

Evening Standard



CURTAIN CALL — AND BEAUTIFUL BLINDS

STYLISH PRIVACY SOLUTIONS FOR GLASS HOUSES » HOMES & PROPERTY 40 PAGES INSIDE



JAMES DEGALE: PEOPLE THINK I'M PAST IT

LONDON BOXER SAYS HE'LL PROVE DOUBTERS WRONG AGAINST EUBANK JR » SPORT PAGE 55

NOW TORIES SPLIT: THREE MPs QUIT

» TRIO TO SIT WITH INDEPENDENT GROUP

Joe Murphy Political Editor

THERESA MAY was dealt a serious blow today as three Conservative MPs quit to sit alongside the newly formed Independent Group. In a dramatic coup, former business minister Anna Soubry, Commons health

committee chairwoman Dr Sarah Wollaston and backbencher Heidi Allen all crossed the floor of the House.

The walkout — revealed exclusively in yesterday's Evening Standard — left the

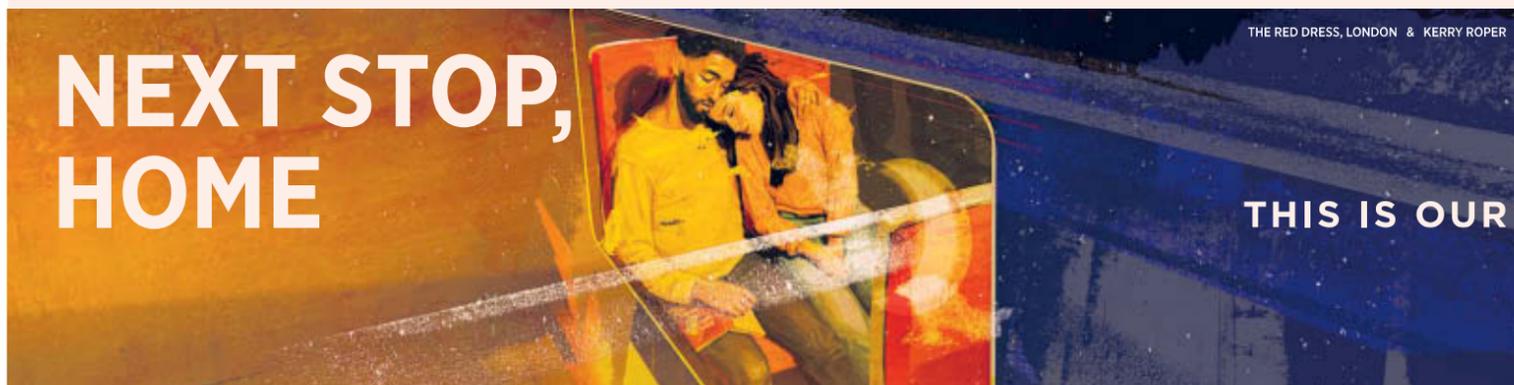
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BACKLASH AFTER I.S. BRIDE LOSES UK PASSPORT

Shamima Begum, 19, with her newborn son at a Syrian camp today after learning she has been stripped of her British citizenship by Home Secretary Sajid Javid. Tory MP Ken Clarke led warnings that the decision could be a "boost for jihadism"

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THE RED DRESS, LONDON & KERRY ROPER

NEXT STOP, HOME

THIS IS OUR **LNER**

Ron Lewis

JAMES DEGALE greeted news of George Groves's retirement with a shrug. DeGale has won an Olympic gold medal and is a two-time world champion, but he had hoped to cap his career with a win over his greatest rival. That will always elude him now.

DeGale and Groves had a feud that stretched back two decades, since they were schoolboys training at the Dale Youth amateur club in the basement of Grenfell Tower. They went on to be world champions, although when they twice met in the ring, Groves won.

The defeats still grate with DeGale. For all he has achieved, the idea that Groves still has any bragging rights over him is far from ideal. Older and wiser now, DeGale has learnt to live with it.

"I wasn't shocked," said DeGale, nicknamed 'Chunky' since those amateur days. "He's hinted at retiring the last couple of years. Best of luck to him, he has fulfilled his dream. I bet he's content. I'm not going to hold a grudge.

"I'll never get the chance to beat him, but never mind, it was part of the journey. When you look at it, his best win was against me. We gave each other publicity, we helped each other's careers.

"I can't see us ever being mates. He doesn't like me, he says stupid, sly stuff. People can change once the career is over, but the rivalry with George is too genuine, too real. I'll be pleasant. But he will probably still hate on me. He thinks he is bigger and better than me. We'll always have that competition."

