The gym was a two-storey building that stood like a monument on a corner block. The main entrance was through a mixed business that offered fruit and vegetables, with a milk bar that sold soft drinks and ice-cream, in the company of the ever popular milkshake. The shop faced into Abercrombie Street, Chippendale. Then situated behind the shop was a store room that was big enough to house a snooker table as well as the shop’s stock of trade. Behind this, down a small set of steps that opened out to a narrow passageway, were three compartments. These spacious areas were used as dressing-rooms. The main dressing-room was reserved for the top fighters — main-event fighters — and this is where Mr Mac mainly operated from. It had a rubbing-down table and a sweat box for anyone who had to lose weight in quick time.

This contraption was a handmade timber box, with a door that opened outwards to let you enter to sit on a platform seat, and a lid that had a hole in the middle for your head to protrude through. Once this was closed securely, a pot of water was then put on an ignited gas ring inside the box. When the water came to the boil, it turned into steam. It was something that had to be watched closely, otherwise the boxer would incur a very burnt arse. You had to have someone in the room at all times to keep an eye on things and let you out when you were finished.

Towards the rear end of the building, there was a side-door entrance from Myrtle Street, which was used strictly by the fighters, and opened to the public only occasionally. Up the stairs, on the top floor, was the
Keith Saunders, aged fifteen, training at Billy McConnell’s gym in Abercrombie Street, Chippendale, in 1949 (photograph Fred Potts, from the author’s collection).
gymnasium. This consisted of a standard-sized ring in the front part of the top floor with boxing gloves of various sizes draped upon the nearest corner post. The post was also draped with worn leather headgear. Back from the ring, and down a few steps, was an assortment of punching bags and skipping ropes and on the racks placed against the wall were your floormats for groundwork exercise.

Mr Mac was a battler, a knockabout person, who perceived as a kid that he would have to work pretty hard to build up what he wanted, and he did that. Mr Mac was a church man, so I thought that he would be a very generous person in a lot of ways. But he had his portion of defects, although he did make a supreme effort to see his family had the right upbringing to the best of his knowledge. I guess that is what counts.

I trained seven days a week and did nothing but talk, eat, sleep and box. Mr Mac had many ways of correcting my bad mistakes. He would either hook me on the chin with punches from both hands, while in the process of teaching me in the ring at the gymnasium, or if he felt the mistakes needed a stronger reprimand, he would put me in the ring with one of the good main-eventers. So naturally, when I was least expecting any action and made the same mistake he had pointed out to me previously, I landed on my butt. It was a rude awakening, but effective. I knew better next time.

Keith (in white) and other boxers training at Billy McConnell's gym in Abercrombie Street, Chippendale, in 1949 (photograph Fred Potts, from the author's collection).
Alfie Webster at Billy McConnell's gym, Abercrombie Street, Chippendale, in 1947 (photograph Phil Ward).
around. There were very few, though, if any, who ever had the opportunity to unseat me in any gymnasium once I had learnt. Mr Mac's psychology proved to be a bloody good one from his point of view, because it always seemed to pay dividends.

Mr Mac had some pretty good fighters at that time — in the forties, fifties and sixties — prelim boys and main-eventers, plus amateur fighters. Some of the older people may well remember one Joe Clarke, who was a good puncher and had fourteen knockouts in a row to his credit. Then there was Charlie Dunn, another good puncher, also a very good mate of mine, but that did not make any difference when we sparred each other in the gym. Charlie Beaton held a decision over George Sands on 18 November 1949 at Leichhardt Stadium, Sydney, then beat Clem Sands at Newcastle Stadium on 17 January 1950. Alfie Webster was a good smooth boxer, also a very good mate of mine, as was Owen Moase, who had an accident at work that damaged his hands, but this never deterred him from training and fighting. Another of Mr Mac's boxers was Ken Bailey, who was classed Australia's best boxer in the immediate postwar years. There was Freddy Ridell — tough, very hard to beat — Tommy Barber, Albert Gall and Ray French — tough as teak. Walk-up-all-the-time Carlo Marchini won the Australian middleweight title on 14 February 1955, at Sydney Stadium.

Others who trained with me were Bruce Farthing, light heavyweight contender, and Bert O'Keefe, top amateur and professional boxer, until he was injured in a bout at Sydney Stadium that left him semi-paralysed down one side of his body; Tony Barber, who became Australian middleweight champion on 10 July 1967; Ernie 'Bull' Hughes, who became Australian light heavyweight champion on 22 September 1958; tough and rugged Billy Barber; Graham Moffat; Billy Stanley; Aub Roberts; Laurie Murray; Teddy Rainbow; Keith Staggs; Max Simpson; Alan Barber; Ralph Moore; Brian Sheehan; Noel McLean; Bruce Shelley; and Alfie Sands of the famous fighting family, who contested the most fights of all. Also training in the same stable was his youngest brother, Russell.

What talented fighters those boys were and I am proud to say they were very close mates of mine. Now, at this particular time, I will take the opportunity and, with all sincerity, pay tribute to those lads who fought preliminary bouts without reaching the heights of main events or the ever-elusive big time in that era. They never received the big mention in the media. In my book it was the little people, who are never credited in any way or form, who were virtually the main cogs in the big wheel of the boxing game. Those lads were always in abundance when called upon as sparring partners for the big main-eventers and ever-present to fill the card for Monday night's fight program at the Old Barn — Sydney Stadium.
An aerial shot of Sydney Stadium at Rushcutters Bay in the 1960s (photograph Ernie McQuillan).

The Sydney Stadium at that time was the Mecca of boxing for those who participated, along with the patrons, young and old, people from all walks of life. They flocked to see their idols do battle at a venue packed
Keith Saunders fighting Dave Cryer at Sydney Stadium in 1950 (photograph Regal Photo Service).

to the rafters. Those unfortunates who could not gain entry stood in the streets and in Rushecutters Bay Park, opposite the stadium, to listen to the broadcast version of the fight from the amplifying system that was erected outside on the stadium walls.
When fighters of the calibre of Ron Richards and Fred Henneberry, Vic Patrick, Tommy Burns and a host of other impressive names of the fistic world fought there, the stadium became the equivalent of Madison Square Garden. Of course, it was on a smaller basis. When a young fighter was included on the same bill as the famous ones, it was a token of great esteem, something he would remember for the rest of his life.

I knew this feeling. I have fought main events at numerous stadiums, but none were the same as fighting a triple bill at Sydney Stadium, even though I have graced the ring fifteen times at that Old Barn. As a matter of fact, I engaged in my first professional fight there in 1952, a six-rounder. Sydney Stadium also had wrestling to contend with and gave that sport a Thursday night promotion that was financially beneficial for the promoters. But the money they paid out for prelim fighters was a pittance in comparison to what they receive today. A fighter like myself was paid thirty bob for being a stand-by. This was in case someone on the card was sick and did not turn up, or a few of the fights were ended early by a quick KO. This was a way to ensure that the program did not die in the arse.

Leichhardt Stadium was an off-shoot from the main stem of Sydney Stadium, what a bloody system! It was as crooked as a dog’s hind leg. I was paid thirty bob for fighting a four-rounder at Leichhardt, and then the trainer collected his 25 per cent, but there were no standards of pay or conditions for fighters, and no policing of rules.

I fought main supports to wrestling matches. The advertised billing sounded important, but the money was the same — peanuts. I guess I could have stayed there for the rest of my boxing career, fighting supports to the wrestlers. It got me no further up the ratings ladder, that is for sure. My boxing record was incomplete, but what the heck — I went down in the annals of Sydney Stadium boxing history as being there, win, lose or draw.

It was such a pity everything was destroyed when the Old Barn was demolished in 1970.

Boxing had a big following at that time. It was a ritual for fans to go to the gym on a Sunday morning, instead of going to church. They would watch the fighters go through their paces, boxing with sparring partners in their wind-up preparations for fights on the Monday night. The procedure was pretty simple — sixteen-ounce gloves were slipped onto your taped hands, while the headgear was firmly fixed into place. If it was a main event you were being prepared for, then you boxed eight rounds with different sparring partners. The heavy gloves and headgear were to protect the fighters so they would not damage each other too much.

