder than anything I'd seen in Philly.

"Emanuel was professional all the way through. The pre-fight dressing room was another day at the office. If you prepare well, the fights are won at the gym. It's just a formality once you get to the arena. You've got the cut solution; the ice; the playlist. It comes down to the simple things.

"With Lennox [in the Poconos], we were all within walking distance of each other at any given time, playing chess; barbecuing; playing video games; shooting pool. We had some real good characters in those camps, too, whether they were from London or America and had chequered pasts.

"[And my art] was doing really well. I was working with Bert Sugar, and all the top magazines. I did the programme covers for Lennox and [Evander] Holyfield; Lewis and [Michael] Grant; I designed a clothing line for Lennox; I did some stuff on Naseem Hamed. The art was a really big part of it. My first sale in Las Vegas was Lennox Lewis and David Tua. I bought a piece out that the chief financial officer of the Mandalay Bay ended up buying."

It was also in 1997 that Slone, having by then been commissioned by active fighters, *The Ring*, and the WBA, was recruited for the first time to paint for the International Boxing Hall of



**TSZYU V HATTON:** Slone's pre-fight piece captures the anticipated intensity of The Hitman's signature victory in 2005

Fame. "I've done it ever since," he says. "It's the hardest way to make an easy living. The biggest thing, in '99, was Lewis-Holyfield in New York. I did a page in the programme, and it got the New York art critics really excited. On the East Coast – for the last 14 years I've been based on the west – everybody knew [about my work]. People wanted to buy prints; people wanted certain fighters painted.

"But I only paint a certain level of fighter. If I paint you, it's because I respect what you've accomplished. I'm not going to paint just for money. You won't find me painting a bullshit fight or a bullshit fighter. It's just not what I'll do. It was 90 per cent boxing – I was very busy with Emanuel

and his crew of fighters – and 10 per cent artwork. We had so many deals going on that could have been huge – management and promotional deals. This was right before Golden Boy started; we were going to do a big promotional company, under Emanuel, that never came to fruition, so my mind was really focused on boxing.

"After Lennox retired [in 2003], The Kronk went through some changes. Things got a little sticky [Slone ceased being vice-president in 2005]. We did some promotions in Phoenix – it was Kronk Promotions. Ray Beltran was our prospect; he broke his jaw in his second fight; nobody believed in him, but we got him back on his feet, and he eventually went to train with Freddie Roach. I was there when Andy [Lee] signed his deal in Chicago. But I just wanted to move out west and pursue the art stuff more.

"I moved to Vegas in 2008. Emanuel and I stayed on the phone every day. It was just a location. Eventually, out here, the artwork got so great that boxing faded away. Right up until the end, we always talked about getting everything back together and doing this stuff. I knew he was sick when in one conversation he didn't even bring it up. 'Is there anything you need, Emanuel?' Just pray for me."

By the time of that move, the reputation of Slone the artist had grown further. Ricky Hatton had become another close friend; Denzel Washington, Pamela Anderson and Nelson Mandela owners of his work.

"I torture myself when I'm not painting," he says. "I get in a certain zone when I'm painting that I don't get anywhere else in life, except maybe in the boxing ring. It fills a void I don't find elsewhere, and it's that one-on-one challenge. It's like a fight – you're losing against the painting, because it's not what you want, but then it's your job to turn it around and figure it out. I'll fix it; I don't start again. Now I can afford to buy more than one canvas; there was a time I'd have to paint the same canvas over and over, because I couldn't afford more than one.

"[I paint at] night time, to music – I'm a big country fan. Anything lyrical. It has to have a story; something that I admire. It's the lyrics. I can't paint to stuff that has no meaning to me. Very often [I'll paint until the sun comes up without having gone to bed].

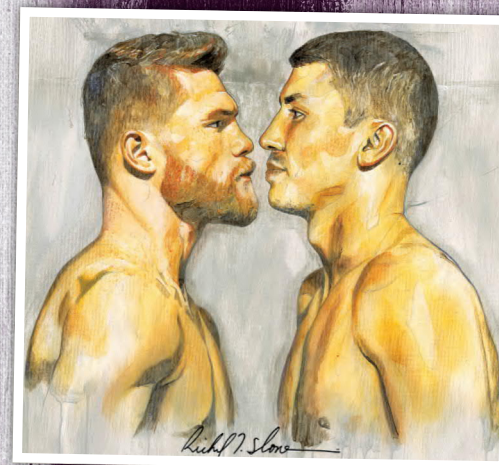
"When I run into somebody I wouldn't expect knows my artwork, and they say, 'Hey, my uncle bought a piece of yours a long time ago' – that's where the reward comes in. It's a surprise. It's not when you're expected to do a big fight and you're there; it's those moments when you get caught off-guard. It could be at the airport. 'You did this – thank you.'

"I try to do everybody justice without being disrespectful. I don't think there's a profession out there that I respect more than being a prizefighter.

"I think because of my respect for fighters, they feel that, and I just fit in with them like I've known them for years. Especially the English guys. My father knew Fury's people long before Tyson was born, and we're similar kind of people. Hard-working. My grandmother [was from travelling stock]; my great-grandfather was from Dublin. My father being a blacksmith and a horseman – my mother was a seamstress – as a kid I'd fight at Appleby Fair.

"I think it'll live on beyond me – that's what feels good. People will keep that thing going. One day, that'll be the segment of boxing history that I couldn't fulfil in the ring." ■

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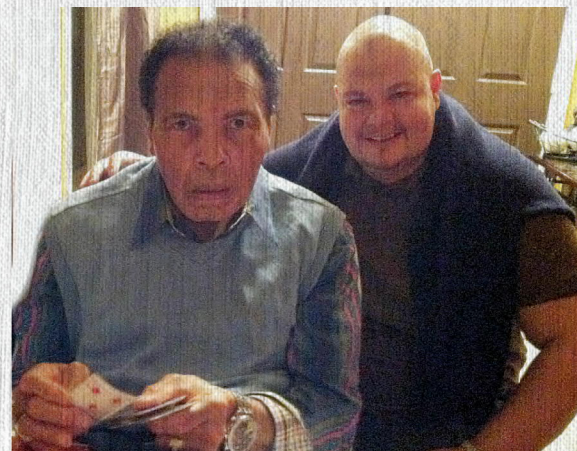


## His Biggest fan

A German lawyer bought the first of 38 pieces by Slone after the artist relaxed his own rules

IT had long been Richard T Slone's policy to give the fighters he had painted the first option of investing in his art. Since September 2017, however, and more specifically the build-up to Saul Alvarez-Gennady Golovkin I, German lawyer Ingo Wegerich has perhaps become the most prolific collector of Slone's work after persuading him to relax his rule by explaining his vision for building a collection of, and ultimately overseeing an exhibition about, the painter's art.

"[The Alvarez-Golovkin painting cost me] five figures," Wegerich, who most recently paid for art from the International Boxing Hall of Fame, told *Boxing News*. "I love his art, and I want to make it bigger, so that it's more known outside of boxing. I have 38 of his paintings. It's just the start. I'm not looking to sell. It's also something personal. We're staging a vernissage on September 22 in Frankfurt. My goal is to make an exhibition, and tell people the history of boxing art – maybe in England, or USA, maybe Las Vegas or Madison Square Garden."



**LEGENDS:** Slone has met many of the greatest names in the sport, from Don King [left] to Muhammad Ali [above] and his great friend Joe Frazier [below], who called Slone his 'white son'

