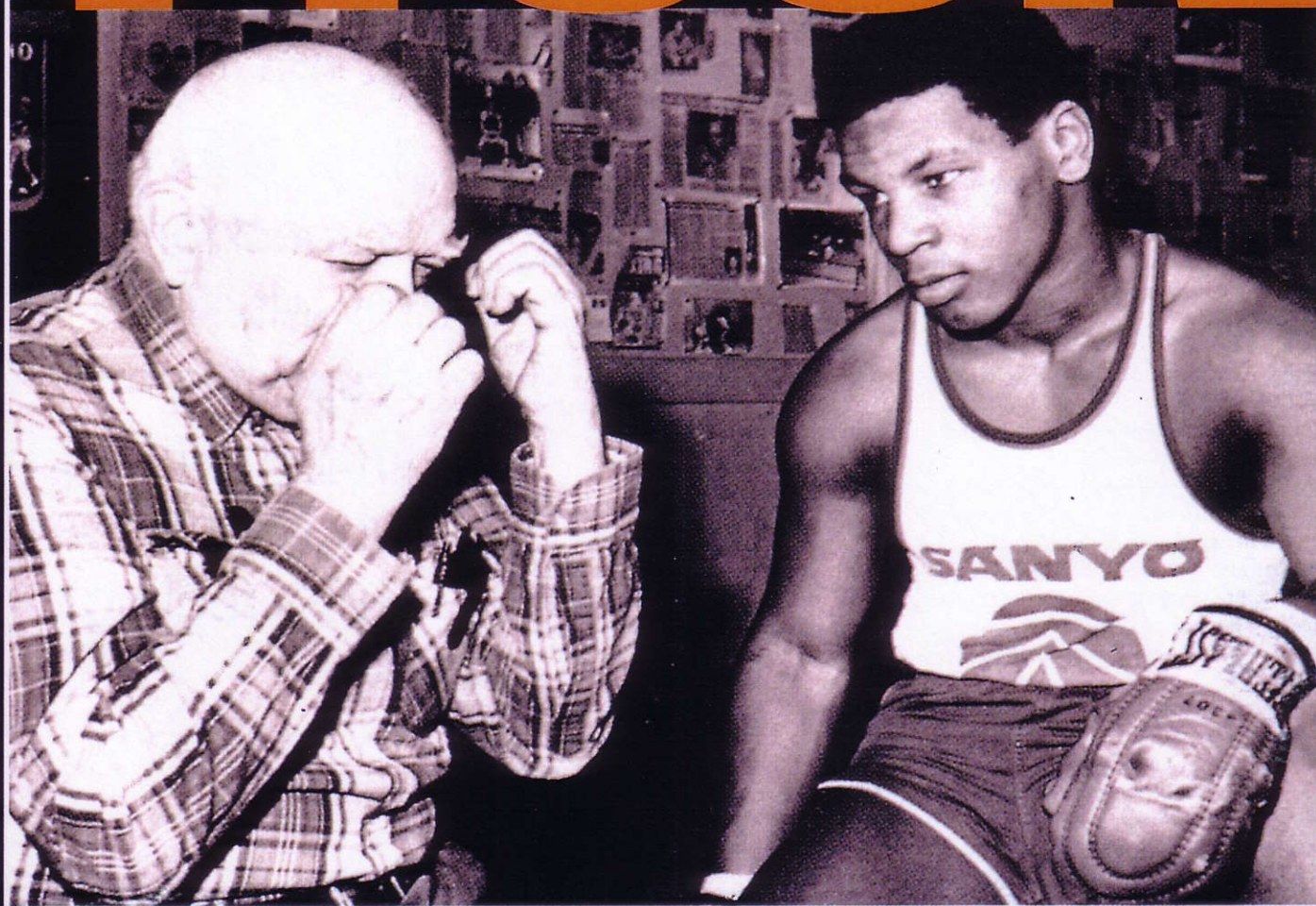




THE ESQUIRE INVESTIGATION

# TYSON



**The old guard**  
Cus D'Amato, Tyson's trainer and mentor, demonstrates his unique hands-up bobbing and weaving style to his teenage protégé

**He was the greatest heavyweight of our generation. Then it went wrong. As not-so-Iron Mike fights in the UK this month, we trace the fall of a legend, and report on why Tyson has become a sideshow attraction**  
By Eamonn O'Neill



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ike Tyson's eyes skewer straight through me. I am standing a few feet away from him as he prepares to strip off for the weigh-in for his fight here in Las Vegas against a boxer named Orlin Norris. Hundreds of people are packed into the auditorium in which the air-conditioning has driven the temperature down to almost freezing point. People around me are shivering, although it's 90° outside. When Tyson spots me, he scrutinises me sullenly.