Mr Mac would change the session from Sunday morning to Sunday night. He would put on a live artist, singing and entertaining the audience. The people loved this and would pack the gym out. The cost of entry was
a silver coin and most of the proceeds went to the pensioners who lived in the vicinity. Besides, it gave you a chance to show your local followers just how fit and ready you were to go on with your next fight. I think they called it 'form guide'. Today they say you can't compare the fighters of today with those of the past — that today's are much better. Pig's arse is my own opinion. I reckon today's fighters would not receive even a four-rounder in those days, you just had too many class prelim boys, let alone top main-eventers going around.

The training for a fight, in my book, was far harder in those days. For instance, road work started at 4.30 of a morning. Mr Mac would pick me up. My attire for that session was a flannel T-shirt, jumper, long trousers and 'obbnail' army boots. Then we proceeded to Moore Park. On arriving, I would loosen up by shadow-sparring for about thirty minutes. Then I would start to run. There were always a number of us together. The park was flat for about two yards at the start, and then it climbed uphill, and then it flattened out again. When Mr Mac dropped his hand, I sprinted the last hundred yards of each of my last three or four laps. I ran five miles every morning for three weeks, maybe four. Towards the end I would do what they called a tapering-off program, with maybe two or three rounds boxing and four or five rounds shadow-sparring. I would train at least six weeks for a fight.

I did plenty of boxing in the gym. My usual start would be, once again, shadow-sparring to warm the muscles. This would take three rounds and I knew when the time was right by the perspiration on my body. Each round took three minutes and I had a half-minute rest between rounds. I then skipped rope for three or four rounds, finishing every half of the three-minute sessions as fast and as hard as my legs could go. This was to build up the stamina in my legs so they could go the full distance. After skipping, I punched the heavy bag, the light heavy bag or the light bag. It all depended on how many rounds I was scheduled to travel over. It was usually four or six, but twelve for a main event, and even fifteen rounds for a title fight. I did whichever preparation Mr Mac thought was best for my conditioning. After working on all these bags, my choice was a light bag and I worked for speed, accuracy and power. I learned a hell of a lot by watching the visiting American fighters, especially the black Americans. Man, they were ten years advanced on us in every department of their trade. I did not know at the time that I was to be a sparring partner later to many of those famous fighters.

I continued to work out on what is known as a speed ball, which hung from a platform positioned against the wall. I preferred this ball to the one they call the floor-to-ceiling ball. The speed ball made you faster and more accurate. You could strengthen your punches and shorten them at the same
time. The shorter the punches, the more power they carried, with the
shoulder behind them. Believe you me, there was one particular
importation, the great Freddie Dawson, who was a master at this type of
training. He would punch this speed ball, which was pear-shaped and about
the size of a human being's face. He would send it at tremendous speed,
almost a blur to the human eye, then, with about fifteen seconds to go in
his session, he would — what we call in the boxing game — freeze the
ball. This meant punching the ball with all your power to stop its swing.
If you were not fast and accurate enough you would most surely break your
hand. This meant good timing and plenty of practice. I observed and learned
everything possible there was to learn from these very talented fighters.

One day I heard Freddie Dawson speaking to Bill McConnell. 'Why
haven't we seen this guy in the States Bill?' He was speaking of me,
welterweight Keith Saunders and this was also reported in the Australian
Ring of May 1959. I was classified as the best gym worker in Australia. What
I could do to opponents in the gym amazed Dawson, so you see he secured
my services for his fight preparation, and he beat all those who entered
the ring with him in Australia.

I remember our very first meeting in the ring at the gymnasium in
1950, because I was only sixteen years of age and facing a man highly rated
among the best fighters of his division in the world. I felt a sense of fear
at first, which turned to respect for this man, who in turn paid me the same
tribute for my skills and courage after I had entered the ring with him on
numerous occasions as his sparring partner. And even though Freddie and
I became very good friends, I don't think he believed in showing any mercy,
not even for his grandmother, because he pulled no punches, you better
believe it. I know! I felt the bastards.

His gear was tailor-made, even his boxing gloves. I was boxing in
sixteen-ounce gloves; he was boxing in twelve-ounce, with an adhesive
white tape on his hands as well. Strike me lucky, it was like being kicked
by a mule every time he hit my arms or anywhere. Man, I just had to keep
moving at lightning speed. I had tremendous workouts in the gym. They
became just like fights. In one workout I had with Charlie Dunn we boxed
a few rounds, then really let a few big guns fly. Charlie, a good puncher,
whacked me to the side of the head with a good right cross and boy, I heard
doors ringing in my ears for a week after, but I did not let Charlie know
at the time. I came back and delivered a few hefty left hooks which evened
things up. It was enough to make us respect each other's punching power.

Of all the importations I boxed with I would rate the hardest puncher
as Joe Brown. The others included O'Neill Bell, Emory Jackson, Rudy Cruz,
Cecil Schoonmaker, Babe Ortiz, Freddie Dawson, Joe Brown, Irving Steen,
Tommy Stenhouse, Vic Icean, Carl Coates, Henry Brimm, Billy Hester,
Ramon Fuentes and Milo Savage. But Joe Brown was the hardest puncher and best all-round fighter and Freddie Dawson came a very close second.

I am sure everyone from that era remembers the epic fight between Vic Patrick and Freddie Dawson held on 1 September 1947. Freddie became very popular over the years with the Australian boxing fraternity and made good friends outside the fistic circle. He was an amazing person. His attributes as a sportsman were beyond reproach and his body build and skills were those of a world champion who was never crowned. Jack Pollard's *Ampol's Australian Sporting Records* (Sydney 1969) records that he was born on 28 January 1924, at a place called Thomasville, Arkansas. When he was twenty-three years of age he disembarked on Australian soil to fight Vic Patrick. He was a seemingly ageless thirty-one when he had his last bout against fellow black American, Marshall Clayton, in Perth in 1954. Freddie had twenty-one fights in Australia and won sixteen of these by knockout, four on points and one on a foul.

In his native land he was given the old grease ball treatment (caught while not in top condition) that robbed him of a world title, and on that occasion it was a home town decision. I know there were many, even among our very own immortals, who experienced similar situations and who exited, stage left, and were never given full recognition until their deaths.

Freddie, as I knew him, not as he seemed on paper, had a very quick wit. I remember when he was being interviewed on a Sydney radio station and was asked what his favourite record was, he quickly replied 'Careless Hands'. On another occasion, when he was being questioned about his earnings and his investments, he said he had it all tied up in real estate at Kings Cross. I have never since known a man with such wit and awareness of life, and alertness. Yet he was an unhappy man, as I observed during some of our conversations, but he never showed it in public.

The boxing game has been called many names — barbaric is the one that sticks in my mind. People sit in judgement of a sport they don't understand and should not comment on, in which the exhibition of fitness and skill combine to put a feed on the table and pay the bills. The sacrifice a fighter makes is to perform an act of entertainment, because those who criticise usually do not have the guts to participate themselves. They pay to see someone else play cut the role, to let out their hidden egotistical frustrations. Most certainly have a lot to learn. In my experience it is something special that speaks for itself. You cannot explain things of this nature; it is something you have to be involved in to appreciate. To me boxing means close mateship, with respect and love, among those past and present boxers of that 'barbaric' sport. Then, on the other hand, man must have control, so there must be skill involved too.
In the late forties, I boxed an exhibition bout with a female boxer, Cathy Thomas, at Mascot Town Hall, to raise funds for Cathy to go to England to fight a female boxer there. Cathy was a good boxer. She had all the moves and was also very attractive, but none of the top male boxers would box with her, including Jimmy Carruthers, so I accepted a bout of three rounds. She had a gorgeous body. Why would such a beautiful young girl like that want to take up boxing? I will never know, but I can tell you one thing, all I did was clinch with her for most of the time, because there were no decisions given in exhibition bouts. I enjoyed every round of it.

