



Collins' landmark 1995 fight with Eubank is the subject of a new film opening at the Irish Film Festival this week

VICKI COUCHMAN FOR THE TIMES

BOXING | STEVE COLLINS INTERVIEW

Two Oliver Reeds, a wolfhound and a hypnotist – life with Steve Collins

Former middleweight and super middleweight champion Steve Collins recalls 1995 meeting as he prepares to donate land for keyworkers' homes

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When a barefooted Oliver Reed tumbled into the room with his shirt hiked up atop his vast stomach, Steve Collins sensed trouble. The actor and the fighter had spent a lovely afternoon together, but the mood was turning.

a London club. “I could not believe his strength for a man of his age and weight. Then he challenged me to an arm-wrestle. He beat me and I said, ‘I let you win, Oliver, because I don’t want you getting upset because you’re getting old.’ It was banter but he was insulted. He wanted to kill me and came at me with a bottle of champagne. The next morning I got a message from him: ‘Great craic.’ ”

That was the side that wrote hell-raiser headlines, but Collins saw the kinder one too. Reed had first made contact with Collins when he asked him to look after Oliver O’Dea, a young boxer he had taken an interest in. “There were two Oliver Reeds — the one I met in the day and the one I met that night. I thought he was so fascinating. What an intellect! Interesting, a charmer and the best example of someone who should not drink.”

Over a couple of hours Collins, now 59, describes a kaleidoscopic cast list, including the mind guru and alleged cult leader who played a part in his success, and his own varied guises — fighter, farmer, actor and now the landowner planning to build 330 homes for keyworkers in St Albans.

The reason for the interview is Wednesday’s Leicester Square premiere of *One Night in Millstreet*, the opening act of the Irish Film Festival. The documentary tells the story of how Collins beat Chris Eubank to win the WBO super-middleweight title in 1995. It was a deliberately weird event, the glitz of boxing transplanted to the sticks of a Co Cork town, population under 2,000. Long before the days of infighting influencers and cross-over exhibitions in the Saudi desert, Collins used all kind of hokum to baffle boxing’s great eccentric.

show began. They played Eubank's knockouts on four giant screens and the little South America guy got smaller by the second. Eubank entered to *Simply the Best*. Even his opponent's corner-men were moving to it. I thought, 'This fight is over.' This was the bit I needed to take out. I needed to steal his confidence."

Eubank was on a lucrative eight-fights-a-year tour. Ray Close had been due to complete a trilogy against Eubank, but was forced to retire after an MRI scan found brain lesions. Enter Collins. The former electrician at the Guinness Brewery in Dublin had gone to the US to seek out Marvin Hagler and made his mark in Brockton. By the time he had become a late stand-in, he was already the WBO middleweight champion but lacked a bit of prime-time pizzazz and was regarded as the underdog.

He arrived at the press conference in a racing green Jaguar with a prize Irish wolfhound in the back. "I had to upstage him. I thought, 'This guy has been voted the best-dressed man in Britain so I'll turn up as the quintessential Irish gentleman.' They would not let the dog in the hotel, but it worked. I started speaking in Gaelic. He was irritated."

The final trick tilted Eubank over the edge. Freddie King, Collins's trainer, was busy working with Herbie Hide before his world title bout with Riddick Bowe, so he called on Quinn, a hypnotist who had no experience of boxing. Quinn has since been at the centre of controversy over claims that he can cure cancer and a cash-for-prayers scheme, but in 1995 Collins craved the unorthodox.

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"A lot of people had opinions about him but I liked him and he sat there and said he'd hypnotised me so that I would not feel pain. Eubank was rattled. He said it was legal cheating, 'this guy is a robot' and was all for pulling out

in a trance, eyes down, headphones on, as he got raised up on a platform on a motorbike and the rockets went off. Someone prodded me because they thought I was asleep. Then I felt the ropes and thought he's ringside now.”

It was a gruelling fight played out against a backdrop of a changing nation. Eubank was knocked down in the eighth. Collins was downed in the tenth. It went to the cards and Collins got the split decision. “I got back to the dressing room and collapsed. Then I heard this helicopter and that was him getting out.



Collins celebrates his success over Eubank in 1995

DAVID MAHER/SPORTSFILE

“After that he got nasty and started making all these allegations. I thought if he believes all this, let's get straight back to the rematch. The second time round I had to do something different and went with a new style. It worked. He has still not given me the credit. He should have no problem. Chris Eubank was stronger than me but I won the fight because I planned it better than him.”

Collins would also fight Nigel Benn twice, winning on both occasions, but was disillusioned by the time Roy Jones Jr's lawyers told him their much vaunted fight would never happen. He retired in 1997, having never lost a world title in the ring.

“When Eubank hit you it was like being hit with a sledgehammer,” he says as he compares old foes. “When Benn hit you it was like being hit with a bullet. Eubank never hurt me but his strength put me over. Nigel Benn hit me with a left hook and I thought my teeth were broken. I had a horrible taste in my mouth. I felt sick. It was a horrific feeling. I didn't want to be there. But after that split second, I thought, ‘That's your best shot.’ That was the big question. What will happen when that lands? I could cope but I was scared of Nigel, scared of his power.

“I feared losing but could accept it. My fear against Nigel was damage. I think I'm bulletproof but at the same time I love my family. It's a very selfish job. I wouldn't do it now.”

Retirement for all three has not been easy. Benn has admitted he came close to suicide. Eubank has had his own mental health struggles. Collins had a bitter legal battle with Barry Hearn and had to deny assault allegations. In 2005 he married his second wife, Donna, bonding over a shared love of horses, and now cuts a contented figure who has just retired from the Army Reserves. He has acted in numerous films, with another in the works, but wishes he had used a pseudonym to avoid being dubbed “the boxer”.

There are more stories. His uncle Terry fought Reggie Kray. “He said he wasn't that tough in the ring.” In a north London bar with Jake LaMotta, Collins got the call that Terry had been in an accident. “Jake had a glove and wrote ‘keep fighting’ on it. Sadly Terry died and we put the glove in the coffin.”

“I knew I was going to be screwed over. The fight was late and, finally, Don King does that laugh — ‘hee, hee hee’ — and pulls out a letter. My lawyer looked at it and nodded. I’m the only person in history who Don King paid before a fight. But money was never what it was all about.”



Collins fought Eubank twice in 1995

DAVID MAHER/SPORTSFILE

Hence, he now wants to donate his own land to build 330 homes for keyworkers. The idea is to sell these at two-thirds of the market price. “I’m forever getting developers knocking on my door offering crazy money, but I want my clapping on the doorstep to count for something.”

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In his submission to the council he wrote: “This is not about maxing out on profits. This is about doing right by those who

A final decision is due in January but he will spend this week looking back instead, and perhaps nostalgia will build better relations with Eubank. “He has got an issue with me so I try to avoid him. I can’t thank him enough for what he did for the sport, he was a great boxer and on another day he could have won. He just won’t accept that.”

The UK premiere of One Night in Millstreet opens the Irish Film Festival (Nov 15 to 19) on Wednesday at Vue West End.

Boxing