He calmly strips and stands on the scales. Cheers ring out from the crowd, which includes some women who squeal with delight when Tyson, a convicted rapist, flexes his muscles. His people seem jumpy and wired. But not Tyson. He's still and poised to the point of looking doped. When our eyes lock, I realise he's in control and vigilant. As he stands facing the world naked apart from his prison tattoos and a pair of briefs, he turns and glares down at me for the last time. I nod at him. He turns away, half-smiling and half-sneering. Then, a second or two later, he directs his gaze back down at me and returns the nod. It's as if he's seen inside my head – the way he does with opponents before a fight – glimpsing and acknowledging the complicated and conflicting feelings I have towards him.

Then Tyson's entourage vanish, leaving the scrambling media in their wake. The artificially chilled air suddenly returns. I shudder. Then I reach for my lower back, where the palm of my hand finds a sweat stain as large as a dinner plate.

**It's October 1999, I'm in Las Vegas** and Mike Tyson is in town for a fight tonight. Four days earlier he'd sounded more like a man fending off a mid-life crisis than a boxer ready to beat up a mediocre opponent called Orlin Norris. "My past is history. I made so many mistakes," said Tyson, cradling his

head. "I listened to all the wrong people. Now I try to make my life happy. I know who I am... It's tough these days to train for a fight. I haven't seen my family in months. But this is what I do. This is my therapy."

That sort of talk is fine for the couch, but not for the crowds. They want annihilation, not analysis.

"I lost a lot of respect for myself. I lost respect in my judgement and who I was as a person. That's real ugly... I didn't care if I went to jail or not. I was pretty much at a low point in my life. [But] I'm pretty much getting over a dark moment in my life."

This is a man who's blown \$150m in less than a decade. The US papers claim he now needs around \$20m to just about crawl into the penniless bracket. He needs to fight, it's the only way he can keep his head above water.

But Tyson is still a crowd-puller. Thus, the whining private jets have been arriving at Las Vegas's McCarron airport for the past few hours. Their passengers heading for the MGM Grand, the self-proclaimed "City of Entertainment" and the world's largest hotel, which sits on Las Vegas Boulevard with all the charm of a monolithic, luminous, green brick. Inside the reception area, thousands of people swarm around.

Tyson's public-relations people stride around purposefully. They have to sell the 33-year-old as a misunderstood, decent guy. Significant matters like rape, assault and prison are sidelined. They *will* sell their man. He *will* win. They *will* get their cut. All the contracts *will* be renewed. That's the plan.

In the vast main lobby, a tower of video screens plays an advert for the Tyson fight on continuous loop. A baritone voice intones the inane commentary: "It's the biggest night in sports." Fast-cut images of Mike Tyson and Orlin Norris training are washed in red. "MIKE TYSON RETURNS." The voice-over assures us that tickets for the big fight are definitely still available.

**Tyson's story has now become part** of US media folklore. It's almost, but not quite, down there with the washed-up fables of Pee Wee Herman, Tonya Harding and, significantly, Sonny Liston. Tyson's career bears astonishing similarities to Liston's. Both were bullied at school; both learnt to box while incarcerated; both obliterated opponents with left-hooks; both had periodic drinking problems. Liston also had a gun put to his head, was arrested regularly and committed rape several times. Liston died aged 38 – "a baby!" in Tyson's words – probably killed by a lethal heroin overdose

#### Weight of expectation

Tyson weighs in for his 1999 fight in Las Vegas against Orlin Norris, sporting briefs and his prison tattoos of Che Guevara, Arthur Ashe and Mao Tse-tung

'I lost a lot of respect for myself. I lost respect in my judgement and who I was. That's real ugly'