

'He lives off his dad's name. If I can't beat him there's no point'

Rick Broadbent speaks to James DeGale and Chris Eubank Jr as they get set to put their careers on the line on Saturday



Chris Eubank Jr parks his orange McLaren supercar outside a scruffy gym on Brighton seafont. Wearing all grey, he descends past the bright murals of boxers and steps inside the metal door. About an hour away James DeGale, clad in black training gear, is taking the lift to the top floor of a bland office block in Wembley. The door opens to the music from a speaker and a backbeat of punched bags. On Saturday the 60 miles will disappear and these two will meet at the O2 arena for what DeGale has branded the "retirement fight". Ghosts of the past and future drift through two sweatshops.

BRIGHTON

"I could have done anything," Eubank says. "I could have been a doctor, a lawyer or a football player. I tried every sport under the sun but, once I got a taste for boxing, everything else seemed bland and grey."

Eubank, 29, is referring to the fact that he was born into money. His father, the former WBO middleweight and super-middleweight champion, has loomed large over his career, somewhere between a blessing and a curse. From monocle to monster truck, the elder Eubank has been easily lampooned since his warrior days, while his son has sometimes been portrayed as a lesser talent trading on nepotism.

"For years my dad stopped me boxing because he did not think I would be tough enough," he says. "A large percentage of world champions came from nothing and used poverty to push towards the way out. I didn't have that. My dad needed to see that I was willing to — I won't say die because that sounds bad — but willing to put everything on the line. Naturally, you want to show him you are the man you say you are."

This fight will be different for Eubank, who has 27 wins and two defeats on his record. His father is a notable absentee from the gym, and his son has employed a full-time trainer for the first time. Nate Vasquez, an American from the Floyd Mayweather camp, and a sparring partner are even living with Eubank.

The decision to be self-sufficient for so long, relying on advice from his father and his former trainer Ronnie Davis was taken as evidence of hereditary arrogance. The Bond-esque car does not help. He says his father will be in his corner on Saturday and you wonder how Vasquez will take that. Eubank is adamant he is not trying to prove anything to his father. "I've never once sat down and thought I need to be better than my dad," he says. "Everyone outside expects that, or wants that, but I don't compare myself to him — different generations, different people."

Nevertheless, the similarities are obvious. Their voices easily merge and the wrinkling at the corners of the eyes bridges decades. Both

inspire a good deal of loathing, too, and both have been involved in pitch-black boxing nights. In 1991 Michael Watson needed six brain operations after suffering life-changing injuries during his world-title bout with Eubank at White Hart Lane. Fast forward to 2016 and he told his son to stop hitting Nick Blackwell in the head during their British title fight. Blackwell suffered a bleed on the brain and was placed in an induced coma, although he is now recovering and planning to run a half-marathon.

"In my opinion this is the noblest sport you can take part in," Eubank Jr says. "It is the hurt game and people can lose their lives but that is why I dedicate myself to my craft. It's very, very serious and I train all year round."

"The blood and cuts and screaming magnify everything, but watch rugby and the NFL. The intent is the same — to score points. There is no malice. People think you must really want to kill someone, but the opposite is true. If you have that mentality of hate and anger you will fight the wrong way. You will lose your game plan, go wild and get tired. This is 70 per cent mental."

Famous figures watch on from the murals. There is Eubank Sr and Nigel Benn, Roberto Durán and Rocky Balboa. Davis is honed from the same stuff channelled by Burgess Meredith in *Rocky*. Perhaps the most pertinent aphorism,



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though, is next to Mike Tyson — "Loved by few, hated by many, respected by all".

Eubank knows what it is like to be a villain. "Words can't hurt me and I've had the haters, the doubters and the trolls since day one, people saying he's only doing it because of his dad, he only wants to make a quick buck."

"These guys saying things on social media are not happy with themselves and just need to vent — 'Let me call him an arse because it will make me feel better'. When I first heard these things I'd think, 'What have I done?' but it's the British way. If somebody is not your ordinary Joe and has something to say, then they do not like that. Or rather they love the fact they don't like it."

"Some people may love the flamboyance and attitude, and others will root against you, but the one place you don't want to be is in the middle. Would I rather be the hero? I couldn't say. All that matters to me is I'm respected and people are tuning into the sport I love."

Respect is a well-worn word by the end of the interview. Eubank says "legacy" a lot and "leaving a mark" is his No 1 aim.

He will need to do more. His points defeat by George Groves last February was over-hyped and exposed the flaws in not having a trainer.



DeGale chalked up 13 wins after his defeat by Groves in 2011, but some now see him as a fighter in decline. A vicious draw with Badou Jack in 2017, in which he lost two teeth, was followed by the loss of his IBF super-middleweight title to the unexceptional Caleb Truax. Although he regained the title last April before vacating it, doubts linger.

"He underestimated his opponent and did not have the motivation," Eubank says. "His last few fights were not great but he knows I'm a livewire. We will see the best James DeGale we've seen in a long time."