Fighting was not the only thing I did. My other outlets in life included following an Aboriginal football team called the Redfern Allblacks, who had a big following, both black and white. Both my elder brothers, Alan and Colin, played for the team. The matches were played on a Sunday and after the match, win, lose or draw, we all went back home to our individual houses. We had tea, then the procedure was we would all meet at Aunty Bunnie's place in Lawson Street for a singsong and a dance. The entertainment was fantastic. The people that passed through Aunty Bunnie's place were celebrities, or on their way to becoming celebrities. A conversation I had with an old friend, Burt Murray, brought to light how many good times we had and how many of the people there became stars: Jimmy Little, singer, recording star; Alan Saunders, entertainer; Jack Hassen, lightweight champion of Australia; Harry Williams, actor, country and western singer; and Claude Williams, his brother, to whom I pay great respect for the good work he did for the Aboriginal musicians who sought his guidance in this field. Claude also gave me a great opportunity by making it possible for me to meet the people who gave me the start to write this book, on the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council. Each time I put pen to paper, it is done with a little passion and sadness because I remember Claude. But I know from the gut feeling I get that he would want me to finish the book with great pride. May his soul rest in peace.

When Burt and I spoke, he looked at me for a second or so, then looked down to gaze at his clenched hands, with a far distant expression in his eyes, as though he was actually turning back the pages of time. Then he slowly began to speak of an incident that occurred in Mockingbird Lane. He said, 'I remember real plain the day I saw you fight a copper's son who lived a few doors down from my place and you really bashed the shit out of him too'. I never knew Burt had witnessed this fight. I was just one of
the many who fought or exchanged differences in Mockingbird Lane. Burt was quite a person. He married Phyllis Hinton, the sister of the thirties flyweight champion, Rollo. That was just a little before my time, but it gives me great pleasure to say I had the privilege of knowing him. I could speak a great deal about the ex-fighters who gave me a lot of good advice, something that will remain with me for the rest of my life.

As a worker, I toiled in many jobs, all hard yakka jackhammer types. The jackhammers were ninety-pounders, cutting away rock faces so hard that it would break the diamond-point pick used in the jackhammer every sixty seconds or so. I worked on wet borers, drilling holes for dynamite blasting on the Cahill Expressway. Also I laid prestressed concrete beams with a pump and a hydraulic jack that was capable of lifting twenty tons. Under each beam was placed a three-inch steel plate and on top of this a five-inch rubber pad for the beams to sit on. We also used the first monorail, with tipping trucks, to pour the concrete roof. It ran from the Sydney Conservatorium, somewhere near the Mitchell Library, and ended just before Woolloomooloo.

My brother, Alan, was made a leading hand on this job by Moniers, one of the leading building firms, who had the contract to build the tunnel for the Cahill Expressway. Alan made me boss of a crew that had to put into place the giant concrete beams for the roof, and in my gang was an ageing gentleman who, unusually, had the physique of a much younger man. He came from Germany, where he had the job of being one of Rommel’s highly ranked officers during the Second World War in 1942. This man singled me out to become a very good friend of his and he followed me everywhere I went on the job site. He would be so close behind me at times that I found myself tripping over him when I stopped to turn around.

All my work mates found this somewhat of a joke and labelled Gerry with the tag of my ‘shadow’. Gerry found it easy to talk to me and not to others, so he told me of an incident that happened to him during the war. He was in a situation where he had to lay down his arms and surrender to a New Zealand soldier with a white piece of rag and was walking towards him when all of a sudden he fired on Gerry at almost point-blank range. Gerry said he did not know how anyone could have survived the shot. He woke up in hospital not knowing how long he had been in there, but with a deadly souvenir — a skin graft over a wound the size of a two-bob piece at the top of his forehead, a mark that he would wear for the rest of his life.

The sun was streaming down on a very hot summer’s day and my crew were setting up the awkward steel saddle that was made to fit the ends of the prestressed concrete beams. Gerry had climbed up on top of the beam and was giving his own interpretation of supervising things. I gave a laugh at his amusing act, then climbed up onto the beam just in front of him,
to do the finishing touches on the steel saddle, in preparation for the heavy
lift to be made by our strong hydraulic jacks. Gerry was still carrying on
with his antics, and mumbling in an odd gibberish that I could not
understand. I was not taking any notice of him anymore because I was too
involved, by this time, in making sure of the safety of the saddle for the
lift. Gerry was now dancing up and down along the narrow stretch of the
beam right behind me. He had a length of steel piping in his hand which
he was swinging from side to side and over my head. The chief boss and
the worried workers, who were concerned for my safety, started screaming
out to me, trying to draw my attention to the dangerous act being performed
by Gerry, but I am afraid without any success. They were too far away, in
the compound on the other side of the huge gap where the tunnel was to
go. They knew they could not cover that distance in time to stop his crazy
actions.

I guess it wasn't my time to leave this world yet, because I just
happened to lift my head and glance at the rising dirt bank to the left of
me and I saw his shadow wielding the steel piping. I leaped from the
concrete beam in a flash, not giving a bugger about the distance of the fall.
Gerry was brought down from the beam, and when he'd had medical
attention, they found that the sun's rays beating down upon his head had
triggered something off to do with his old war wound. Gerry was never
sacked over the incident but was made to wear a helmet at all times while
working on the Cahill Expressway site.

Many Aboriginal people have helped to build some of the major sites
in Sydney. The next project we were working on was the demolition of a
place originally used as Wynyard tram subway to North Sydney. The
foreman of the job wanted to recruit a full Aboriginal gang, which he did.
We demolished the interior, ripped up the tracks, jackhammered the
platforms away, then set about building the carpark that was to replace it.
To keep up with the schedule we worked up till 11.00 at night. When we
were pouring concrete, I was elected to bring in the cement wagons.

It was at this time that a maniac, whose victims were mainly men
under the influence of alcohol, was running loose in the area. He caught
his victims in a deserted place, removed their genital organ, and left the
body in a mutilated state. We were working underground and my job meant
I had to come up the tunnel, which was pitch black at night and, to make
things a lot more bloody eerie, the tunnel had many passages running off
the side wall. This created an ideal place for derelicts to camp.

I armed myself with a piece of three by two before I left to go up the
tunnel on nightfall. I had a light that was no better than a candle. About
half-way up the tunnel I suddenly heard the rustling of paper and when I
stopped, the rustling stopped. All crazy things were running through my
mind, mainly fear. I figured, Christ, this bastard gets a hold of my pride and joy, a man's main weapon being lopped off, he may as well be dead — this bastard is in for one hell of a fight. As I stepped closer to the wall, perspiration was building up, along with the heart beat, at each step I took nearer to the opening of a passageway. The light penetrated the darkness to reveal the form of a derelict with one shoe on and one off, layering newspaper scattered around. I gave a great sigh of relief.

I have strayed a little from my amateur days, never mind! Anyway, at sixteen years of age in 1950, I made it to the New South Wales State Amateur Boxing Finals along with Ray Perry, John Howard, Jimmy Carruthers and Bruce Farthing. I was also on the training squad for the Olympic Games at one stage or another, but Mr Mac convinced me to turn professional. 'You cannot eat cups or medals', he informed me, after I had won a silver medal in the titles, so I turned professional in 1952, very much against my mother's wishes.

My first professional bout was a six-rounder at Sydney Stadium, against Tommy Bowman on 7 April 1952. It was not a successful debut in the professional ranks — I lost on a knockout in round four. A message was passed on to me by my handlers in the dressing-room after the fight, while I was taking off my boxing gear in readiness for a relaxing shower. It was 'It is only early days yet, son. You were just a little nervous in there tonight, nothing to worry about.'

