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Memoir

Bully's sporting chance

by [Paul Mitchell](#)

ONLY A GENEROUS observer would have said I was dancing around the ring. A less generous one, the one I'd become after watching my filmed efforts on my boxing trainer's iPhone, said I was 'frankensteining' the ring. My lumbering, T-shirt-tanned frame was swatting at the focus pads that Chris – my lean, smiling and properly tanned trainer – held up. The footage was unequivocal. I was hitting the pads at a much slower rate than I'd thought. As we watched my clumsy moves, Chris, a former Victorian welterweight champion, offered me his take on the sweet science.

'Sooner or later, Paul, you've got to get into the hitting zone,' he said with a grin accentuated by a huge white mouth guard. 'That's not a bad straight right, but you've got to keep your left up,' he added, explaining other technical problems. It was a long list and I nodded and panted. Then we started up again.

'Squat down when you punch. And really let your ribs go.'

Yarraville's The Gym had its next 'Boxing Challenge' in about three months time. I had to decide soon whether I was going to fill in the forms and go into proper training for a bout. The date for the challenge hadn't been set, but my birthdate had been. More than forty years ago.

I'd started boxing classes five years previously. I'd told myself it was just for fitness. But I'd become increasingly interested in technique, and what it might mean to take those skills into the ring.

'Did your father box?' Chris asked as we sparred one day.

'No,' I puffed. 'But my grandfather and uncle did.'

'Boxing sometimes skips a generation.'

When I boxed, I tried to channel the good energy my grandfather and uncle had occasionally exhibited. They were flawed men.

That's a weak jab at the truth: my grandfather Bill and my uncle Greg, from my mother's side, were alcoholics. Who abused women. Who often treated them as sex objects and figures for ridicule.

My grandfather also abused his relatives physically and psychologically. Before he married Mum, Dad was watching his soon-to-be brother-in-law, Greg, bat at Horsham Oval. Dad said something critical about Greg's technique. Bill grabbed Dad by the throat and said, 'Don't you fuckin' talk about my son like that.' When Bill let go, Dad thought, *What the hell have I got myself into here?*

A dynasty. Bill and Greg (with his brothers Wayne and Gary) were supremely talented sportsmen. From 1942 to 1974 – when alcoholism forced Greg's retirement from cricket, boxing and football – Bill and Greg were, according to varied sources, also two of the toughest sportsmen Victoria had seen. Greg could have played in the then VFL or represented Victoria at cricket. It's said he even had the skill for the Test arena. But he had the mindset for the pub's front bar.

'He put two blokes in hospital in his first five overs once,' Dad told me. 'Luckily he could only bowl five overs in any innings, once the grog got hold of him.'

Mum said Greg's later divorces gave him an extra reason to get on the booze. He

ended up homeless in Portland before Mum and my late grandmother peeled him off a park bench and into my grandma's home in the Geelong suburb of Belmont. He lived there with Bill and they drank together.

They were both outstanding fighters, in and out of the ring. Bill won his army division's boxing title in Crete. He was sixteen, on active service with a fake ID. His divisional boxing opponents probably wished he'd been caught out. Greg was famous for fighting Jimmy Sharman's boxers. The Aboriginal troupe visited the Horsham district in the late 1960s and Greg defeated all comers.

I tried to channel their talent and skill. As I skipped and jabbed and sparred, I wished I were fifteen. I wished, at least, that I'd taken up boxing a long time ago. But boxers are told that thinking about the past, that last exchange, will find you flat on your back in the ring. In life? Not so. Without the past, without memory, we're nothing. Musician Nick Cave said recently his greatest fear was losing his memory.

My greatest fear is failure.

BOXING HAD MADE me fitter than ten years previously. And more relaxed. Just knowing what I *didn't* know about the sport gave me humility and patience with myself. Patience that was extending to others. I was channelling my anger into the mitts and bags. All the anger from my childhood.

My grandfather was about my age now when he tore me from his fibro one-bedroom flat as a six-year-old and threatened to beat my head in. He told me to put my dukes up, and moved into his boxing stance expertly. I had apparently said something to shame my mother. My father was inside. He didn't come out and I was angry about that for a long time. But looking around the gym at quality fighters, and what they could do with a punch in a millisecond, I better understood Dad's reticence to get off the couch.

The same Dad who put a knife in my face and threatened to kill my brothers and me over the breakfast table the next year.