Eubank wants to fight for another five years but Saturday could have seismic consequences. "It's a no-or-die fight and I can't afford a flat performance let alone a loss," he concedes. "It's the fight that gets me back into the position of challenging for world titles." There is one offer on Saturday but the IBO is the least-regarded acronym in boxing's fractured world.

He has strident views. His other defeat was in 2014 to Billy Joe Saunders, who has since given up the WBO middleweight title after failing a drug test. Eubank says he is regularly tested and uses the Anti-Doping Administration and Management System (ADAMS) whereby he must tell testers where he is for an hour every day. "You keep hearing of guys testing positive and saying it's nasal sprays and meat, but it's bullshit. There is absolutely no excuse. If something is found in your system, then you're a cheat and it doesn't matter what you say."

Eubank moves from drugs to the dregs of the sport, the snake oil salesmen who fleece fighters. "The education of fighters is the main issue. People are getting taken advantage of by managers and promoters and giving money away to people who don't deserve it. There needs to be an institution for fighters to protect themselves. I've been blessed by having a father

How they compare

DeGale	Nationality	Eubank
British	British	British
33	Age	29
Southpaw	Stance	Orthodox
6'0"	Height	5'11"
25	Won	27
2	Lost	2
1	Draws	0
15	Knockouts	21

who went through the same thing and can keep me out of the traps and potholes, but not everyone can afford lawyers."

He talks of a future family, too, of running a business, opening a gym, doing motivational talks, working for charity and starring in action films. He could be anything but nods to the mural of his father. "I want to be up on that wall one day. The only way I can do that is by grafting, grinding and winning. It's a long road."

WEMBLEY

On the top floor of Ujima House, Leroy DeGale is watching his son go through his paces. Leroy has been delivering tickets to some friends and thought he would pop in. He laughs as he tells the story of how Eloise, his daughter, once tried to teach dance steps to some junior boxers. His son went to the Barbara Speake Stage School as his parents tried to steer him clear of gangs. Now he has not been able to run on the roads for seven months because of achilles tendinitis, but Leroy likes his movement. His son is 33. They know this may be the last waltz.

DeGale finishes crunching his stomach and is soon talking third-person truths. "There are a lot of questions hanging over this fight," he says.



"The main one: 'Is James DeGale finished?'"

Before the fight with Jack in New York, Leroy and his wife, Diane, had to cancel a Caribbean cruise. It has happened again: a sixth holiday cancelled due to their son's unpredictable career. "You can't plan ahead," he says. "Now we book everything last minute." He will be there on Saturday but Diane will not. She will be watching on TV or lying down, counting the minutes and waiting for the post-fight text.

The past two years have been tough. The Jack fight took DeGale to new depths as he was knocked down in the final round. The first British fighter to win Olympic gold and a professional world title admits he may quit after Saturday. "I want to leave my mark," he says. "But I don't care about being a celebrity after I retire. If people give me a smile, that's good enough. I want to be half-forgotten."

Pride is driving him. He knows what people are saying and is wary of speaking of injuries for fear of being seen to be making excuses. Yet a 180-degree tear in his shoulder was debilitating and he came back too soon. "Way too soon," he corrects. Being unable to run, that staple of boxing training, was a mental challenge too. "I thought I was not going to be fit but there are other ways. And I had to do it. I'd go on a long run on Sunday and I'd be f***ed for three days."

He does not like Eubank. "If I can't beat Eubank, there's no point," he says. "He's tough, strong and game but to be the best you need more than those attributes, you need skill, you need a jab. He thinks he is better than he is."

The enmity goes back to when DeGale lost to Groves and Eubank sent him a Facebook message. "He was still an amateur and he was calling me out, saying one day we will make a lot of money. He lives off his dad's name."

DeGale can do the talk but can also be

DeGale, left, was the first British boxer to win an Olympic gold medal and a professional world title, while Eubank Jr, right, has struggled to live up to the reputation of his father who won world titles at two weights in the 1990s

unusually honest. In the past he has told me how there are parts of the body he cannot move after a fight, how he urinates blood for days, how he thinks he may be bipolar due to the scale of his highs and lows. Boxing is crushingly lonely, which is why he keeps his family close,

along with Jim McDonnell, his long-term trainer who plenty of people have told him to leave over the years. Twice expelled from school, DeGale was threatened with social services at 15, whereupon his mum packed his bags and told him that she would not allow him to destroy the family. They are limpet-tight.

The Jack fight was the hardest he has been hit. "It was madness, madness," he says. "It was the fight of 2017. We both got knocked down. I was hurt. I was going in that last round. Blood everywhere. It was gutsy. I got through."

He pinches himself on the arm. "How does it feel? It's not like, 'Ow, that hurts'. It's deeper." Emerging from those depths has strengthened him in a way he thinks Eubank does not know. "It is why Chris will always mix it with the big boys but never win. I have been punched in the face since I was ten."