I thought, shit, nothing to worry about? Here I've been, sparring with O'Neill Bell and Emory Jackson in earlier days, when I was thirteen years of age, and now I get beaten. Emory Jackson held a points decision over the great Australian, Dave Sands, on 24 February 1947, then Dave reversed the decision on 14 April 1947, by a points win. Both contests took place at the Sydney Stadium. O'Neill gave me a free ticket to see his fight with Tommy Burns for boxing with him in his gym preparation for this fight. The outcome was not so lucky, but in no way did he disgrace himself in his bout against Burns on 3 March 1947, before a crowd of some 14,000 people. Burns held the welterweight title for a month at that time. Burns was the shorter of the two by about three inches, but from what I could see, he was pretty well proportioned in the muscle department. He had Hollywood features, which was very unusual for a fighter, but had all the other characteristics of a pugilist.
As Ray Mitchell records in his book, *Great Australian Fights* [Melbourne, 1965] Burns's stance was an open one, elbows out in an orthodox style, left hand forward, his gloves at shoulder height, with his right glove carried slightly forward of the right side of his chest. Bell, with features of wrinkled tungsten steel, moved forward in a gliding motion, on well-balanced dancing feet. He had barn-door-like shoulders and displayed a mass of well-tuned muscles embedded beneath the layer of black skin, gleaming in the forty-five lights situated above ring. He showed no emotion on his face. He moved out with one intention on his mind, to do a job, and his 100 per cent class showed that he was only intended for the elite.

In my eyes Tommy took a battering, but with a heart as big as himself, he came back in the last few rounds to stop Bell in the eleventh round. This was another of the great fights that will go down in Australian boxing history. O'Neill Bell was then matched against Dave Sands, one of Australia's greatest Aboriginal fighters at that time. Sands had the potential to become a world champion, but through bad management and poorly promoted fights, he lost the long-awaited chance of achieving his goal. But for Bell, it was a hurdle too far beyond his reach: he was knocked out in round two on 5 August 1947 at Sydney Stadium.

I had the privilege of boxing with Dave Sands at McConnell's gymnasium in Abercrombie Street, Chippendale, when I was about fifteen.
years of age. As a man I could not fault him. He especially looked after his sparring partners and, in my opinion, you would have to reach into the top shelf to find a class fighter of his calibre in the square ring. I shall enlighten you on my very close association with the fighting Sands family later on.

My gifts were constantly being used in the gym as I was sparring partner for the world-class importations who came out here to fight in Australia. There was never a time when I could be accused of not holding my own with these world-rated fighters in gymnasium workouts. Even the likes of Henry Brimm had nothing on me in our sparring sessions and, just before he fought Dave Sands, we took a shower after a vigorous workout in the gym. Now, Mr Mac preferred his fighters to take showers together, so he could save money with his gas bills. I assumed that Henry knew the other fighters would not take a shower with him, out of sheer embarrassment because he was so well endowed. But I could not give a stuff simply because I had reason to believe that I was not standing behind the door when these weapons were being given out. So it did not worry me like it did the other lads. In a sense I felt that being one of his main sparring partners, and because both of us were blessed with the same black birthday suits, we had something in common. This made him feel at home enough to ask for my opinion about the prowess of Dave Sands’s fighting ability. ‘Keith,’ he said, ‘How do you think I will go with Dave Sands in this fight, Monday night?’

There was no room to shirk the issue, so I looked him straight in the eyes and said, ‘You want my honest advice, yeah man, well Henry, I am not going to feed you any bullshit. I reckon maybe if you do not hurt him in the first few rounds, he might let you go the full distance!’ That was as far as my advice went, because Henry interrupted me, angrily blowing his top before I had finished giving him my advice. He raged, ‘I will knock him out, man.

Well the outcome of that Monday night’s fight on 8 August 1950 was a total reversal of what Henry had said to me. Sands knocked him out in two rounds of their twelve-round contest at Sydney Stadium. I can always remember Henry Brimm, with that lazy eyelid of his, and how I would impersonate him on the odd occasion, in jest, with no disrespect, mind you. He fully deserved his rank amongst the best. This act of impersonating him with the lazy eyelid became somewhat habitual. So much so, in fact, that I would be doing it unbeknownst to myself, until I thought my eyelid was going to stay that way.
As a boy, naturally my energy source was unharnessed and should have been put into its right perspective from the very start. Instead it was burnt up as an amateur fighter, by sparring with professional main-event fighters and world-rated importations of all weights and sizes in the gymnasium. In this way my youthful spring of willpower and strength was being sapped up by those smart leeches. I gave them my skills in the hard workouts for their training preparation for a scheduled fight, but they did not have the decency or respect, even when I did turn professional, to pay me something for the use of my speed and skilful boxing arts.

I do not profess to have been a world beater, but I still maintain that, if I had been given the chance, and was nurtured, along with the right promotions and the other concessions that go along with it, then who knows? I sure had plenty of ability in the right department. I was a fast, clever boxer-puncher and capable of holding my own with any of the importations, who I knew were paying other sparring partners for their services. When it came my turn to be paid, it was done in words, like 'Thank you for your services Keith. You know it's a great experience for you to learn by, my son.' I certainly must have been rated high on the list of the exploited black fighters. I certainly agree with the experts that, for some of us, the best part of our assets as good fighters was left in the gymnasium working out with champions and importations.

In the space of time from thirteen years of age up until I was twenty-one, I boxed with some of the best fighters in the world, including our very own champions Dave Sands, Jimmy Carruthers, Elley Bennett, Darby Brown, Allie Sands, Russell Sands, Vince Blake, Carlo Marchini and Allen Williams, and Ernie 'Bull' Hughes at a later date. Their records are listed in Appendix 1 at the back of the book. The only two fighters who ever paid me cash in the hand for my workouts with them were Elley Bennett and Darby Brown. Darby gave me ten pounds for three rounds a day to help him get fit for his fights with George Barnes at Snowy Robbins's gymnasium in Erskineville in the mid-fifties.

What a pitiful crime that the majority of fighters knew nothing of the value of money and, if they did, it was very little. I certainly did not know, because I never had it long enough to find out. Mr Mac received the total amount of my purse for a fight from Mr Harry Miller, the pay clerk for Stadiums Limited, and took his 25 per cent, then paid me whatever was left. I don't think I really ever knew how much my takings were for a fight, I mean the money on top. But if you did not fight for McConnell or McQuillan then you found it very hard indeed to secure fights with Stadiums Limited.

There was another side of Mr Mac that I did not fully understand at the time. He would go in the corners of named fighters, but as for me, those
times were very few and far between. To be honest I won most of my fights with both of his sons-in-law, and George Bullivant, Mr Mac's chief second, in my corner. Occasionally I took a dive or was told not to use my full ability in a fight and, as consolation, later on he gave me a soft pad in the Sun Herald, by saying,

"Two of the best boxers I ever taught were Keith Saunders and Harry Wise. Both had a ton of ability, and would have won Australian titles, had they been a bit tougher on the chin. Saunders was one of the best gymnasium fighters I have ever seen. He fought several main events in New Zealand and in several suburban stadiums and looked a million dollars. Yet, on many occasions against top preliminary fighters, he finished on the wrong end of the result. Saunders had a peach of a work out with Freddie Dawson. Dawson thought he was such a great sparring partner that he gave him several nice gifts for helping him prepare for his fights.

I was lucky enough to train Ramon Fuentes, a world-rated welterweight, brought out here by Mr Art Mawson to fight George Barnes. Keith Saunders was Fuentes' main sparring partner, and on several occasions, he knocked Fuentes down in the gym. Yet, when Fuentes stepped into the ring at White City with George Barnes he won their fight...The way he went in the gym, you would have backed Keith Saunders to beat anyone. Ramon Fuentes wanted to take him back to America with him, to get him fights over there...Although...Saunders and Wise...had plenty of fights, it was the proof of their ability that they finished their careers pretty well unmarked.

The coming fight on 5 June 1952 at the Old Barn was with Stan Wilson. They dropped it down to a four-rounder, which was what my first professional fight should have been. There is a bloody big difference between amateur boxing and professional fighting. That first fight with Bowman, I was flat out from the word go. The amateurs only fought over three rounds most of the time, although I have fought the odd six or two-round fight. They were only two-minute rounds and an extra minute in the professional ranks. You would be surprised the big difference it makes. It was a very different story. This time nobody knows, but the fighter himself, what it is all about. We all act differently because we are individuals. Naturally we all go out there with the one intention, that is to win in the cleanest and quickest way we know how. If it came to the fight going the full distance, you hope to Christ you have done enough training for your legs
to carry you through. In the first round I was not making the same mistakes as I did before in my first fight.

