Mike Tyson - ‘a dirty face with an angel’
Michael Glover and Clive Palmer

Research Preface

The story behind Mike Tyson is one of incredible highs and lows. His record in the ring involves both high profile wins and losses, while his record outside it conveys a number of crimes and misdemeanours the pinnacle of which is the ten year prison sentence for the rape of Desiree Washington in 1991. There is, however, a sequence of events in the years leading up to Washington’s rape which moulded Tyson’s behaviour both inside and outside of the ring which culminated in this most heinous of crimes.

Torres (1989) reveals how Tyson began a career in crime at the tender age of seven when he broke into the shop below the flat he lived in. He entered through the floor boards. In a particularly insightful story into Tyson’s future behaviour involving sexual violence, Torres (1989) tells of when Mike accidentally broke a toy gun he was given as a present along with a doll. In an act of aggression Tyson violently snapped the head off the doll and in an interview with Torres years later said, “I felt an immense thrill when I ripped the head off the doll. It was like an orgasm” (Torres 1989: 17).

Tyson’s aggression and violence developed as he increased in age and size. After he was picked on in his early school years, however the future heavyweight champion of the world one day decided it was time to fight back and discovered he had a talent for inflicting injury. Torres (1989) describes how this was the beginning of a close relationship between Tyson
and violence. After retaliating against his bullies “Mike did not wait to be provoked. Now it was he who started things” (Torres 1989: 27).

Torres (1989) also reveals how Tyson was introduced to, participated in and saved from a life of stealing, mugging, gun crime and drug taking. Sugden (1996) states how Tyson’s behaviour saw him arrested 40 times by the time he was 12 years old. It was at this age when Tyson began living in Elwood Cottages, a special wing of the Tryon School and Youth Correctional Facility for the deeply troubled. It was here that Tyson first began boxing with Bobby Stewart, a counsellor at the school and former boxer. Spotting his potential, Stewart referred Tyson to boxing trainer Cus D’Amato who took the young boy under his wing, teaching him the art of boxing and turning him into the wrecking machine of the late 1980s. His criminal past, however, seemed to have left its mark on Tyson and would never entirely leave him. “Mike’s demons were pulling on him and he never seemed to try to free himself from their grasp. Still he dreamed big dreams” (Torres 1989: 74).

Tyson’s professional career began in 1985 and the following year, according to Sugden (1996), he became the youngest ever world heavyweight champion at the age of just 20. He went on to be the first undisputed world heavyweight champion, holding all three major belts at the same time. However, Sugden (1996: 184) states that “after the deaths of his guardian and mentor Cus d’Amato and his manager Jim Jacobs, Tyson appeared to lose the ability to distinguish between himself as predator in the ring and his persona outside it”. Tyson was left to deal with a mixture of incredible wealth, fame and popularity, and without D’Amato and Jacobs to control him a return to his childhood behaviour was inevitable. For example, Sugden (1996: 184) explains that, “Tyson’s physical development was matched only by the size of his ego, which was inversely proportional to the underdeveloped state of his super-ego (social conscience)”. Tyson lost the undisputed crown in 1990 to James Douglas, who himself relinquished it at his first defence to Evander Holyfield (Bellfield, 2006).

In July 1991, Mike Tyson’s criminal background and, as Sugden (1996) claims, his lack of social conscience found a new depth of depravity when he raped beauty queen Desiree Washington in an Indianapolis hotel room. Piper (1995: 77) talks of Tyson’s sexuality, saying that it “hinged on violence and a disregard for consent”. On the witness stand, Washington, according to the Washington Post (1992), told of how Tyson “lured her to his hotel room on a date and forced her to have sex as she tried to fight him off”. In
February 1992, an Indianapolis jury convicted Mike Tyson of raping Desiree Washington and he was sentenced to ten years in prison with the final four years suspended (New York Times 1992).

Tyson was released in March 1995 and chalked up three more knock out victories within a year, one of which regained him the WBC heavyweight title from Frank Bruno (ESPN, 2002). In late 1996, Tyson would fight who many thought would be his first genuine test since release from prison when he faced Evander Holyfield. Originally, the fight was due to take place in autumn 1991 for the undisputed crown, which by now belonged to Holyfield, but did not occur due to Tyson’s rape conviction (Bellfield 2005). As stated on ESPN (2002), Holyfield won via technical knock-out and took Tyson’s WBA heavyweight title in the process. It was the rematch the following year, however, which plunged Tyson into controversy once again. As reported on Slam!Boxing (1997), Tyson was disqualified and later banned for biting a chunk out of Holyfield’s ear in retaliation to repeated head butting by his opponent.

