



Source: Rory Carroll, 'Iraq gamble as Sunnis left out of constitution deal', *The Guardian online*, 29/08/05.

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According to many a good boxing judge, I'm supposed to reach the top very quickly. Promoter Joe Dodds in his column in *Australian Ring Digest* said he had to be 'rather sceptical at times' of that sort of praise and would himself have to see me live up to these recommendations. And there he is in the front row, chewing on a big cigar like he's some sort of American bigwig at Madison Square Garden, not just a sweaty, fat crook who can see a ten cent piece in long grass at fifty yards, sweltering in Sydney Stadium.

Tonight I'm facing off against Cyril Roberts. Don't know much about him, just talk, about him being fast, having a big reach, and he's undefeated in fifteen bouts. All knockouts.

The bell rings and Roberts comes out blazing, tryin' to bulldoze over me. A right cross and I feel my left front tooth wobble in my mouthguard. A combination left-right from nowhere and I'm wondering how the canvas got so close to my nose.

He is fast.

The referee counts the numbers, each with its own rippling echo. One...one...two...two..., three...three...Nine...nine...and I'm on my feet, hands up, ready...we circle...

He feints to the right, throws a straight left.

There's the canvas again. Don't know if I blacked out for a second. He's fast. Really fast.

Six...six...six..., seven...seven...seven...

After a couple of hits like that everyone expects you to stay down, and don't blame you if you do. I hate doing what everyone expects.

Eight...eight...eight...

I struggle to my feet, somehow wobbling my way to the end of the round thinking only a month ago Archie Kemp, contesting the Australian lightweight title, was knocked down three times. The third time he didn't get up. Ever.

I'm a world away from a fortnight ago. Had to take a dive against a guy called Max Murphy on an under-card down at Wollongong Pioneers' Hall. I was fighting under the name Johnny Shields. Johnny Shields! Not like anyone would've guessed that was a fake name. Max, who must've been standing on one foot at the weigh in, well he'd have been lucky to toss a punch let alone throw one. My mother made a harder punch for Christmas dinner. I was s'posed to go down in the fourth, but by the time the sixth came around he'd hardly laid one on me. Out of the corner of my eye I could see his trainer eyeballing me like I was doin' poor Max a disservice.

So I got him in a clinch, and hissed in his ear. 'C'mon, you big girl! I've got a long drive home. I don't wanna be here all night.'

I dropped my guard to make sure he'd get a clean shot at my head. Instead he goes for a hard right to the body

which glances of my arm. It was too late by then, I'd already put myself off balance and had to go down. I take the count and get up at the standard eight, wobbling around, clutching my ribs and wheezing like there's no tomorrow. The referee calls it off and raises Max's arm.

The judges had him well ahead and it must have at least looked like I put up a fight because the report of the fight said I'd earned the crowd's approval by standing 'toe-to-toe with Murphy and slugging it out.'

Max went on to become state champion. If I'd known that, I'd have knocked him cold in the first, or the second or the third, when I had the chance. Problem was, the deal to lose, which included petrol money, was worth more than I would've made by clobberin' him.

Robert's keeps coming after me, monsterring me around the ring. I barely survive the second round. By the end of the third his punches have started to lose their sting. Ronnie, my trainer tells me I've taken the best he's got, he's startin' to tire.

I come out for the fourth and take the fight to him. He is tiring, his hands dropping. I line him up and now it's his turn to talk to the floor. Seven...eight...nine...and the bell saves him for the end of the fifth.

This is it, Ronnie tells me. I've got to finish him this round.

'Why?'

'You won't be able to see in another two rounds.'

He's right. The flesh around my eyes is throbbing and puffy.

The bell sounds for the start of round six, and I rush out, too eager. He punches wild and hard, smashing me flush on the nose, snapping my head back. I haven't taken this beating to lose. I get in close, push him to the ropes, denying him his reach advantage, beating away at his body, feint left and land an uppercut flush on his chin. I literally see his jaw slam sideways. He falls up, then to the canvas, limp. The referee puts the count on him but he's not getting up. He's out cold.

Dodds strolls into my dressing room afterwards, chomps the end off a fresh cigar and spits the stub at my feet. He's just a blurry outline as my eyes start to swell closed. I can only tell it's him because of the shadowy sweat stains in the armpits of his suit. 'You've got some ticker there, Bernie. Come and see me tomorrow and we'll talk about putting you up against some higher company.'

I nod. My head's a smashed, misshapen, red bloody mess. My nose is broken. Not even a title match. All for less than twenty pounds. There's maybe a thousand people here, and I might get my name mentioned in the paper tomorrow.

Eighteen fights. Thirteen wins. Twelve by knockout. It's not a career, but it'll do me. I'm finished.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ross Murray.