I took my time and placed my punches well. I won on a knockout in the second round. Confidence plays a big role in one's life and that win certainly boosted my morale. Mr Mac was not letting the iron grow cold. He and Harry Miller were soon setting up another four-rounder with Clem Shearer, then a six-rounder with an opponent to be named. I figured they must have been pretty psychic to know I would beat Shearer. Nevertheless I kept on training, boxing a lot of rounds in the gymnasium and sticking to the ritual grind, which paid dividends on 4 June 1952 at Sydney Stadium. I knocked Shearer out in the first round.

Mr Mac suggested I have a week's lay-off, but told me to take care. There was a pretty important fight coming up for me and he told me, 'Get rid of the build-up out of your system and start training on the Tuesday'. You cannot do much in a week, but I did manage to release my 'build-up'. I never did have much trouble with women earlier in my life, but I found as I grew older that this was to change. When you are a teenager, twenty is old, and when you are twenty-one you tend to think you are a man and know everything. Then, you never become a man till you are forty. Once you are forty you tell lies and say you are younger, pushing the present and future into the past. Confusing isn't it?

I turned up on Tuesday for training and did the usual procedure: three rounds of shadow-sparring, two rounds on the light bag and two rounds of skipping. That was just a light preparation, before building myself up to the heavy work involved in my training schedule, in readiness for the six-round bout with Tom Ritchie at Sydney Stadium on 8 July 1952. I'd had a rigid preparation, so I was in perfect condition. I walked down the tunnel and made my way to the square ring, the centre of attraction, where forty-five lights beamed down from the upper structure of the ring. It had the appearance of a realm belonging only to those with the ambition in life to succeed in the trade they know best. But, I knew only too well that the well wishers were only in the winner's dressing-room and not in the loser's. It had a sensational feeling all of its own and it did not matter if you were fighting the main event or a preliminary. There was still that astounding feeling each time you had the opportunity of walking down that tunnel to the ring.

I believe every fight is important. You must be mentally fit as well as physically fit. You cannot worry about the last fight, because that is gone. You cannot worry about the future fight because it is not here yet. The only fight that counts is the present, and that is the one that needs your thorough concern. That is how I looked at each fight. This one was no exception. That was my attitude as I stepped through the second strand
of the ropes and into the resin box. I removed my gown and sat in my corner, and my chief second, George Bullivant, laced my gloves. My mouthguard was rinsed and inserted into my mouth, while we waited for the referee to call us to centre ring for our instructions. His last words were, 'I want a good clean fight and protect yourselves at all times. Go to your corners and come out fighting.' The bell sounded and I moved out methodically, like a well-timed machine, jabbing with rapid straight lefts. I searched for an opening and weak spots in Ritchie's make-up. I hooked occasionally with my left hand, keeping myself well balanced at all times, because he carried his power in one hand, his right. As the fight progressed into an action-packed affair, by the fifth round I knew I had his number. You can only fight as well as your opponent allows you. I waited for that mistake: it came. I feinted with a straight left, which caused him to automatically throw his own straight left. I moved my head a fraction of an inch to the right. I slipped the punch and countered with my right hand over the top, nice and short with my shoulder behind it, flush on the chin and it was all over. I won by a knockout in round five.

Mr Mac was overeager to keep the ball rolling. While I was changing to hop into the shower, Harry Miller walked into the dressing-room. Harry was an individual I could not take to. His cattish way of speech and other characteristics shit me to death. You could always tell when he was going bad — his cigar was a bumper in his mouth and was never alight. I did not know what the conversation was about between him and Mr Mac. I presumed it was a negotiation for my next fight. Mr Mac never said anything more to me, other than 'I will see you at the gym tomorrow'. He paid me six pounds for my night's work. I then went home to bed.

I believed what he told me was gospel. I totally trusted the man. On Tuesday afternoon, when I went down to the gym, he called me aside and told me to take a few days off. He said, 'You have another six-rounder, son, coming up at Sydney Stadium in a short while. Look after yourself now.' By this time I was starting to enjoy my mates' company and having a few beers, looking at things in a different light. I was becoming too easily lead. They say you can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink. Pig's arse! Take him back enough times and he will eventually drink. I was acquiring a taste for the amber fluid.

The father of one of my best mates, Ron Christie, had a good supply of grog, which he kept locked away in the bathroom. In the forties and fifties the bathrooms were built outside, away from the house itself. Ron had a way with locked doors, so my other two mates and 'Shoulders', which was Ronnie's nickname, stepped inside and started a little party of our own. After some time of whooping it up, we slowly staggered outside, figuring everyone else should join the party. But in those days, people minded their
own business and did not interfere in anyone else's hassles. That was the lifestyle. There was hell to pay when Ronnie's old man found out about it. We were barred from kicking around together for a while. You know what parents are, and were, even then. They found out that each of us was just as bad as the other and when we got together it was like sitting on a volcano waiting to erupt.

I thought it was time to scarper, get back into training. It seemed the safest place to be. As I walked through the doors of the gym, Mr Mac was the first person to greet me. 'Been looking after yourself?'

'Yes, no problems.'

'Get changed. I want you to work out with me.' Christ, I thought to myself, wouldn't this shit you, I mean, Freddie Dawson could only work out three rounds with him. Everybody in the gym hated working out with Mr Mac. I am sure he must have known something of my drinking episode, because he worked the living shit out of me, six rounds of hell with a sparring partner you can't clinch, or dance out of reach of for a spell, or set your own pace with. When you were working out with Mr Mac you were throwing punches into his big gloves the full three minutes of each round, and in the end I was so friggin' exhausted. He told me to shower. It was enough training. I sat down on the seats and took my time removing the bandages from my hands, after my gloves had been taken off. I then went downstairs and climbed onto the rubbing-down table wrapped in a couple of thick blankets to sweat and dry out. Once this was done I showered, dried myself and took my time in dressing, then made my way home.

By fight time on 8 September 1952, I had my act together. It is a fight I will never forget. On arrival at the stadium, Mr Mac went to see Harry Miller, the manager, while I weighed in and was examined by Dr Ken Smith, the stadium medical doctor. I then dressed in my boxing gear. While I was having my hands taped Mr Mac came back. I could sense there was something wrong by the way he came around in front of me and put the last pieces of tape on my left hand. He looked at me and said, 'Son your opponent did not turn up tonight, so you are fighting a substitute'.

'Who?', I asked.

His reply, 'Cyril Roberts'.

Cyril and I were both of the same pigmentation. He was a relative of the great thirties boxer, Alby Roberts. Cyril was fighting main events, double bills and was very high in the Australian ratings. I thought it could not be the same fellow, but I soon learnt differently. On paper it would have spelt out mismatch, but I was going out there to prove the arseholes wrong. For the first two rounds I gave him a thorough boxing lesson, really starting to get on top. I thought to myself, I can knock this guy out in another round.
or so. In those days you never had a boxing shield to wear in order to protect yourself from low blows. The bell rang for the third round and Cyril knew he had to do something drastic to save his reputation, as well as his rating. If he could, he would tell you to this very day he deliberately hit me with a low blow. How the referee did not see it is totally beyond me. The pain was excruciating. It was somewhere towards the end of the round and the referee gave my seconds time to revive me before the bell had sounded to end the round, so he must have known it was a low punch. I could not finish the round, or come out for the next round, or any other round for that matter. So it goes down on record as me losing on a KO in round three.

The boxing game is a hard game and there is no room for whingers, so you just have to cop it sweet. Dr Ken Smith put the testicle back in the ball bag and I left them nestled together in my jock strap all the way home. There is nothing like a good hit in the Carnegie Halls to put a damper on a man’s sex drive. I was given a couple of days off for the soreness to subside, even though I needed a longer time to heal. I was back in training for a four-rounder fight against Jerry Starlight in October. It was a tough fight. There is never an easy fight. I knocked Starlight out in three rounds.