Following this event, it was a general view that Tyson’s once awesome boxing ability had diminished as a result of his time in prison, although it did not stop him going back to prison in 1999 for nine months on an assault conviction. Another comeback fight came in 2002, when Tyson eventually faced Lennox Lewis after being banned once again following, according to Anderson (2007: 74), “Tyson’s threatening demeanour at a pre-fight press conference in New York, which ended in a fracas”. Tyson, by now somewhat a washed up and past it fighter, was knocked out in the eighth round. The following year, Tyson sunk to his lowest position when he declared himself bankrupt (Biography.com, 2010).

**NB:** The title of this chapter is a play on words from the title of a famous film called Angels with Dirty Faces (1938) starring James Cagney, Pat O’Brien and Humphrey Bogart. It was a story of children growing up to be gangsters, learning to live by ‘street rules’ but presided over by a ‘higher force’ looking after them. The parallels with Tyson’s life history are striking – even to the use of boxing for the young disadvantaged boys in their society.

**Reference List**


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Mike Tyson stood at the foot of a king-size bed inside his penthouse hotel suite. He stared for a moment at the woman sitting on top of the dark, silk sheets. Her ample backside placed perfectly on the edge of the mattress as she glanced around the room waiting for her host to make conversation.

Nothing could be further from Tyson’s mind than conversation. He continued his role as voyeur from the foot of the bed, his target seemingly confused by the silence on their ‘date’. Dressed all in black in designer track pants and t-shirt, Tyson could feel his muscles tense as he contemplated what he could do once he overpowered the girl. His biceps stretched the t-shirt a size too small and he could feel the adrenaline pumping through his veins. His immediate needs would soon be met, but never fully satisfied.

“So, when’s your next fight?” Desiree Washington asked from her position on the bed in an attempt to get the conversation ball rolling. Her voice was cocooned in unawareness of what Tyson was planning to do with her.

There was no response. It was as if Tyson had seen her lips move but not heard the sound coming out. He simply stared sadistically at the movement of her full lips, painted a vibrant red.

Desiree could now sense something was wrong. Still she waited for a reply from her ‘date’ but still none came. She prayed he was just shy and did not know what to say to her, that his stationary pose and eerie silence was just a nervous reaction while he searched his brain for small talk.

“I think I’d better leave,” Desiree said as she began to get up from the bed, worried by what the plan all along had been for her since Tyson persuaded her to meet him here on a date. As Desiree edged towards the door, unsure
of what her ‘date’ would do next, she felt a solid grip on her wrist and an overpowering force against her desired direction of movement.

“I want you to stay,” Tyson demanded in his high-pitched and lisp-packed speech. With his hand still surrounding her wrist, he gave her a tug towards him and her inferior in weight body duly obeyed as she stumbled back towards the king-sized bed. He was a heavyweight champ, and he was not about to let this lightweight, let alone female lightweight, dictate what was going to happen.

Tyson could feel his body heat begin to rise in anticipation of what was about to take place, what he had wanted to happen since he first lay eyes on this woman just a few hours ago. He took a step towards Desiree and she fell back onto the bed. The gap between the two bodies was narrowed as Tyson took another step towards her, ignoring her plea to let her go.

A bang on the door pulled Tyson from his concentration. Another bang and this time a voice followed. “Are you okay in there? Mr Tyson, what’s going on?” The voice seemed calm and in control but Desiree’s fear still concentrated her stare at the giant heavyweight standing over her.

The door again was shaken by a resounding bang. Tyson, now disturbed from his plan, strode over to the door with violent intentions and looked through the peep hole. It was a man he did not know, yet, oddly, a man who still looked familiar. Something told Tyson, something entangled in all his violent and abusive nature, to trust this man.

Opening the door, he saw the man’s face clearly; a weathered complexion with dark skin and a clean shaven jaw. He stood just over six foot tall and wore a navy pinstripe suit with a dazzling red tie as well as a trusting look and spoke in a deep voice. “Mr Tyson, I think you should stop and think about what you’re doing,” he bellowed, looking him square in the eye.

Tyson turned to look at the frightened looking girl on the bed. For some reason the words spoken by the mystery man at the door stuck inside Tyson’s head. The heavyweight walked over to one of the big sofas in his penthouse suite and sat down, wondering if he would actually have gone through with any of the sadistic thoughts in his head. Out of the corner of his eye Tyson saw Desiree Washington seize her opportunity and dash out of the open door to freedom. He didn’t care; the man in the pinstripe suit and dazzling red tie had got inside his head.
“Who are you, anyway?” Tyson said in his high-pitched voice. But the man in the pinstripe suit had already disappeared down the corridor.