He has had a good career. He has been the IBF world champion and made enough money for his family not to worry unduly about cancelling cruises. DeGale says that he would not swap his 2008 Olympic gold medal for £5 million. Where is it? "At my mum's."

What is motivating him now? "Another glory night and proving the haters wrong." He pauses and sees a flaw in that response. "If I was a member of the public I'd think I was in decline, too, because I have not looked, or felt, good."

It is a family affair for these fighters. DeGale taps his head. "It's an unforgiving sport and, touch wood, I will get out with my faculties." He heads for the lift. In Brighton the orange McLaren fades into the fog.

Photographs
Marc Aspland

Whoever wins, a lot of people in Semenya case will be unhappy

Martyn Ziegler
Analysis

It is sport's most complex and controversial issue, and there can be no easy solution.

Today, Caster Semenya will arrive at the Court of Arbitration for Sport in Lausanne, Switzerland. She will be accompanied by a team of lawyers determined to overturn rules laid down by the IAAF, athletics' international governing body, which state that the 28-year-old South African should be obliged to take testosterone suppressants to compete in women's middle-distance running.

Lord Coe, the IAAF's president, will be there too, and the body's lawyers are equally determined to, it says, preserve fair competition in women's events.

The five-day hearing will go to the heart of issues of sex, gender and identity that do not just divide sport but society as well.

The IAAF lost one court ruling on testosterone suppressants in 2015 but this time, as *The Times* revealed last week, the IAAF's lawyers have changed their approach in an important way. They are expected to provide evidence that while Semenya and some other DSD runners — those with what is known as Differences of Sexual Development — are legally female, her biological sex is male: genetically, she has male hormones, as well as testes (internal) and no female reproductive organs such as ovaries.

There are various types of DSD — one type called 5-ARD can cause a person to be born with XY male chromosomes, but because their male organs may not develop externally they are often raised as girls. Testes can be present internally, but still producing male levels of testosterone after puberty. Nowhere is the absence or presence of testes mentioned in the 10,000 words of the IAAF's regulations for DSD athletes, yet it now appears to be a main tenet of its case.

A statement released by the IAAF last week stated: "If a DSD athlete has testes and male levels of testosterone, they get the same increases in bone and muscle size and strength and increases in haemoglobin that a male gets when they go through puberty, which is what gives men such a performance advantage over women."

Jonathan Taylor, the IAAF's London-based lawyer, told *The Times* that the physical advantages for female athletes with testes were "huge" compared with those who do not have the testosterone-producing organs.

"Some individuals with a female legal sex may have testes and so much higher testosterone than women with ovaries, and so all the same physical advantages as men," he said. "This is the case with some individuals with DSDs, and also with transgender male to female athletes. They have a huge advantage over women with normal female testosterone levels, as shown by the 100-plus national, continental or world records that DSD

athletes have set, and the 100-plus national, continental, international and Olympic medals they have won."

Once more, the IAAF is stressing the impact of the presence of testes in DSD athletes.

That will also apply very much to cases of trans athletes competing in women's events.

It is certainly difficult to argue against the point of view that if testes are present and functioning, they are providing some of the physical advantages of males to DSD females.

It is not that clear-cut however. The IAAF's regulations cover seven different types of DSD athletes. In three of the categories, including 5-ARD, testes would typically be present. In the other four categories however, such as congenital adrenal hyperplasia, testes are not always present and sometimes there are XX female instead of XY male chromosomes.

That could be a very important legal point for the court to rule on: Semenya's legal team will be expected to argue strongly that the IAAF appears to be focusing on the particular DSD condition that Semenya and some other middle-distance runners have, rather than the regulations governing all seven conditions and testosterone levels.

The case has already provoked bitter divisions — Tokozile Xasa, South Africa's sports minister, launched a social media campaign last week to support Semenya, who was born and raised in a small village in the rural north of South Africa, and claimed that the case is a "subtle incident of racism".

That appears to be a reference to the fact that the most successful DSD athletes at the moment are all middle-distance runners from Africa — including all three medal-winners from the Rio Olympics women's 800 metres in 2016. The IAAF has identified only middle-

distance races between 400m and a mile as those where the rules will apply — it says those are events where the advantages of testosterone and higher levels of oxygen-carrying haemoglobin in the blood are greatest.

Whatever the outcome, many people are going to be unhappy. If Semenya loses, she will have to take testosterone suppressants and it has been shown that this will have a very detrimental effect to her performances — she failed even to qualify for the 800m final in the 2015 world championships when she was taking the hormone blockers.

There will also be an outcry from her supporters who believe it is an attack on her human rights.

Taylor has said that if the IAAF loses, then DSD and transgender athletes will dominate the podiums and prize money in some women's events.

Whoever wins, this has been a distressing and difficult process for Semenya, but one in which she has carried herself with outstanding dignity.

Semenya's case in Lausanne will have major repercussions for middle-distance running's future