Training was always the hardest part, but the wins gave you enough rewards to back up again. By this I mean the victory parties that followed, the women, the booze — it sure as hell was a fast life. I suggested to Mr Mac I was suffering from industrial fatigue and needed a rest. I wanted to have a shot at other things in life. To my surprise he agreed.

This put me back in full swing with the mates. Ronnie had found a place called Bundeena, somewhere out Cronulla way, through some friends of his. So we all gathered together and decided to go and stay there for the weekend. After arriving by train at Cronulla, then catching a ferry to Bundeena, we proceeded to explore the place. It had caves and bush surroundings set back from a good sandy beach, with a few tiny houses dotted here and there. It was a place of reasonable living. We had a hammock, cooking utensils and sleeping gear. It was enough for a weekend. After we got settled in, some of the locals invited us to the RSL, a makeshift sort of place just starting off — nothing elaborate. I guess they were proud of it at the time.

I remember very well, after consuming a considerable amount of beer, we were starting to feel a bit merry — well, pissed. One of the lads, Marty Rickards, passed an informal remark about one of the photos hanging on the wall, unintentionally I might add, not to incite an altercation. But some of the patrons overheard and things got out of hand, so to speak. A bloody big brawl eventuated. I knocked a few blokes over, so did Ronnie, but I am afraid they did not give me the time to stand back and count the winners or the losers. When it was all over, you can take it from me, we came out
pretty well on top. Now when I look back, it was one ripper of an all-in 
brawl. I do not mind a bit of violence now and then, as long as it is kept 
in its right place. We went back to the camp and slept it off.

The next morning we decided to go down to the beach. No one that 
I knew of had a hangover or showed any signs of having injuries, so it was 
a matter of opening a few cans of beans, grabbing a hunk of bread and that 
was breakfast. We were really roughin’ it. Then someone yelled out, ‘Grab 
a few revivers to take with us’.

By this time, the previous night was on everyone’s lips, and in such 
a small place it did not take long to circulate. Naturally the people residing 
there — you could not blame them, I suppose — came to the conclusion 
that they could not put up with rank outsiders carrying out this sort of 
caper in their little community. They formed a vigilante group, with the 
itentions of throwing us out of Bundeeena. I was thoroughly enjoying the 
beautiful warm sunshine, with the splashing of waves lapping at the rocks 
around the pier. There was a fragrant smell coming from a nearby pond, 
in which grew lilies and a type of watercress, and flowers were growing along 
the banks. The scent of the flowers was mixed with the tang of the fresh, 
salt sea air. The air cleared the cobwebs from the brain, allowing it to catch 
the eye-filling view of the fleshly beauties. Their sleek curves protruded 
from under their costumes, as they paraded on the beach after a refreshing 
swim, or rubbed suntan lotion on themselves. All this made me feel totally 
at peace with myself.

In the meantime, Ronnie’s girlfriend came down to join us at this 
little resort. She left us to go and change into her swimsuit. Christ, you 
should have seen it — a bright yellow swimsuit a blind man could have 
seen a mile away. The glare was too bright for the naked eye, but no one 
passed a remark and everyone kept their thoughts to themselves. It was 
just about then the vigilantes arrived in force. Ronnie’s girl was lying down 
alongside him. As a matter of fact we were all just laying there soaking 
up the sunshine. We pretended not to take any notice of the arsehole of 
a little group gathered together, having a consultation among themselves 
about who was going to be a spokesperson. I could see that the peace in 
myself was slowly ebbing away with the tide. Each of us had a bottle of 
beer to suck on. We decided when this beer was finished we were going 
to break camp and head for home.

The group had by now elected a number of speakers. They came upon 
us in a sudden burst, stopping within talking range. One, who I presumed 
was their leader, blurted out in a voice of authority, ‘We cannot tolerate 
this sort of upheaval going on here. We do not have a police station on this 
resort and we like to keep it that way.’ He kept on raving, but I did take 
to into account what he said about the police. If what he said was right, there
were no coppers stationed at Bundeena and if there was any necessity for the police, they would have to ring Cronulla for them to come across, so there was no problem. They continued to rave on and we just lay there in the sand and tried to ignore the whole thing. This more or less got to them. So, taking note of Ronnie's girlfriend in the bright yellow costume, the spokesperson now diverted all his attention to single out Ronnie. He said to him with the tone of viciousness in his voice, 'You're as yellow as your bloody girlfriend's costume'. I thought to myself, shit here's a goer. It is sure to be on again and no one coming from Redfern is going to cop this insult sweet, you can back it in for sure. It was like waving a red flag at a bull. We looked at one another, then automatically all jumped to our feet. The sudden movement shocked them, and shits was trumps — they backed off very smartly, with some of them protesting and putting out their arms, 'Now wait, let us talk this thing out. You know he is right'.

I quickly replied for all to hear, 'Let us cool down and talk'. As I said before, I like a little bit of violence now and then, as long as it is kept in its right place. This was definitely not the right place or the right time. So thank Christ, we could all finally see the stupidity of the whole situation, and agreed on a pact with them, under the condition that we finished the full day's enjoyment. Then we would get our gear together and move out of Bundeena. This way it looked better for us. It showed we never backed down and that we left: at our own convenience. To tell you the truth, I was glad to get out of the arsehole of a place, in the end.

Christmas, I was feeling, was an event where I was just going through the motions. It did not seem to play a big part in my life as it did before. I just took it for granted that this was an exercise in growing up. The thing was, it never occurred to me to think about it in the days when I had nothing, not that I have too much now, but Christmas was a lot better when I was a kid. All in all I did tend to brush it aside as a young man. I went back to the gym and started training after Christmas. I had a bout lined up with Ned Curry at Lithgow on 27 February 1953. I knocked Curry out in the first round.

Mr Mac advised me to keep on training. I was matched with Ray Richards at Sydney Stadium come 16 March 1953. I fought him, a good, hard, very strong puncher, and made the mistake of trading punches toe-to-toe with him in the second-last round of a four-rounder. The result was Richards KO'd me in round three. I was overconfident after winning that
first-round KO over Curry, a mistake I most certainly paid for. You're either hot or you're not.

There weren't many places for recreation in Redfern in the fifties, apart from the snooker rooms, the Prince Alfred Park bitumen tennis courts and a basketball court. We made our own recreation. We had a street pick-up football side (a team chosen from the best available players of the street) and we played occasionally on a Sunday. Each street mob or gang would field a side and most of us played club football at sometime or other. I was their goal kicker. There were some pretty good players among them. Even I had played A grade and quite a few others played A grade as ring-ins in the St George comp. So there was no lack of experience or any slouchers among the street sides. We often had pick-up sides in touch football, played in the street, with a makeshift ball made from a sugar bag folded and rolled up to size and tied with string. We also played bandball, and street hockey was played with cut off old broom handles.

However, at this particular football game, which we played at the Victoria Park, called the Uni, I did not have a pair of football boots. Alan and Colin were playing football for the Redfern Allblacks A grade side, and Colin had just bought a brand new pair of boots. So I grabbed them and shoved them in my bag, picked up the lads and headed for the Uni. The game had been in progress for some time and the opposition were in front by a try. In the second half, a three-quarter line movement from our side, just over the half-way mark on their side, looked like a certain try being on. The ball moved out along the line to me, playing outside centre. I still had plenty of pace, faster than my winger, but Kenny Hinton made a covering tackle from behind, before I could get myself into full stride. I did not see the bastard. I came down with my right foot in an awkward position and when he moved to get off me to play the ball, he came down again pressing the upper part of his body on my legs, and in so doing, he broke my ankle. As it happened, one of the lads, Batears McPherson, rode his pushbike to the game. This became my mode of transport to Prince Alfred Hospital, which was just around the corner from where we had played the game.

