

the press
conference

with FRANK WARREN

Legendary boxing promoter Frank Warren has had more scraps with the newspapers than most of his top fighters have had world-title bouts. To date, his libel action fight figures are: fought 40, won 39 with KOs, lost one on a technicality. Clearly not someone to mess with once you get over the keyboard.

During 25 years in boxing, Warren has also taken on all-comers to become the main contender who stages the biggest fights. He even came out swinging just nine days after he was shot by a masked gunman in November 1989. Former boxer Terry Marsh stood trial for the shooting, but was acquitted.

One battle that had Warren on the ropes was with Kelvin MacKenzie, who frenziedly splattered him across *The Sun*, most notably when he was rumbled bobbing and weaving with a flower-stall girl.

For the son of a bookmaker who was brought up in a council flat in Islington, the boy Warren has done good. Now 53, he is worth a few quid and has a country mansion in Hertfordshire, a pad in Belgravia and a home on the Algarve. He has six children aged between 15-30 from two marriages, the second of which happily continues with former *Vogue* model Susan.

I meet Warren at his empire HQ not far from his home. In Frank's large office, there's a renovated Wurlitzer in one corner and stacked everywhere is rare boxing memorabilia awaiting auction. He's been having a clear out. Warren is slighter and more quietly spoken than you might expect. He's smooth, bright as a button, up front and likes a laugh.

He is neatly snuggled into multiply cashmere, from his black casual top, neatly tucked into to dark grey checked trousers, to his fluffy socks. The shoes are Gucci loafers with chunky soles.

Frank, you've had a few run-ins with the papers over the years, fired off a few writs, what's it all been about?

If you are a kid where I come from, if somebody upset you, you'd have a bloody row about it. You'd have a fight, sort it out. Now, you can't do that in business, can you? You are left with putting the record straight through the law, so I've sued a few people. For me, it's never been about seeking damages, but as a way to redress the balance if something has been wrong, and get an apology. I had a front-page apology once, but normally they are only three or four lines hidden somewhere, which ain't always great. But what's important is that it's printed and people see it — especially other journalists.



“I never identified Terry Marsh. How I was brought up, you don't point your finger at anybody. But I know who shot me”

What's been your worst experience with papers?

Well, it has to be all the stuff that was down to Kelvin MacKenzie. I have never met him, so I have no idea why he was so interested, but for some reason he got a real hard-on about me and was desperate to bury me. It was going on before the shooting, but when that happened he just went for it. I got caught out with a bird who sold her story and he ran that for nine days. Four days of that was on the front page. Why? I'm a boxing promoter, not a star. All that crap about Elton John and the rent boy only went on for three or four days. I knew it was personal at the time and I've been told since that it was definitely personal. It was such crazy stuff — I couldn't believe what was going on. He was determined to do me in and I would love to have seen him at the time. I vowed I would have knocked him spark out. If we'd got in an argument, I would have absolutely chinned him. That may not be the thing to say, but that's exactly how I felt.

But surely you could have shut him up by suing, especially over the girl story?

Nah, what was I gonna do? It's like when the papers said David Mellor screwed in a Chelsea kit. We all

“MacKenzie had such a hard-on for me that he was finding every angle he could to stick the knife in”

know he didn't, but you can't sue a newspaper for saying that when the main story is true. OK, I screwed a bird, but I didn't do the other 90 things that they wrote. They had me looking for houses with the girl and the next minute I am leaving my wife. It was a load of bollocks, complete and utter rubbish, but if I had gone to court over all that, I would have to live the other stuff again.

I can remember *The Sun* doing a two-page spread drawing a comparison between me and Donald Trump, who was having money problems in America. It was pathetic. What the fuck have I got in common with Trump? MacKenzie had such a hard-on for me that he was finding every angle he could to stick the knife in. To me, that was the unacceptable side of journalism because it wasn't journalism — it was absolutely creating news out of nothing. I can take it, but at the time I had four little kids, a wife, and a lot of financial pressures. I kept thinking, Why are you doing this? It was total abuse of his position.

So I take it you and Kelvin don't get together often for old time's sake?

When he took over Talk Radio, he was struggling. He was desperate to get my boxing and he wrote saying,

Portrait
Phil Adams



by Rob McGibbon

FRANK'S NEWS SCHEDULE



Newspapers

I'm a bit of a newspaper addict and I read them all. I get the lot in the office every day — from the *FT* to the *Daily Star* — and get a stack delivered to the house at weekends. I usually begin with *The Telegraph*, then go through the tabloids. I get into the sports pages first to see what boxing is in there. *The Times* and *The Guardian* have very good sport. I also have a guy in the office who downloads all the stuff on the internet about boxing that's in the American papers. I love it all. I know what I am looking for and I read pretty fast so I get through all that and the papers in about an hour. I also keep up with the news pages and read all the supplements.