Mike Tyson stood in the corner of the ring, his trainer shouting boxing buzz words at him as he stared at Evander Holyfield, his opponent, in the opposite corner. This was it, fight night; the chance to win back the undisputed heavyweight crown. But in the few seconds before the first round bell Tyson couldn’t help but think back three months to when he was in his hotel room with Desiree Washington. What if he’d raped her? He wondered if he would be stood in this ring right now if he had not been disturbed by the man in the pinstripe suit and had gone through with his plans to self gratify?

The ring of the bell for the first round suddenly brought Tyson back to reality and drained his body of the nostalgic feelings. Tyson went at Holyfield in his usual attacking style, trying to knock his opponent out in the first few minutes as he had done so many times in the past. Holyfield, though, was a much higher class of fighter.

Tyson would swing his sledgehammer punches into the body and head of Holyfield, but his opponent would just take them as if they were nothing. At every opportunity, knowing it would frustrate his opponent, Holyfield would grapple with Tyson; hugging him close to stem the flow of sledgehammer blows.

“You can’t touch me, boy,” Holyfield whispered into the ear of Tyson while in one of their close quarter tussles. His taunts filled Tyson with rage. He was desperate to knock that stupid smile from Holyfield’s face.

The bell for the second round sounded and Tyson went at Holyfield again with an onslaught of flying fists. But again his opponent just grappled him and held his head close, whispering insults as he boxed in Tyson’s mind. “Can’t throw your punches now can you, Mikey?” he would say. “What’s wrong with your gloves, Mike?”

Both warriors continued; each landing a few blows but spending most of their time wrestling with their sweaty heads clashing side by side. Holyfield continued his insulting jibes but by now was adding something else to his plan. As the two fighters’ heads locked together Holyfield began to move his head in towards Tyson’s, butting him above the eye. Tyson felt the anger within himself begin to rise.
The third round began and the two fighters’ heads were again locked together. Holyfield forced his head into the spot above Tyson’s eye, which was now beginning to swell badly. Tyson’s blood was now at boiling point with anger burning through his body. As their heads came together in another clash and grapple, Tyson noticed his mouth placed next to his opponent’s ear. He thought of the pain he could cause Holyfield, of the regret he would have for ever daring to head butt him in such a disrespectful manner. “Just bite his ear, hard” Tyson thought to himself. It would be so easy. Bite it, pull it, rip it off”.

As he stared at the ear of his opponent with his jaw tense and teeth at the ready, the focus of Tyson’s gaze switched to the crowd in the background. A man in the front row craved his attention, Tyson could not help but notice him; he was wearing a pinstripe suit with a dazzling red tie. The two men stared at each other for a few seconds and, projecting his voice above the roar of the crowd, the man in the pinstripe suit spoke to Tyson.

“Mr Tyson, don’t do what I think you’re going to do”, the man in the pinstripe suit bellowed in his deep voice. “You can win this fight, Mr Tyson. You can knock him out.”

“But I can’t do it”, Tyson said in hope of a reassuring reply. “He keeps head butting me”.

“Win the fight”, the man said abruptly.

Just as they did three months ago, the man in the pinstripe suit’s words got into his head. Tyson didn’t know who this guy was, or where he came from, but he felt the need do what he said. The words spurred Tyson on, there was to be no more dallying about the task in hand. Mike Tyson was going to regain the undisputed heavyweight crown here, now, tonight.

Surprising Holyfield with a burst of energy, Tyson broke free from their latest bout of head and chest clashing and caught him with two of his sledgehammer blows, one on each side of his head. The punches were hard and bursting with intent.

Holyfield knew he was in trouble. Another punch came, and another, fast, a left hook this time that connected with the side of his head, causing him to wobble. A huge right fist came pile-driving into the face of Holyfield and he found himself on the canvas. Before he knew what was happening, the
referee had counted to ten and he had been beaten. Mike Tyson was the new undisputed heavyweight champion of the world.

Tyson was overjoyed. He had done it. As the referee raised the new champ’s arm, Tyson turned towards the crowd where he had seen the man in the pinstripe suit just seconds before. But, just as he had in the hotel three months earlier, the man had disappeared without a trace. Tyson, though, somehow knew and inwardly hoped this would not be the last he saw of the man in the pinstripe suit.