My grandfather didn't hit me. And Dad didn't stab me. But those events weakened me for a long time. And when I went to training, I still sometimes saw my late grandfather's face on the bag or in the focus pad. But it didn't last long. More often I think I was trying to prove to him that I could do this, I could box: *Hey look Billy Boy, look at that jab, look at that cross!* He'd tried to teach me once. Along with his fighting genes, he'd given me some drunken lessons after that first dukes-up affair: *Hit 'em on the bridge of the nose before they expect it, laddie, get their eyes waterin'. Then bang 'em with an uppercut and its lights out.*

But despite his madness, his throwing plates at my grandmother, his abuse of her, his threats, his acting out on those threats, I knew – and I even knew while he was doing those things – that my grandfather loved me.

He converted to Christianity on his deathbed. He told me as I sat beside him how sorry he was for all the pain he'd caused everyone: *Don't go beating on your family like I did.* He died peacefully. Gary Ablett Senior visited him before that, amazed at my grandfather's sporting feats. I'd have backed Bill in a fight when both he and Ablett were in their primes. And no one tried it on with Gary Ablett Senior.

I never saw my father's face on a boxing bag or focus pad. I forgave him long ago. Because Dad didn't know how to be good to himself in the kitchen of my childhood, or how to function as a father beyond what he referred to as earning a quid and getting my brothers and me through high school. He's seventy-one now. And a quality grandfather.

At his sixtieth birthday party, he explained that his mother hadn't wanted him, and his dad had hardly talked to him. In his country-town home, Dad was basically mothered by a neighbour over the back fence. His real mother died in 1975. Dad's neighbour came to his sixtieth, which was held in my brother Aaron's shed. Dad called his neighbour 'Aunty'. But he beamed as he showed her around to people as if she were his mum, because she was.

MY WIFE SAID I shouldn't fight in the ring. What if I got a broken nose? Or jaw? Or got knocked out, got brain damage? I told friends that when you take up

a sport you should push yourself to your limits. What was one fight? I had played tennis to the highest level of which I was capable. Last check, that had been Melbourne Pennant Grade 7, and A-Grade Men's night competition.

I'd have to train harder than I had for tennis, obviously. I was no mathematician, but I reckoned I'd have to train about fifty times harder. To fight three three-minute rounds successfully without collapsing (regardless of whether anyone was hitting me), I'd need to be fit enough to survive six. That was the rule. Be fit enough to fight double the amount of rounds you have to. Have enough in the tank when the going gets rugged. Be hard enough in body that the rips to the stomach won't floor you. Despite aching shoulders, be strong enough to keep your hands above your nose for the entire bout so your defence is solid.

That was the theory. Hard to achieve when you're my age. Easier when you're in primary school and you're fit and malleable. I watched the young kids training at The Gym and I wished my father or grandfather had taken me to the ring.

MY UNCLE GREG sexually abused my younger brother Justin, who was then in his last year of primary school. Justin didn't tell me about it until he was thirty-five. That was when he was able to tell himself. When he realised that his anger – his bar brawls and road rage assaults, his abuse of his estranged wife and his killing of family pets – had its foundation in the abuse he'd received from his uncle.

I didn't get angry with my late uncle. But he wasn't mine to forgive. My brother, saint that he is, forgave him. He was even at Greg's hospital bedside when he died, stomach bloated, choking on his own faeces because his body, destroyed by emphysema and liver damage, wouldn't allow his waste its normal exit.

He did not die peacefully. He did not, my mother said, want to go. He fought until the end and then gripped the sheets until his body stiffened.

I used to visit Greg every time he went into hospital. I wanted to show him God's love because that's what mattered to me then. Where my love fitted in, I'm not sure. But no matter how cloudy my motivations, I know Greg appreciated the fresh air of me being there with him.

Ah, you're a good lad.

Because of what he'd done to my brother, I couldn't bring myself to visit him during his last days in hospital. But I wasn't angry. And that disappointed me. It still does. Why didn't I see his face on a mitt? In public, I had treated Greg as I always had, with a nudge and a smile: *Look at this guy, almost on his deathbed, but still checking out the girls.* He was emaciated and no threat to anyone. He was also scared.

I was at my daughter's senior school rowing regatta when he died. I was standing under a gum tree near the Barwon River, watching Hannah and her crew manoeuvre their boat back onto its rack after another win. They were the power crew of their division – super fit and ridiculously girly with pink ribbons in their hair. Justin rang me and gave me the news. I asked him how he was feeling.

'Yeah, I'm all right,' he said, but his voice was slow and drawn. An unexpected wave of grief came over me as I looked at my fit and athletic daughter, high-fiving her crew.

Do we have spirits? If we do, how do they leave bodies? Questions for theologians and crystal shop operators, but I looked high into a ghost gum, the trees so prevalent in Greg's Wimmera birthplace, and a crow cawed loudly. I couldn't take my eyes off it and it wouldn't stop its racket.