I was sent from casualty for X-rays, where they found my ankle was broken in three places. It was set in plaster. I was given a pair of crutches and told not to put my foot on the ground under any circumstances. Three weeks after the accident I was invited to a cabaret at Alexandria Town Hall.
My mother was against it and I explained to her, 'Mum I do not have to change gears, I am travelling slightly slower, and I'm restricted in some areas, and I cannot possibly do any damage by just sitting there talking to people. It is not necessary for me to be confined to the house. That is why I have crutches — for moving about.' I arrived at the Alex Town Hall a little late, but nevertheless I was there. The beer was flowing freely, and an abundance of food of all sorts was laid out on decorative tables, with the band in full swing.

I sat down at a table reserved for me and my mates. I was taking things easy, just talking to the lads who were gorging the food into themselves and drinking like it was going out of style. I said to myself, stuff this, I am getting in for my chop too. After a few hours had elapsed, I dispensed with the crutches and within another half hour or so I was up dancing. It appeared some of the lads had spilt beer on the floor around where I was sitting, so the plaster was soaking up the beer as well. I did not remember too much about it, until next morning, when I awoke with a very large hangover, to find the bottom of the plaster all soft and soggy.

This was Sunday. I had to go to the hospital on Monday for a check-up on the ankle. There was no soreness there, but how in the bloody hell was I going to explain the condition of the soft plaster. It was bad enough putting up with the car bashing from Mum. I could not eat — the thought of food made me feel I wanted to chuck up. I stayed in bed all day and managed to keep some tucker in my stomach at teatime. Next morning I arose to a wet, warm body sponge all over, except the leg with the plaster, this being the only way I could tub. I ate a hearty breakfast before I left for my appointment at the hospital.

I went straight to the orthopaedic clinic, where I was the first to arrive. I was called in immediately and sat on a surgical table and a doctor sat down in front of me. She undid the safety pin that held the split in my trouser leg together, to give her free access to the broken ankle, without taking my pants off. I would not have minded if she had taken them off because she was one lovely looking sort. I am very observant where beautiful women are concerned. She, too, was very observant and quickly noticed the soft plaster. I told my story before she could speak. I said to her, 'My intentions were good. I thought I could be helpful by giving Mum a hand with the washing.' I told her, 'I was only putting the clothes in the washing machine when the water splashed out over my plaster'. I do not know whether she swallowed it or not, anyway she continued to take it from there. As she cut the plaster off my leg, she gave me a lecture on the dos and don'ts, the whys and what not fors. I just sat back and tried to show her I was listening, with all my uncivvied attention, to the rule she was advising me to follow. Strangely enough I followed the instructions to the letter and
within a few months the plaster was removed from my leg (I had suffered a little more damage from the dance).

With this obstacle out of the way, I made a beeline for the gym. Mr Mac told me to be careful and ease myself back into training. I strapped my ankle above my boot with a crepe bandage while I was training. It was sore at times, but it strengthened itself up. Mr Mac knew I was short on cash, so he lined up a fight with Bob Sanders at Sydney Stadium on 6 July 1953. Bob was a good boxer-puncher and I was stopped in two rounds. Mr Mac advised me to give my ankle time to heal before I fought again. He said, 'Stick to exercises, especially on that ankle, and keep yourself fit by light workouts in the gym. You are only young and your bone will mend very quickly with proper care.' I was nineteen at the time.

The Waterfront

I was out of work, so this presented a bit of a problem, financially. I believe my luck was beginning to change for once. Alan Glynn, stepfather of Kevin Beston, a very good mate of mine, told Kevin to chase me up as soon as possible to let me know he could find both of us a job on the waterfront. He had spoken to Snowy Campbell, who was making arrangements for the two of us to pay our union fees. After this was accomplished, there was a waiting period before we received our medals, but we were registered at the pick-up centre, which was better known as the Bin, in Sussex Street, Darling Harbour.

There were two categories in the workline: street or deep sea. Both of us were working street in the same gang. I was a little hesitant at first because of my colour. I soon found out different. I was treated just the same as the next bloke working alongside of me. It makes one feel a part of justice has been done and you fit in with the human race belonging to this country. The people of the waterfront, to the best of my knowledge because of their union discipline, had respect for their fellow members and formed a mateship that eliminated discrimination. There were somewhere between forty-five and fifty different nationalities working on the Sydney waterfront then. For the next four months or so I resigned myself to my job and tripling the amount of exercise on my ankle.

My thoughts now wandered back in time to my sister’s daughter, Nervice, when she was a baby. She was the apple of my eye from the first time I set eyes on her. I pushed her everywhere in her stroller. The incident that arose to my mind was the time I took her to the picture show one Saturday afternoon in Cardiff. I remember it well, like it was yesterday. There was something wrong with her stroller, so I carried her the mile or so to Cardiff. You would not read about it in the Women’s Weekly. I had
her sitting on my lap inside the picture theatre and no more than a couple of minutes after we sat down, I heard a peculiar rumbling noise coming from the direction of her tummy. I picked her up to investigate the rumbling more thoroughly. Then, squalch, out from both sides of her napkin, all over me, came a runny yellow motion, that soaked straight into my clothes. There was nothing I could do about it. The smell, along with the uncomfortable situation I was in with my clothes, forced me to leave immediately.

The process of walking home with the searing heat of the sun bearing down on me dried the substance all right, but it also increased the odour. When I arrived home, my family laughed and made a joke of the whole thing. My mother informed me later I was a very fortunate lad to have a baby initiate me with her evacuation of the bowels. It was considered that it would bring me good luck in the near future. I can assure you I did not need this kind of luck.

Old father time had moved on since then and Nervice was growing into a beautiful young girl with a voice to match. Boy, Nervice could have been anything; the similarity of her voice with Connie Francis's was something again. If you were in a room on your own and heard the two voices from another room close by, unless you were a real pro, you could not pick the difference. To me Nervice was more than just kin, she was a friend, a mate, a true sticker, one who would not stand for anyone putting me down, no matter if it was right or wrong. You never spoke bad of her uncles in her company. A bond between us began, I suppose, from the time she was a baby and initiated me with my good luck.

I once took her to make a recording at Coogee. I believe the club was Stones. They made a mistake with her name by putting Navis Scales on the label of her disc instead of Nervice Saunders. It was a standing joke between us for a long time. Nervice had many disappointments in her life, but never showed the hurt that was inside her. She backed-up again every time there was a let down.

Nervice and I moved pretty much in the same circles and I sort of kept a watchful eye on her. She had her pursuers, but these premature relationships never eventuated into anything with a solid foundation for security. She played the role of a young girl doing all the things in life she wanted to do, but I knew different. She was acting out a role to please other people and receiving no benefits for her good-hearted efforts. I admired her — she was a goer who refused to give up. She knew all the lurks and perks for other people, but used very little for herself. It was a sad state of affairs for someone who had so much to give.

You can only walk into a forest half-way — beyond that point you are walking out of the forest. Nervice's gruelling life never really reached that
climax when the gratifying release from hardship means that life becomes better after the half-way mark. I now feel I should have done more for her in helping her to pursue a career in the entertainment world. I do not suppose I would feel such a sense of guilt — if only. If is a small word with a big meaning. To me now it seems I just closed the gates after the bull had got out.

Nervice sang at the gym on Sunday nights. I went to many talent quests and to the best of my knowledge she won them all. She was an outgoing person who loved life as an entertainer but never reached her goal. She was also a mate that stuck like shit to a blanket and a mother that loved her children to the very last, someone that makes me very proud to say ‘That was my niece’, every time anyone chances to recall her name. Those good people who mingled in her company had nothing but praise for her. This apple of my eye gave her all to her big family of eight and, in the process of doing so, passed away at the age of thirty-nine. She was a young flower cut down, that never really grew into full bloom, God bless her.

We cannot stop time that ages us, but we can keep the good memories locked away for as long as we choose. For me I chose to keep this special memory of Nervice locked away with me for the rest of my life. Do not surmise that my story is jumping all over the place. There is a very simple explanation — that is what my life was all about, jumping all over the place.

_Nervice Saunders (left) and a friend at Mount Druitt, Sydney, in the 1970s (photograph from the author’s collection)._
Under the circumstances the most I did over the next period of three or four months was training in the gym and working on my ankle. For some reason or another, I seemed to be called upon to do a great deal of sparring, far too much for a person who was supposed to be doing only light training. The following year I was matched against Nev Lynch in a four-rounder at Sydney Stadium on 11 January 1954. I felt myself coming back with strong determination when I scored a knockout in two rounds.