There has been a lot of talk that maybe DeGale, 33, should be retiring, too. When he first won the IBF super-middleweight title, beating Andre Dirrell in Boston in 2015, DeGale looked a supreme boxer. The past couple of years have seemed

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW JAMES DEGALE

'People think I'm shot now but that motivates me... this is when I'm at my best and it's why I have to prove them wrong'

DANIEL HAMBURY



54%

knockout rate for DeGale while Eubank Jr has won 72% of his fights by KO.

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of DeGale's past seven fights have taken place in North America.

like just hard work, however. He had a brutally tough draw with Badou Jack in a world title eliminator two years ago, which was followed by shoulder surgery and the loss of his world title to the unsung Caleb Truax. He won a rematch, but it was another tough fight.

He gave up the world title to pursue more lucrative bouts than the IBF's mandatory challenger of the time, Jose Uzcategui, so he returns to the O2 Arena for the first time since losing to Groves there eight years ago, to face Chris Eubank Jr on Saturday.

Considering Eubank Jr was comfortably outboxed by Groves a year ago and has nowhere near DeGale's achievements, the former world champion is slightly indignant that the bookmakers have made Eubank Jr, 29, favourite.

"A lot of people are going to make a lot of money backing me," DeGale said. "But it is not the first time. I was 80-1 to win Olympic gold. People think I am shot now, but you would think that. I had those good performances against Dirrell, [Lucian] Bute and before that, but it gradually got worse. So I can see why people think I am shot. This is my motivation, this is when I am at my best, this is why I have to prove people wrong."

He is fresh out of bed at his home near St Albans when we meet for an interview,

before tucking into a breakfast cooked by his sister, Eloise. He seems genuinely excited about the day of training that lies ahead and says this is the first time in years he has trained injury free.

There were four operations — a rebuilt shoulder, a deviated septum and two groin surgeries. More recently it was an Achilles problem that slowed him.

"Imagine what I was thinking, I couldn't move properly and my shoulder was wrecked," he said. "I knew things were bad the week before the Jack fight. I got the draw and went and got it fixed. The surgeon said it shouldn't be too bad, but when I woke up he said it had been a lot worse than expected.

"I should have had a year out, but I had it in my mind that I was going to be back in six months whatever. In camp for Truax I was s**t. But then you taper down and think everything will be all right.

"But even in the changing room I was thinking, 'I hope he is even worse than I think he is'. I got in there and he was fit and non-stop. I couldn't avoid punches,

CHUNKY'S TITLE FIGHTS

May 23 2015, Boston

Becomes first British Olympic gold medallist to win world title when beating Andre Dirrell on points to land the IBF super-middleweight belt.

Nov 28 2015, Quebec

Retains title with hard-fought win over former world champion Lucian Bute.

Apr 30 2016, Washington

Is given a harder than expected test against Rogelio Medina, who threw more than 1,000 punches, but comes through on points again.

Jan 14 2017, New York

Loses tooth and damages eardrum as he is floored for first time in professional career in draw with Badou Jack.

Dec 9 2017, London

Admits "something is missing" as he suffers shock points defeat against Caleb Truax despite being 1-100 with some bookmakers.

Apr 7 2018, Nevada

Regains title with unanimous points decision in rematch with Truax.

I couldn't get out of the way, I couldn't hit back, it was crazy. It was so bad, but it was my fault."

The Eubank fight will be five days short of the 10-year anniversary of DeGale's professional debut, when the Olympic champion was booed.

DeGale's public persona rubbed a lot of people up the wrong way and it took him years to win over the fans.

"A lot of things I did were cringy," he said. "I look back at interviews, seeing the way I talked and the way I am, and it is embarrassing. I came back from the Olympics, I was shoved in the spotlight and I couldn't cope that well.

"I was just trying to get across that I'm the best, that I believe in myself and I was willing to box anyone and prove it. That's all. I boxed anyone who was about — I can be proud of what I have done."

Eubank Jr has had a large number of detractors, too, although DeGale has little time for him, with their own rivalry going back to an ill-tempered sparring session years ago. DeGale does not

believe his opponent has learnt from his mistakes. "I just see a delusional fool," DeGale said. "He is deluded — about life, boxing, he still thinks he beat George Groves, now that is crazy stuff. Some of the stuff him and his dad have said over the years is just mad.

"He sent me a message years ago on Facebook — 'be yourself, carry on being the person you are'. If he wants to stay on being arrogant, let him do it. If you haven't got the boxing brain, it is going to be hard. He has brought in this new coach [Nate Vasquez], I don't know if he has been listening to him, he trained himself before."

DeGale has made changes himself in recent fights, adding Paulie Malignaggi, the former world light-welterweight and welterweight champion, to his training team, alongside Jim McDonnell.