UNCLE REG BLOW died four years ago. Too soon, like so many Aboriginal elders. The silver fox was known internationally as a peacemaker between religions and cultures. I was lucky enough to meet and work with him. He loved boxing. He fought in the ring, and photographs of him as a younger man showed him in a cap like Rocky Marciano's. He told me, 'Life's like boxing, Paul. You gotta give more than you take.'

I was out of breath at the end of every class. Giving of my body in the hope it gave me something back: fitness. And self-confidence. Enough to stop fights like

the one I'd seen when I was in Grade 5.

A game of modified rounders in the quadrangle. Nicky Roberts, a curly blond, batting his way into the record books. We can't get him out because he is *never* out unless the ball cannons into the cardboard box we use as a wicket.

Mick Burnett is a quiet, slight boy with dark features. He bowls to Nicky and the ball hits Nicky's corduroy leg halfway up, directly in front of the cardboard. The LBW appeal comes from our team, Nicky gives himself not out and that should be the end of it.

'You're a cheat, Roberts,' Burnett says.

'What did you say?'

Nicky Roberts is the toughest kid in school; even the Grade 6ers don't go near him.

'Said you're a cheat.'

'Get fucked Burnett, you wimp.'

'You're still a cheat,' Mick Burnett says.

Roberts drops his bat and puts Burnett in a headlock. He belts into the skinny boy's face, time after time. I have never seen a real fight, but I know instinctively this one is going on too long. But no one dares intervene.

Burnett's nose and mouth bleed. He looks tired, but he remains on his feet, arms wrapped round his head, taking a pounding. I can't watch anymore, but I do. And I'm glad I don't turn away because Roberts loses concentration and Burnett gets a punch in. Roberts falls backwards, holding his nose, a trickle of blood emerging from it. There is a muted cry from the crowd. Burnett fires a quick round of punches, some into Roberts's chest, some trying to reach the face the blond boy is covering adeptly. Roberts pushes Burnett off balance then picks up the rounders bat, a smaller version of the one used for cricket, and hits Burnett in the face with it.

I don't remember how the fight ended. I have a sense it only stopped because Roberts got tired. I remember Burnett's bloodied face and the weird appearance of a huge yellow glob of phlegm above his top lip.

Nicky Roberts had to face the principal that afternoon. The idea seemed strange then and ridiculous now. The principal was his dad.

I hope Mick Burnett is all right now. But he probably isn't. We don't forget that kind of violence. We forgive it, maybe. But we don't forget it.

'LOOK AT YOU, watching a boxing show,' my wife, Jo, said one night.

The show was Channel 31's *KO Boxing*. Low-fi. Some clunky interviews and dodgy footage of local fights. But I can't afford Foxtel, where the main fights happen. That's probably a good thing. I might turn into a man like Michael Kozalek, a US indie musician a bit older than me. He watches televised fights in bed with his girlfriend, then puts details of the fights into the lyrics of his songs. Along with details of watching the fight in bed with his girlfriend.

I haven't written boxing poems. I wrote a short story about my grandfather threatening to beat me up. And fact-meets-fiction poems and stories about him and my uncle Greg. Those poems have shown up in books. But I don't write poems with lines about straight rights or left hooks, or the way to weave when an opponent is coming at you, both fists blazing.

The dodgy boxing show ended and I went to bed. With my wife.

I boxed because I was scared.

I wasn't scared of ghosts, my grandfather's or my uncle's. Though I was scared of turning into one of them. Especially as I watched my hair thin and my face begin to sag. I wasn't scared of Nicky Roberts or his ilk. I wasn't scared of anyone.

Except my middle brother, Aaron. And I had decided to do something about it. Because, unfortunately, being rational and calm and all the right things hadn't stopped me from feeling scared.

Not long after I got together with Jo, Aaron assaulted me in the driveway of his Geelong house. He was angry because he thought I was acting like a privileged shithead from Melbourne. I probably was. Not communicating with him or his wife or my mum when I left my two kids from my previous marriage at his house for babysitting.

Aaron had a great relationship with my ex-wife. He never said it, but he missed her, and he hated the fact that we'd divorced. He threw me against his ute and I held his arms. He tried to wrestle free and I kept holding his arms. At that time I'd been attending boxercise classes, the poor cousins of boxing training. I'd been strong enough to hold the burly fella back, but boxercise would have been useless for technique. I wouldn't have known what to do if he'd got free and started punching.