Columnists

I like all the boxing writers. They all have a different take on things. Colin Hart is the doyen and has seen it all, done it all. So I rate him. Ron Lewis on *The Times* is very good. I like all sport, so I read all kinds of sports writers. I like Paul Hayward in the *Mail* and Martin Samuel manages to write for the *News of the World* and *The Times*, which can't be easy, but he does them both well. I love my gardening, so I read

gardening writers such as Monty Don in *The Observer* and Bunny Guinness in the *Sunday Telegraph*. They are both great. I also love music and concerts — opera, classical, rock, soul, all sorts — so I read a lot of reviews. One excellent reviewer is Simon Price on *The Independent*.



Magazines

I subscribe to *Newsweek*, *The English Garden*, *Vanity Fair* and *Private Eye*. I've been mentioned in that a few times, but nothing too bad. I think it's brilliant.

Television and Radio

I am a BBC man. I am an early riser — I'm rarely up later than 6am — and put the TV straight on to BBC news. For radio, Radio 4 or Five Live for news or sport, Classic FM or Smooth for music.

Web

I have my own site — www.frankwarren.tv — which is becoming an important part of the business. People can access live fights, radio commentary and a massive library of fight footage. We can have 600,000 people tuning in for a big fight. I have four guys working on the site full time.



No interview would be complete without some discreet product placement. We aim to be a bit more up front, so feel free to pull The Blatant Plug...

Joe Calzaghe takes on Jeff Lacy on 4 March in Manchester in the super-middleweight division in one of the outstanding fights I have promoted in my 25 years in the sport.

"Let's put water under the bridge". I was thinking, Yeah, it's hard when you put your own money up to run a business, but when I was starting out he loved trying to finish me. I sent him a letter saying simply, "Talk is cheap". I would have nothing to do with him.

What he did was the worst experience I've ever had. Forget the shooting. Bang, shot, bit of pain, back at work within nine days. In business you take all the shit because it's what you have to do, but all that stuff in the papers, you have to take it home at night. It was 24 hours continuous crap. I am reading this stuff thinking my wife has now got to read it.

I'm sure MacKenzie couldn't take it. I remember at the time the *Mail* caught him on holiday with a bird in Barbados, but they played it down. It was obviously the old matey thing with the editors and I thought I would like to have seen you get some of the real treatment. If I see him, I'll still chin him! Nah — I'm joking. But seriously, it depends what mood I'm in. I saw him once, at some do. I walked in and someone said, "He's over there, Kelvin MacKenzie" and he ran out of the room. He gives it all that jack-the-lad, I'm one of the blokes shit, but he's not, is he? He comes from a middle-class family and talks absolute bollocks. He strikes me as a bully and they all come unstuck.

I'll send Kelvin your best when I next speak to him! How would you sum up your media image based on the newspaper coverage?

I don't know. It's hard to say how others see me. What would you say it is?

I would say most people have you down as a ruthless businessman, a hard bastard, bit of a gangster. How am I doing?

(Laughs merrily.) I don't see myself as any of that. I don't think I am ruthless. In some ways, I am a little

bit soft. Frank Maloney says I look after fighters too well and to my detriment, but that's how I am, that's me. If anything, I go over the line of being friends in business, but I treat people how I expect to be treated. If you want to take a liberty with me, then fine, we all know where we stand. I am quite determined and I don't stand for nonsense, but that is true of most businessmen. I would say 90 per cent of the people who work for me have been with me since I started. They have been loyal and I trust them. I like my food, fine wine, music. I like cars, nice clothes, all the materialistic things. I like books, reading about the environment, gardening, time with my family. My life's not all about fighting.

So where did this image come from? Was it the shooting?

Nah, it was going on before then. When I first started, boxing was run by a cartel and I couldn't get a foot in. It was me against the rest and I loved it, it was like an adventure. The more they tried to knock me back, the more I relished it. But journalists had to work with these other guys to stay in the know about boxing and they were told, "Don't help him, don't publicise his shows." So there was a lot of negative stuff and innuendos in the papers. It was ridiculous, untrue stuff that I sued over — and won. And when I got shot the papers went crazy, so I had to keep fighting. Boxing is a strange old business and it is very high pressure. All anyone cares about is delivery — the boxer, the TV companies, your customers. And our business is all about, "What have you done for me today?" It is selfish and people suffer from amnesia.