"This is the most motivated I have been for a fight," he said. "I can't wait to get to the gym to spar."

But retirement is on the horizon. In an ideal world, he would beat Eubank Jr handsomely then have one more huge fight. He had expected that to be against Groves. Now it must be someone else. He has invested wisely and can look back on his career with pride, but he doesn't want to bow out with a whimper.

He said: "I'm a victim of my own success. I was the next big thing and it was difficult. But I won an Olympic gold medal then made history by becoming the first [British] gold medallist to win a world title, away from home, against a quality fighter. And I'm now a two-time world champion. When I retire, if people see me on the street and remember me, just give me a smile. That's all I want."

● DeGale v Eubank will be shown exclusively on ITV Box Office on Saturday from 7pm. For further information, go to itvboxoffice.com



No glove lost: James DeGale (left) and Chris Eubank Jr have not seen eye to eye since a bad-tempered sparring session



Standard Sport



PEOPLE THINK I'M SHOT BUT THAT MOTIVATES ME

JAMES DEGALE EXCLUSIVE
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BLANC IS IN FRAME FOR BLUES

» FRENCHMAN ON CHELSEA'S LIST IF THE CLUB AXE SARRI NEXT WEEK

Simon Johnson

LAURENT BLANC will be among the contenders to replace Maurizio Sarri if Chelsea decide to sack the Italian next week.

As Standard Sport revealed yesterday, Chelsea have granted Sarri more time to turn the season around. He has at least three games to save his job, with the club playing Malmo in the Europa League tomorrow night, Manchester City in the Carabao Cup Final on Sunday and Tottenham in the Premier League three days later.

However, the hierarchy's patience is wearing thin and while a win over Malmo should be straightforward, having beaten the Swedes 2-1 in the first leg of their last-32 tie, defeats against City and Spurs would likely be the final straw.

Blanc was on the shortlist of candidates to succeed Antonio Conte last

summer and is believed to have met Chelsea director Marina Granovskaia for talks then. The former France and Paris St Germain coach has been out of work since being fired by the Ligue 1 club in 2016.

It is understood that Blanc has watched games at Stamford Bridge on several occasions over the past few years. However, the 53-year-old is unlikely to accept being given the post on a caretaker basis and would want a full-time position.

Chelsea might not be prepared to rush such an important decision over their next permanent coach should Sarri depart prematurely and could opt for an interim instead.

One of the reasons why Sarri has been given a stay of execution is the lack of obvious candidates to fill the role.

It is understood that assistant manager Gianfranco Zola will not be con-



Blue eyes: Laurent Blanc has watched Chelsea several times at Stamford Bridge

sidered despite being widely respected for his achievements as a player.

Former midfielder Frank Lampard has been linked, but he is not going to leave Derby as they attempt to win promotion from the Championship.

Ex-captain John Terry, who was at Stamford Bridge to see Chelsea's defeat by Manchester United on Monday, has

limited experience, having only begun his coaching career as an assistant at Aston Villa this season.

Former Real Madrid coach Zinedine Zidane has also been mentioned as a possible target, but his knowledge of English is limited and he is expected to wait to see what offers come in before deciding his next move.

Spurs plan for two stadium test events next month

EXCLUSIVE

Dan Kilpatrick

TOTTENHAM are hoping to take a significant step towards opening their new stadium this season, with planning under way for test events on March 16 and 23.

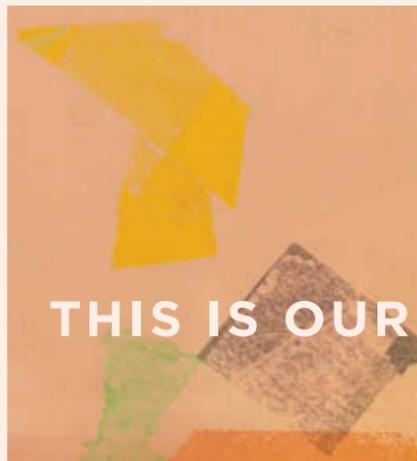
The stadium must host two successful test events, with increasing levels of capacity, in order to earn a safety certificate from the FA.

Spurs have no fixtures between March 9-31 after Crystal Palace's progress in the FA Cup forced a postponement of their meeting on March 17, and they are exploring the possibility of holding the events — likely to include an academy fixture — on consecutive Saturdays next month.

If they are a success, Spurs would be in a position to open the stadium with a competitive fixture, with the earliest possible date now the visit of Brighton on April 6.

However, that game will also be rearranged if Brighton beat Millwall to reach the FA Cup semi-finals, leaving the home game against Huddersfield, scheduled for

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