I had planned to stay the night at his house with Jo and my kids. We drove home instead, shaken. The kids spent the night in bed with us. We tried to explain what had happened. That Uncle Aaron was angry. And drunk. My kids were only seven and nine.

'Why did Uncle Aaron try to punch you, Dad?'

They were afraid Aaron would come to Melbourne and try to get me. So was I.

John de la Hostria, a short, amateur pugilist, taught me to box initially. We met every Sunday for a year, under a rotunda in Footscray Park at 8 am for an hour and a half. He taught me to spar and dance and bounce around, but he couldn't teach me to skip. When Chris saw me dance around he said, 'Well, yeah, that's great, but you're a cruiserweight. You've got to set yourself into your arse and throw more power punches.'

So I did. And kept my guard up. My shoulders ached. It was madness and I was potentially mad. But I learnt to skip. Bouncing, backward and forward, on one leg sometimes.

I kept learning and realised I wasn't scared of my brother anymore. He was unfit. If I'd entered a ring with him, I knew he could throw some punches, I knew he could block a few, but he wouldn't have lasted more than two rounds. I'd win by a total knock-out in the third.

MY BROTHERS AND I used to turn the lounge room into a boxing ring after school. We loved it. It was when Mum was working part-time and Dad was full-time. We latchkeyed in and I set up Madison Square Gardens. We used couch cushions, grasped from behind, as boxing gloves. Because I was tall, I fought my brothers on my knees, but I also made Aaron go to his knees when he fought Justin. Which wasn't kind because Justin, three years Aaron's junior, was equal to him as a fighter. On Justin's first day of primary school, when I was in Grade 6, one of my mates called out, 'Your brother's in a fight.' I ran off, expecting to see Aaron tangled with some kid, but it was Justin, a prep, giving it to a Grade 1 boy.

It got ugly in the lounge sometimes. It was easy to slip a fist or wrist bone out from behind a boxing glove cushion. You could do 'accidental' damage. Justin did once, and made Aaron's nose bleed. In my referee role (the non-boxer was always the umpire), I said the blow was fine because Justin was smaller.

Aaron and Justin became bar brawlers in Geelong. And Justin assaulted a bloke in a road rage incident, just before realising the source of his rage. But neither of my brothers boxes now. Justin has a chronic back injury, and Aaron was a chronic drinker and smoker. They might both die before they turn fifty. They have five kids between them, two of them under ten. I wanted to get them to the gym to get fit. Punch them if I had to, just to wake them up.

I TALKED TO one of The Gym's hardest instructors, Snowy, in the change rooms. He had black hair. I didn't ask why he was called Snowy. Didn't want to provoke him.

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Are you signing, Snowy? I asked, rummaging for my clothes.

He was about twenty-five, and had just finished studying law at La Trobe.

'Nah mate, nah, I just train now. I got nothin' to prove.'

He talked about how some of the other trainers liked to join in the Boxing Challenge, but it wasn't for him. I listened, but was wondering what I was trying to prove if I signed up to fight. That I wasn't scared? I knew I wasn't. That I knew how to box? I *knew* I didn't know how to box. I could throw a few and step out of the way of a few. But, seriously, could I box? Fight for three rounds like a fighter was supposed to? Like my uncle and grandfather had? The answer was yes, but only if they matched me with a spud of equal inability.

Training with Chris was one thing. He was a professional. He made sure that I didn't get hurt. Too badly. But the next step was 'fight class', the one up from The Gym's standard boxing class. Chris said he'd seen a few of the guys go too hard in that class. That had put me off joining. But sometimes fight class joined us in normal classes.

It was a rarity, but occasionally the instructor allowed a bit of body contact. Just body, no head. I came back from some time off and Qamil decided it was a good night to do some light body sparring with successive partners. We'd already gone through several bag and pad rounds, as well as ab work and squat jumps. I was dizzy and I wanted to stop. I told the first bloke to take it easy; I hadn't been here for a while. He said he hadn't either. But I was still the one gasping for air and taking thick body blows. The last guy I faced off with was a barman. He'd served me drinks before. And he served me a combination of punches to the ribs that left me wanting to find a bar to lean against. I got one punch in, and he came back with two harder ones.

The bully.

But he wasn't really a bully.

Bullies are, I'm afraid, people like my brother, Aaron. Who was the softest, gentlest kid growing up. But then he was bullied systematically for five years while he was an apprentice painter. He put up with things that would see the perpetrator fined heavily or jailed today. And bullies are people like the two blokes in Grade 7 who befriended me because I was new in town, but then they beat on me every lunchtime. And told me, every day, they were going to beat on me even worse after school. I'd race from the schoolyard on my bike, never turning back. I went to bed petrified every night for a year.

