



# The ghost with gloves

*One of Australia's best ever middleweight boxers died ignominiously in the US in 1917. Now a Sydney film-maker is resurrecting his tragic story. Ian Heads reports*

**T**he trail left by Les Darcy as he passed through a string of American cities 77 years ago is by now stone cold. But for all the dusting over of the years, Darcy's tragic story lives on as Peter Fenton discovered recently when he went chasing the ghost of the great Australian boxer in the US.

Sydney-based Fenton, movie soundman, ex-rugby union coach and renowned raconteur, has lived with Darcy at his shoulder for the last two years. His near-obsessive interest in the story of the doomed fighter was sparked in boyhood tales told by his father and his mates, and nurtured by his own interest and research in years since.

A long quest to uncover the

"real" story of the life and death of Les Darcy culminates this year when Fenton completes a documentary film script on one of the great Australian sporting sagas. He also plans a 1995 book to coincide with the 100th anniversary of Darcy's birth.

Australia's one-time middleweight boxing champion died on May 24, 1917, in Memphis, Tennessee, of blood poisoning. He was 21. His story ranks with Phar Lap's as the most bittersweet in Australian sport - that of a sunny-faced blacksmith from Maitland, New South Wales, who developed into a ferocious but scrupulously fair fighting machine, only to die in another country while misunderstood and reviled in his own.

Australian newspapers, particularly Hugh D. McIntosh's *Sunday Times*, had turned on him with extraordinary venom after he sailed for the US on the tramp steamer *Hattie Luckenbach*, lured by huge offers from American promoters. Prime minister Billy Hughes was zealously pursuing Australia's involvement in World War I at the time, and Darcy was branded a "shirker" and a "deserter".

As Fenton's research revealed, the extent of such vilification was breathtaking. Fenton followed Darcy's trail through the US, from Chicago to New Orleans, in the spring of 1993. The trainers, fighters and bums who knew Darcy in 1916-17 are long gone now - thus much of Fenton's research was done in libraries. He was astonished by the volume of material that exists: "He was a super-celebrity, the focus of attention wherever he went. Americans had never seen him fight - and never got to see him fight - but they took to him with incredible enthusiasm."

Pressures emanating from Australia blocked every one of Darcy's planned fights in the US. His only appearance in the ring was in a gymnasium scrap with a highly-rated heavyweight, Fred Fulton. Darcy handed out a severe beating to the bigger man.

**Naïve:** Fenton's dogged quest promises to reawaken interest in Darcy, whom he believes had only one failing - he was naïve. "He was no slacker or shirker," says Fenton. "In fact he tried twice to enlist in Australia, but his mother refused to sign the papers both times. The most disgraceful aspect of the whole sad story was the way he was singled out for special attention in both Australia and America."

Fenton reveals that while Darcy was banned from fighting in a succession of American states, other Australians were free to compete. One, Mick King, who had stowed away in Perth, actually fought in Memphis the night before



**Les Darcy (opposite and above): a sunny-faced blacksmith and scrupulously fair fighting machine**

Darcy died. At the same time, numerous Englishmen - actors, sportsmen, businessmen - who had done "runners" from Britain when war broke out, carried on their lives in the US without problems. Fenton suspects that the hand of PM Hughes - a fanatical proponent of conscription - ensured the bans on Darcy.

"The treatment of Darcy was a monstrous scandal - one of the supreme injustices of Australian life," says Fen-

ton, adding how he was moved to tears in Memphis by a letter written by one of Darcy's doctors, who had expressed his own frustration and anger at the way Darcy had been treated. Also in Memphis, Fenton uncovered new material on the arrival of Darcy's sweetheart Winifred O'Sullivan at his bedside just before his death.

**Tribute:** Darcy's impact on the United States was reflected most starkly in his San Francisco funeral. Although he had never visited the city in life, in death Darcy received a staggering tribute, with the funeral procession stretching at least a mile behind the cortège. Back home in Sydney, even fans who had rejected him turned out in astonishing numbers for a second service.

Fenton has some Australian Film Commission support for his project and indications of corporate backing - substantial enough to ensure Darcy's story is done justice. He has hopes of tracking down a rare item - a two-reel film called *The Heart of a Champion*, made in 1915, which tells the Darcy story to that point.

"Sometimes I feel Darcy is sitting alongside me," says Fenton. "I would love to have known him. He was a great athlete and I have found no skerrick of evidence to suggest that he was anything but a fine bloke."

"He deserved much better than Australia gave him ... and I don't think we should ever forget that." ■

## THE BULLETIN SPORTS QUIZ

By Patrick Lindsay

1. Which major league US baseball team has given a trial to former basketball great Michael Jordan?
2. Who won Australia's first gold medal at the 1994 Winter Paralympics?
3. How many times was Merv Hughes fined for misbehaviour in the first cricket Test against South Africa?
4. Which Australian female swimmer became the first in 15 years to break a world record at this year's national championships?
5. Who was the last Australian female swimmer to hold a world record?
6. Which long-serving AFL star was dropped by Collingwood against his wishes this season?
7. Who was the Sydney Swans' first choice in this year's AFL draft?
8. "It's sickening that someone who is down to earth, polite, has good manners, is clever and wears nice clothes, almost has to apologise for it." Who was Ivan Lendl defending?
9. What milestone did Australian wicketkeeper Ian Healy pass during the third Test against South Africa in Adelaide?
10. Name the reigning Indy car champion.

1. Minnesota 2. Michael Norton, super giant slalom 3. Three times (once by the match referee, twice by freestyle) in 1979 6. Peter Dinos 7. Dermont Brereton 8. Pete Sampras 9. 200 dismissals 10. Nigel Mansell