Back in the dressing-room of the Old Barn, Mr Mac, with a very stern business-like look on his face, paid me thirty bob, then told me, 'You are fighting one of the three ten-rounders'. This was a triple main event at Sydney Stadium on in seven days' time. 'You must keep training son', he said. 'Your opponent will be another Aboriginal, Coogan Brown, from Newcastle.'

After I trained the required six days, I found out on the 18 January 1954 fight night, after we faced each other and shaped up after the bell rang, that my opponent was a southpaw. They were very few and far between in the boxing game. To top it off he was a good one. I was told, at some stage or another, the best punch to use against a southpaw was a right cross — pig's arse! After a few fast exchanges of punches, I tried to manœuvre him for a shot with my right hand, but in doing so, he countered with a rip to my body and spot on into my solar plexus. I went down gasping for air. My wind was cut off like a well-bladed axe severing a firemen's hose in full thrust.

There is nothing like bout experience to improve your knowledge. My followers entertained the idea that the rot had set in. Those were not the ideas of Mr Mac — there was still more flesh to be spread around. I do not think any one person can put a figure on the number of rounds I have boxed in the gymnasium. My way of thinking is, this is where the damage is done. It is like everything else — too much of one thing done in excess must eventually do damage. The thing was I never lost the thread that was in my mind on account of those losses. I bounced back again and KO'd Bernie Brodigan in one round at Leichhardt Stadium on 25 February 1954.

The winning streak looked like being on again, because I then beat Keith Gresty at Sydney Stadium on 1 March 1954. My trainer, along with Harry Miller, decided it was time for a change of scenery, and chose to send me interstate to fight on 12 March 1954 at Brisbane Stadium in Albert Street, Brisbane, but still under the promotion of Stadiums Limited. The distance was twelve three-minute rounds. My opponent, Doug Thorpe, was a few pounds heavier than me, something I was beginning to become aware
of with most of my opponents, but what the heck, I gave him one hell of
a fight for five rounds. At least he knew he was in a scrap. I can assure you,
the crowd went away well satisfied. I always thought I gave my best in a
bout. That is what it is all about. I was to find out different at a later stage
in my career, during which I was to fight in four capital cities, many country
towns and across the Tasman.

At this time many middle-class young women, who had lived in the
outer suburbs, came into Redfern for their good times. I am sure if their
parents had known, they would have had a blue fit. I was eventually to marry
one of these young ladies, much further up the track in life, but at this
time I was still involved with training. I always said I would never get
married. I wanted to stay single just like my Uncle Bart, Bartholomew
Robertson, my mother’s brother. He was a railway worker, one of the best
street fighters on the north coast, come herbalist, a great chatter-up of
females, but lived his life out at the age of eighty-odd years still single.
To me that was just the right sort of life — it seemed to suit me right down
to the ground. I personally believe that you take life in both hands and shake
the shit out of it, because you are a long time dead. So how can one be
blamed for living, because that is exactly what I did, although it nearly
cost my life on a few occasions. But I think that is the thrill you receive
taking a calculated risk. I guess that was my kick anyway.

This story proves it. I was with close friends who owned the sly grog
place in Caroline Street, Redfern. I had just left the premises and was on
my way home with a few skinfuls under my belt, when I was approached
by a drunken derelict in search of a drink. I told him I did not know of
any such place where he could buy a bottle of plonk, except the pub ‘and
it is far too late for that mate’. With this I walked away. He was not giving
up and followed me across the street, saying, ‘Listen mate, I have this sheila
down the road and need a bottle of leg opener, you know how it is’.

‘All right, wait here’, I said, and went down home. All I could find
was a half a bottle of wine. I had a fair idea who he might be, so I filled
the bottle with water. I came back, handed him the bottle of wine and said
to him, ‘She’s on the house mate’, but he dropped the eight shillings in
my hand, then disappeared into the night. I retraced my steps and went
inside, only to be disturbed after a short while by someone knocking on
the front door. I opened the door to be confronted by the supposedly derelict
drunk, who informed me he was a policeman. ‘I am arresting you for selling
liquor without a license!’ It still has me stumped how he found out where
I lived in such a short space of time, because I didn’t see him follow me,
but it cost me a fine and that was it.

My brother Noel was down from Taree and was knocking about in
the wrong company. He was drinking in a hotel in Newtown and got into
a fight. Noel backs down from nobody, so after flattening one of his opponents he had to take on the rest of them. One of them had a knife clenched in his fist. He stabbed Noel several times. Noel was rushed to hospital. He was lucky that none of the stab wounds penetrated his lung. There was a police investigation and I am afraid everyone had sealed lips. I found out about this incident while drinking at the Everleigh Hotel. I then went home and found a thin-bladed boning knife. I shoved it down the front of my trousers, then made my way up to Lawson Street and hailed a cab for Newtown. I opened the cab door and jumped in, forgetting about the knife, which penetrated my testicle bag. I jumped out of the cab in pain and returned back home.

Annie Oakley

I was moving in another circle at this particular time, mixing in company on the other side of the tracks. I was not a racist myself so I never sat in judgement of anyone else’s activities. I have always been an adventurer myself and if you told me not to go to a certain place or whatever, because it had a bad reputation, you could back it in for sure that that would be the first place I would make for. It was something I had to experience.

It so happened I was on R and R from the Thorpe fight in Brisbane. I was involved with a chick, who had a very close girlfriend, and I agreed to take both of them out for a night on the town. We had been drinking at quite a few hotels in the city, in a sort of pub crawl fashion. After we’d consumed a large amount of alcohol and the night was almost spent, we decided to go to a private hotel somewhere in the vicinity of Central Station. We paid for two single rooms, the bird I was with in one room and her girlfriend in the other. My chick was bombed, so she crashed out. Her girlfriend was very quick to sum up the situation and took full advantage of it. So with a good night, what was left of it, in total sneaky bliss, not all was lost.

A few weeks had passed and I thought everything was rosy, until, in the early hours of one morning during the week, a car pulled up outside my home in Louis Street, Redfern. The occupants got out to arouse me by rapping on the front door. My sister awoke first. She was watching everything over the balcony. As I arose and dressed, my sister said to me in a very concerned voice, ‘Be careful, Keith, I just saw one of those fellows hand a silver object, which I think is a knife, to one of those girls’.

I slipped on the last of my attire, a white long-sleeved shirt, and replied, ‘Don’t worry’, as I equipped myself with two lead weights that I used for training in the gym. I groped my way down the stairs to the front door.
I opened the door and took into view two women and four men. One woman, with an exceptionally good figure, in a tight-fitting white dress, was standing directly in front of me in the street. As I advanced from the veranda onto the footpath, I noticed she had her right hand behind her back. A few abusive words were spoken. She then shifted her stance, legs apart with the white woollen dress clinging to every inch of her beautiful curves, and drew the hand from behind her back to reveal a gun.

The milkman had just begun his run. The others realised that he might see and tried to stop her, but she took a step backwards and fired. I grabbed my chest expecting to see blood all over my white shirt, but she only fired to frighten us. They must have been blanks, thank God, but I covered the distance from the footpath into the doorway like a flash. Nothing came of it and the dust just settled.

So with this little escapade passed out of the way, I redeemed myself and went back into training for my next encounter with Snowy Wilson at the Old Barn in June 1954. It was a tag-get tagged sort of affair, just being a matter of who was lucky enough to get in with the knockout punch, until I got tagged in round four in a six-rounder. It was very hard to maintain a rating if you had one. I was fighting four-rounders, six and ten-rounders, then the next fight I would drop back to a four-rounder. The next time up, I would be fighting a main event, which consisted of twelve rounds. I once fought twelve three-minute rounds for twelve quid and the place packed out. Christ, a man was up and down like a bloody yo-yo. I grew to love the fight game. Why, I do not know. I remember someone once saying to me, 'Keithy, fighters come and go mate, but trainers and managers stay on'.