Sometimes you can't believe what has happened and that's where the ruthless side comes out, if there is one. But there are many times when I should have been ruthless and nailed their balls to the floor from day one, but I didn't and got too friendly. Looking back, I wouldn't have done it any differently. It's not hard to make enemies. Anybody can do that, especially in boxing, but I have made more friends than enemies. I think the perception of me is pretty OK these days. It is more softened, but I haven't done anything deliberate to change it, I am just the same. When I was younger I was probably a little bit more aggressive, but I had no choice. If I had allowed what was going on to happen, I would have been trampled on and out of the game. I stood my ground with the other promoters and the papers.

If you could balance the press-generated image of boxing, what would you say?

People have had this Hollywood image of it from the '40s and '50s when it was controlled by the Mob. Thankfully, that has pretty much gone by the wayside now. I'd like people to understand that it's not some little backstreet operation. Like soccer, boxing has moved on and is more corporate than people think. Boxing will always be about working-class guys

because that's where most fighters come from, but boxers are not all thick individuals, some are very bright, and boxing is not about uncultured people. Boxing has got a lot of 'street cred' these days. The audience that is dying in newspapers is between the ages of 15-35, well that is our strongest audience. A lot of the geezer magazines like *Nuts* and *GQ* do a piece on boxing now. Because of the cut-backs on newspapers, a lot of the specialist boxing correspondents have gone, but we still do well with coverage. Our internet site is a very important vehicle because that's where a lot of the younger fans turn to for information.

You've had a weekly column in the News of the World for three years. Do you write it or just put your name to it?

I write it myself every week and for 52 weeks a year! It was alien to me in the beginning and they got someone to do it with me, but I'd sooner do it myself. Trouble is, it was the biggest headache I've ever had. I used to spend more time worrying about the column than I did the business. I'd lay in bed at night thinking, what am I going to do this week? God, it drove me round the bend, but I'm well in the flow of it now and I enjoy it. It's fun and I get to say what I want about boxing. I usually write it on Thursday mornings. It takes a couple of hours to do between 800 and 1,000 words and I have an understanding of what they are looking for, so they don't sub it much. They get good feedback from the column and they pay me a good whack.

It would be crazy not to speak about the shooting. What are your thoughts about it all these years on? What's it like being shot?

It bloody hurt! It was a bit of shock to start with. I really thought it was a joke. Suddenly I see this fella shaking in front of me holding a gun. He missed, then it jammed, then it went again, then he missed, then bang, I got hit. I lost half my lung where the bullet went through and I went from 12 stone to nine after just nine days in hospital.

It was tough, but I had no time to think about it because I was about to sign a syndication agreement with a bank for the London Arena. After the shooting the banks crapped themselves, it fell away and it had a domino effect on my businesses. If that deal had been secured, I would have been flying. They have recently got planning permission to build towers on each corner and it's been sold for £200 million. I owned 70 per cent of that so the shooting cost me that and more.

As for Terry Marsh, I didn't arrest him and, hand on heart, nor did I ever identify him. How I was brought up, you didn't point your finger at anybody. Do I know who shot me? Of course I know who it was, but I could never identify that person because he wore a mask. Most importantly, I look to the positives out of it all and I think it made me a better person. All I had ever done before was focus on business. It made me appreciate my family and kids more, and I also think I became a more rounded person.

So, really, getting shot was a good thing? You became a better person and it gave you a much bigger profile. But would you change it if you could?

Er, yes! I would prefer not to have been shot. That's a no-brainer, that one!

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Frank Warren's FANTASY FLYERS

What would be the Fantasy Headline of the story you would most like to read?

"Israel and Palestine Sign Peace Agreement". I think the on-going problem there is the major cause of all the trouble we have in the world at the moment. If that could be sorted, I am sure everything else would fall into place.

What would be the Fantasy Headline involving yourself?

"Warren Peace". I am known for organising fights, so it would be pretty amazing to be the man who managed to negotiate peace between those two sides.

What would be the headline you most dread?

"America Changes Constitution To Allow George W. Bush A Third Term". That

bloke is a nightmare and I can't wait till he's gone.

Who would you most like to interview? What question would you ask?

The most impressive person I have ever met is Nelson Mandela. I got invited to his house while I was in South Africa for a fight in 1996. He was the most amazing person. I would like to meet him again and I would ask how he managed to bury his resentment of white people after all those years in prison under apartheid rule.

What question would you never answer?

I always have an answer.

What headline would you like on your obituary?

"Frank Warren — Out For The Count".