There were bullies on every football field I ever played on. They kicked, punched and belted me behind the play because I was a decent footballer. I kicked a few goals. And my dad told me not to fight back – but what did it matter, anyway? I couldn't, I didn't know how. I tried once and got beaten stupid during a preliminary final. I found out later the bloke was a boxer.

I moved up to senior football in Geelong in the '80s, and I had genuine fear I could die on the field. I saw guys faces completely covered in blood after punches in play that umpires ignored. They looked like they'd been dragged out of car wrecks.

And I knew, I'd probably known since I'd taken up boxing, that if I went into the ring, I would see every one of those bullies in the face of the man coming at me. And, finally, I would know enough to know what to do.

Failure wasn't my greatest fear.

My greatest fear was myself. What I might do if pushed, literally, into the corner of a ring.

There would be a referee in there. He could stop it from getting ugly. And maybe all my pent up hatred of the bullies who had pushed me around might mean I fought badly, wildly, and got my arse kicked. Either way, I couldn't go into a ring to slay a beast that would still be in me when I got out.

I TRIED TO kill the beast in my mid-teens by becoming it.

I'm relaxed when I reveal details of how I was bullied, but when it comes to revealing details of how I bullied others, I'm reticent. I'm ashamed. I can only bring myself to reveal one example. Because it was the moment in Grade 10 that stopped me from bullying. It didn't kill the beast in me, didn't even stop me from throwing punches at school when provoked. But it showed me better than any sermon I've heard what Jesus was on about with his cheek-turning thing.

I was doing bodybuilding during Grade 10, bench presses and bicep curls in my friend Caleb's home gym. And I was the captain of Belmont's under-16 football team. We were undefeated on top of the ladder. My friend, another Paul, was the team's full forward. We were strong, fit and, when we wanted to be, mean. We were allowed into the Barwon Club Hotel because we were top junior footballers. We drank beer regularly. We weren't used to people saying no to us. Especially not wimpy blokes like Michael Hobbs.

It was a PE class in the school gymnasium. Badminton. A stupid, sissy sport, Paul and I thought. But we wanted the best racquets. And if you got to class early, you got the best racquets. But Hobbs got to the bucket of racquets before us one day. He hadn't started whacking shuttlecocks with the one he'd chosen, but he was ready.

'Give us the racquet, Hobbs,' Paul said.

'Hand it over, Hobbs,' I chimed in.

'No,' he said. He had white floppy shorts and pink legs.

'Give it to us, Hobbs, don't be a fuckwit.'

'No.'

We tried to wrestle the racquet from Hobbs's grip, but he held tight. Then the wrestle proceeded to the floor. Still Hobbs held tight. Then Paul and I grabbed a shithouse badminton racquet each from the plastic bucket and belted Hobbs with them, all over his skinny body. We hit bones, we hit head. Hobbs did not give up his racquet. We stopped before the teacher entered, and Hobbs commenced the class with a high quality racquet in his hand.

My fourteen-year-old son, Hugo, asked me recently who was the toughest kid at my school and I told him about Michael Hobbs. Without omitting any details. I was afraid it would make him think bullying was funny. He thought bullying was stupid and that I had been worse than stupid. I agreed.

Hugo bought an Xbox Fight Night boxing game. We played it together because he knew I liked boxing. He spanked me at it. I'd asked him a number of times previously if he'd wanted to learn to box and he'd said no. Now, having played the boxing game, he wants to learn.

The plan was that we would set up in the carport with my boxing bag and I'd teach him what I knew. Then I'd take him to Chris. Hugo's school has given him self-defence classes. I'm glad. Melbourne is the most liveable city in the world, but there are streets I'm afraid to walk down. I don't want my son to be afraid anywhere, but I hope the name Michael Hobbs sticks with him through his journey into manhood.

The Gym's Boxing Challenge passed. It didn't even happen. Not enough people signed up and the ones who did failed medical. I couldn't have joined in anyway because my doctor had discovered a hernia and I had surgery. Now, I can only swim and bike ride. My physio reckons I'll be able to get back into boxing, but I doubt it. I'm on painkillers for a back complaint that I hope won't become like my brother Justin's. His back is a little better now, and he is making peace with himself and the world. Michael Hobbs isn't giving up his racquet; Nicky Roberts is God-knows-where but hopefully repentant. I don't know where Mick Burnett is, and my son took sick the week after he said he wanted to learn to box. I wasn't able to get him out on the bag. We are moving house soon and I have to take the bag down, including the bar and bolts that suspend it from the carport roof. Our new house has nowhere to hang it.



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