

They've made a winning team so far but as the level of opposition increases, so does the pressure for the Irish heroes

DONALD McRAE

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL



In a beautiful house in rural Kent, a long way from Belfast, the two fighters reach out to shake each other by the hand. Barry McGuigan and Carl Frampton have not seen each other for a few days and their reunion starts a serious countdown to another dangerous night. Frampton, who is managed by McGuigan, headlines a bill at York Hall in east London on Saturday. It will be his 12th professional fight in a career that McGuigan has always imagined will scale the dizzying heights.

Frampton has just returned from a flying visit home to Belfast to be with his fiancée, Christine, and their baby girl, Carla. It's the last time he will see Christine until the day of his fight against Kris Hughes, a decent operator at super-bantam with a creditable 15-1 record. The need for Frampton to continue his flawless winning streak is matched by his desire to make a thrilling statement in the ring that will live up to the belief McGuigan has long shown in him.

That compulsion explains why Frampton has spent most of the last 10 weeks in

Kent, training relentlessly for a fight he is expected to win comfortably. Working with Barry and his son Shane, and embraced by the whole McGuigan family, Frampton has shown extraordinary dedication ahead of a routine bout. When I visited them previously, just before Christmas, I travelled halfway round the M25 and back with the fighter and the McGuigans as he sparred a dozen of the 160 rounds he has boxed in readiness for Hughes.

Now, deep into January, the famous Irish featherweight, McGuigan, and his gifted protégé clutch hands and look each other in the face. McGuigan explains that he has just picked me up from the station while Frampton, in turn, confirms he has not been in the house long since touching down from his latest flight back to England. The ease between them is contagious and the huge kitchen echoes with their laughter.

Frampton tells us about hearing a young fan talk of his appreciation for "old-time fighters." The 24-year-old pauses, showing the cool timing and taste for precision that distinguishes him as a boxer, and then he lands a withering crack. "But Barry," Frampton says in his deadpan way, "when he started talking about 'old-time

BARRY

*'He's got loads of ability,
the right attitude, a desire
for work and he's smart'*



HOME TEAM:
McGuigan is right
behind his charge
Photography by
Russell Pritchard

McGuigan's BOY

fighters' I thought he meant someone like Jake LaMotta. Turns out I was wrong. This kid said, 'I really love old-time fighters like Barry McGuigan.'

The 50-year-old McGuigan feints as if to throw a body shot before laughing. "I'll show you what an old-timer can do..."

Frampton's respect for McGuigan, a genuine world champion who won his title in 1985 against a proven great in Eusebio Pedroza, is obvious. A record 20 million viewers watched McGuigan win that night on BBC1. Frampton also knows McGuigan is the most significant boxer in his country's history after he bridged the divide between Catholics and Protestants at the height of the Troubles.

McGuigan bustles around us, offering coffee and sandwiches to me before lighting a fire in the lounge so his hungry fighter and I can eventually talk alone against a backdrop of crackling warmth. The cold of the afternoon disappears while I remember everything McGuigan has told me over the last eight months. We first met each other last summer when McGuigan described Carl Frampton as the best prospect he had seen in decades - a remark he regrets for the pressure it exerts on a fighter for whom he cares so much.

Now, before sitting down with Frampton, McGuigan and I talk again. For the sake of formality I set the tape rolling but McGuigan speaks as he always does - with wonderful eloquence and gritty truth - as he explains why he has poured so much of himself into Frampton. "The bottom line with Carl is that he can really fight," McGuigan says, his face crinkling with the pleasures of possibility. "He's not the complete article yet and he's got a lot of work to do but he's got the appetite for it, and the aptitude. That's where it counts - up here and here."

McGuigan taps his heart and his head before placing a fist on his chin, to show how much he believes Frampton also has the capacity to absorb a heavy punch. "He's got it there too," he says, touching his chin, "and you can't teach those attributes. We work Carl really hard, day in, day out, and that's when you find out the truth about people. You see the real person after a couple of weeks of such training. So we know he has the main ingredients to become an amazing fighter.

"He's got loads of ability, the right attitude, a desire for work and he's very smart. And, to top it all, he is very calm and has great self-belief. I can tell him he's sparring a good middleweight tomorrow and a less confident super-bantamweight would say: 'Won't he be too big?' Carl just says: 'Great. I can't wait.' He has got the bit between his teeth. At the same time he's a lovely and sensible kid. He's got the whole package."

