

This Lonely Place – A Tribute To Thomas ‘The Hitman’ Hearns

‘I told myself I was going to be strong!’, he declared, as his imposing figure stood tall at the lectern, trying his best to hold it together, but, then, breaking down into floods of tears, unable to contain his emotions for a single moment longer. No, this wasn’t the ‘weak me’, having to sit down in total shock upon hearing the news that the most important person in my life had only phoned that afternoon to say that she never wanted to see me again and it suddenly dawned on me that everything I had worked towards for so many years had, in fact, never really existed in the first place. No, this was the six title, five weight World Boxing Champion, the ‘*Motor City Cobra*’ himself, Thomas ‘*The Hitman*’ Hearns, one of the most devastating punchers in the history of Boxing and, also, one of the toughest men who has ever lived, let alone laced up leather gloves and stepped into the ring!

Tommy Hearns was one of my boyhood heroes because he was the pride of the legendary Kronk Gym in Detroit – a place where, through television documentaries, we all knew the heating was kept at a permanent temperature of 100 degrees, where the sign on its entrance read, ‘This Door Has Led Many To Pain and Fame’ and where Boxing’s *elite* warriors tortured and prepared themselves to ‘go to war’. This was the ‘sporting heaven’ where every schoolboy who loved to train hard, as I did, would dream of jumping rope, sweating buckets and sparring with the best. And, in the case of Tommy Hearns, he was the undisputed ‘King of the Kronk’, their champion, idol and absolute ‘cut of the crop’ – forever immortalised in Clint Eastwood’s Oscar-winning movie, *Million Dollar Baby*, where – like so many of us in our younger days – Dangerous ‘*Danger*’ Dillard, a ‘simpleton’ and wanna-be boxer, with ‘all the gear but no idea’ would turn up at his gym, pretend to shadow box and shout out with arms raised in the air, “I challenge the ‘*Motor City Cobra*’, Thomas ‘*The Hitman*’ Hearns to fight me for the Welterweight Championship of the whole world!”

So, Tommy Hearns - cry? Was that even possible? This was one of the ‘Four Kings’ of my era - a man who pumped up to middleweight to go toe-to-toe with *Marvellous* Marvin Hagler in three of the greatest rounds ever seen in boxing history, a man who battled it out on two occasions with *Sugar* Ray

Leonard, knocking him down twice in the second fight, and the first man to take out Roberto *'Hands of Stone'* Duran with a straight right which disengaged the legendary Panamanian from his senses, to the extent that his body dropped like a stone, as he was knocked out cold and unconscious before his head had even hit the canvas, face down.

And yet, here he was stood in front of us, before the world's cameras, a tough man of unquestioned courage and bravery, grieving and revealing his innermost pain, crying uncontrollably, having promised himself that he 'would be strong'. But, unbelievably, he was unable to articulate even the simplest of sentiments, as the tears continued to roll down his cheeks. All that training, all those years of sacrifice, running, press ups, sit ups, lifting weights and hard sparring – Tommy Hearn always appeared to be in complete control of his faculties, but, now, here stood a tearful man, vulnerable and mourning the loss of his trainer, father figure and mentor, Emanuel Stewart.

And seeing this made me think about what it is to be a man and how to deal with tragedies that can affect us all, or, at least, those of us who are fortunate to live long enough to experience many, if not all of Shakespeare's *'Seven Ages of Man'*. I, myself, never had the instinctive courage or natural ability to step into the ring, strip to the waist and engage in combat against a man of similar weight - although it is true that I have always been able to train hard, look the part, 'shadow box', and, of course, 'write' a good fight. But that's not courage, nor is it being brave, and that's how I legitimised my weaknesses in crying long and hard whenever I've encountered life-changing losses. But, I'm not Tommy *'The Hitman'* Hearn and I'm not a fighting man.

So, maybe it is easier for me to mourn my losses, but I still wonder why most of us have to reside inside this lonely place where nobody can truly see, feel or hear our inner-most sensitivities, as, most of the time, we are able to hide from others our grief and deep sense of loss. But, Tommy Hearn is different, right? Surely *the* Tommy Hearn can hide these things? He doesn't cry – not a man who has taken so many heavy punches and blows to his face and head. A man who showed little if any emotion inside the ring. A man who was a legend among great fighting men, who lived and

breathed the true meaning of the word *machismo*. Tommy Hearn's, cry? Was I seeing things? I simply could not believe it! No hard punches to the head, no hits below the belt, no title at stake and lost on a controversial split decision, and, yet, there he was, The Ring Magazine's 'Fighter of the Year' in 1980 and 1984 - crying? It just didn't seem possible.

Well, I have to say that, within an instant of witnessing this extraordinary event, Tommy Hearn's standing went up in my estimation and elevated itself ten-fold to an even higher status than I could ever have imagined. Why? Well, because he showed us mere mortals what it is to be a real man and not just a master craftsman, skilful pugilist and 'tough guy' in the squared circle, because, when the time came, like it or not, he exposed a softer side of himself for all to see and it was an aspect to his character which I, for one, hadn't realised existed within a boxer who, even now, everyone still refers to simply as '*The Hitman*'. Tommy Hearn's - cry? Yes, he did – and respect to him for doing so and allowing us all the privilege of witnessing what those of us, who have lived long enough, have all felt and gone through at one stage or another during our lengthy and varied lives.

Dedicated to the memory of Emanuel Stewart, founder of the Kronk Gym, Detroit.