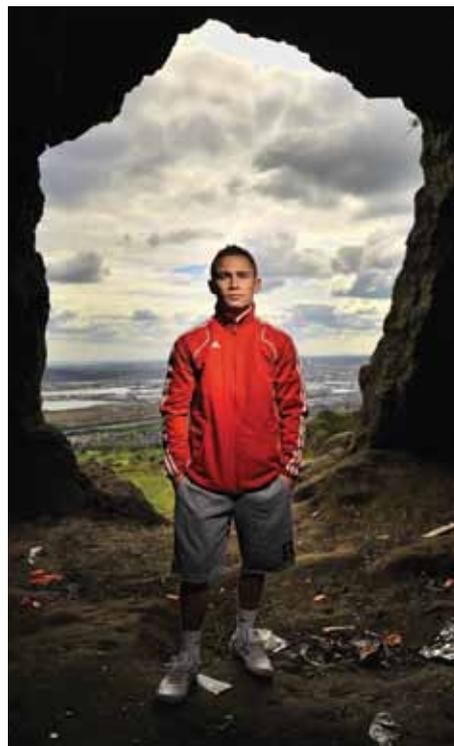
I've spoken to McGuigan often enough to know how demanding it is to manage a fighter in these difficult days. It is harder than ever to make a future in the precarious old fight game - while the familiar machinations of the business remain as maddening as ever. "It's not easy," McGuigan admits, "and it's taken someone pretty unique, like Carl, to make me want to do this. The kid thinks big. He knows he's going to be a champion.

"Carl's in a tough division and Guillermo Rigondeaux [the Cuban] is exceptional. We're not ready for him yet. But we're looking at Kiko Martinez [the European champion whom

Frampton was meant to fight last year before the Spaniard withdrew from the contest], a destructive puncher and a seasoned pro. And I look at Scott Quigg [the British champion], whom I have the utmost respect for. But I know Carl has the beating of Quigg and the beating of an even tougher guy in Martinez. Those are the two titles we want for Carl by the end of 2012."

Victory against Hughes should guarantee Frampton a slot on the undercard of Matthew Macklin's fight against Sergio Martinez on St Patrick's Day, March 17, at Madison Square Garden.

"We've had fantastic support from Matchroom, our promoters," McGuigan says. "They were always a dynamic company under Barry Hearn but



the offensive against a back-peddalling runner. McGuigan does not argue with the suggestion; but he is ready with a persuasive counter. As he talks, remembering how McGuigan fought with such swarming intent in his heyday, it's obvious that Frampton could not have a better teacher than a man who, since retirement, has emerged as the best boxing analyst in the country.

"My style was to walk my opponent down," McGuigan says. "That's exciting but it's also dangerous. Carl is much more clinical and precise. His style is to put pressure on, hit him with a jab, rock his head back, and make him come back. And then Carl will punish him again. That's great because there's intelligence at work - and that leads to a career that will have longevity attached to it.

"But I also know that the better the opponent, the brighter Carl will shine. Carl has all the fundamentals and he loves to fight. When you trade with Carl he absolutely loves it. He's got guts and self-belief and an iron chin. That's why he would look so good against someone as dangerous as Martinez. But we need to work on his offensive style and make sure he lands more to the body."

McGuigan jumps up and offers a riveting masterclass in body-punching. He throws short and hurtful-looking blows in the air, talking or making little exclamations, and explains the mechanics of punching devastatingly to the body. Yet there is also an endearing humility to McGuigan and he outlines why he feels ill-equipped to work Frampton's corner on fight-night. Conceding that his emotions are too jumbled when he is so closely involved with a fighter, McGuigan cedes control to Gerry Storey, the venerable Belfast trainer, and to his own son, Shane.

"Gerry is a sage," McGuigan says warmly of Storey, "and I owe him so much from the day he first saw me boxing in the Ulster Juvenile Finals in 1977. We go back a long way, me and Gerry, and I love the fact he's so calm in the corner. He's a lovely man and I'm also excited by the way Shane is seeing things I don't even pick up on. Shane is still young but he has incredible perception and

'There is no doubt Martinez is definitely the harder fight. He's been in with better opponents'

now, with his son, Eddie, in charge of the boxing side, Matchroom are buzzing. They've revitalised British boxing and, with them behind us, I know we can get the fights that Carl deserves."

Yet McGuigan and Frampton know that they cannot afford to look beyond Hughes. Against another awkward opponent in Robbie Turley, last June, Frampton frustrated himself when failing to win by stoppage.

Frampton now needs to dazzle his detractors by displaying his formidable workrate and venomous punching power. He is already a skilled counter-puncher, but Frampton has to learn how to fight effectively when forced to go on

his work as a nutritionist and a strength-and-conditioning trainer has transformed Carl."

In the gym, and in the television and promotional offices of professional boxing, McGuigan has the sheer nous to steer Frampton towards the biggest fights. And he does not disguise his relish for battle, revelling in the "fantastic banter" Scott Quigg's camp again produces during my trip to Kent. Having seen an innocuous tweet from me, mentioning that I was on my way to see McGuigan and Frampton, Quigg's publicist, Paul Speak, had cheerfully chipped in on Twitter. Speak, who is also Ricky Hatton's agent, sent his best to all of us but ➤

WELL PREPARED:
Frampton leaves no
stone unturned in his
training



➔ issued an invitation up north to produce a more balanced perspective. A tweet back from me, saying I knew how much Frampton respected Quigg, came with a suggestion that the Belfast fighter still thought he could beat his Hatton-promoted rival. Speak tweeted promptly: "That's the difference. Carl thinks he can beat Scott. @scottquigg KNOWS he can beat @carlframpton. Lots of respect from us."

Frampton, who is less of a tweet-master than McGuigan, listened closely when I told him of the latest overtures from Quigg's camp. "It's respectful between me and Scott," he said. "So I have no problem with him. And you have to say that Scott Quigg has a great record of 23-0. It's definitely building between us. You've got Barry raving about me on one side and Hatton raving

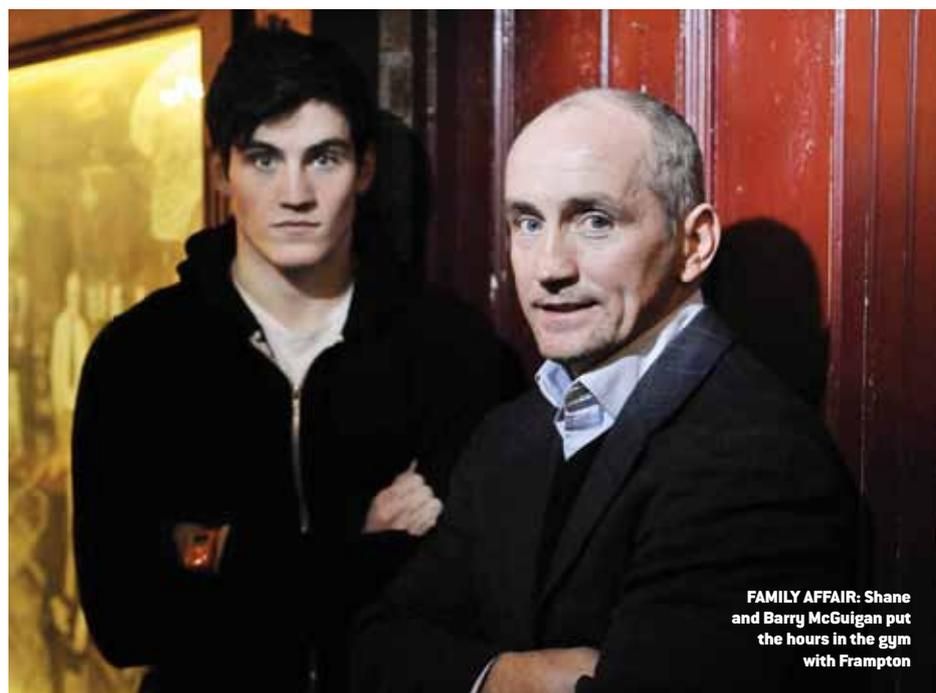
about Quigg on the other side. The fight will happen because he's British champion and I want that British title. So unless he vacates because he doesn't want to fight me I'm sure I'll meet him this year.

"But we're getting mixed signals from the Quigg camp. Sometimes they seem keen but, more often, they're telling us we should let it build some more. Why? What's the point? I'm Commonwealth champion. He's British champion. There is no point hanging around. If they're saying, 'Let's wait for the fight to become even bigger,' that suggests they're not as confident as we are."

Frampton says these words evenly, with none of the bluster that traditionally accompanies pre-fight hype. It is also striking, and evidence of his belief, that he is able to praise Quigg for his dominant performance against Jason Booth. "He normally moves around and takes his time but against Booth he was relentless. He and Joe Gallagher got the tactics right. They knew Booth couldn't hurt him so Quigg jumped on him and basically bullied him. So he can change his style. But I can deal with whatever Scott Quigg shows me."

"There is no doubt Martinez is definitely the harder fight. Scott is good but Martinez has real power and he can knock you out. He's been in with better opponents than Quigg. But Martinez is the kind of guy I will shine against. He's aggressive and I like people who come to me."

On Saturday, Frampton has a chance to display his growing versatility against an opponent who is far less combative. "Kris Hughes is not to be underestimated," Frampton stresses. "He's lost once before, to Jamie Arthur on a split decision, and he's tall, rangy and well-schooled. He could be



FAMILY AFFAIR: Shane and Barry McGuigan put the hours in the gym with Frampton

tricky. But I've heard him say we're looking past him to bigger fights. He's making a big mistake if he thinks that."

Frampton's impressive understatement also comes out of a difficult past, in Belfast, which he overcame through conviction and discipline. "I could have got into trouble," Frampton says. "I lived in the last street in Loyalist Tiger Bay. I was just one street away from the Republican New Lodge. I saw so much bad stuff - riots, people getting beat up, hearing people getting shot. Glen Branagh, at the end of my street, was involved in a riot and got hit with a pipe bomb. He was two years older than me and about 14 when he died. He died at the bottom of my street..."

Frampton looks up, his eyes clear as he stares into the fire blazing in the McGuigan hearth. "If I was out on the street and there was a riot my ma and da would try and get me but I'd want to watch. It was scary but exciting seeing guys pull guns on each other and cop Land Rovers going full tilt down the street and people throwing petrol bombs at them. I was very young when I saw that. But I was lucky I had boxing to hold onto. Lots of kids I knew got involved and made bad decisions. People get in your ear and they make you think you can be a big man. But I was boxing all the time and I was never going to get involved."

He is now a close friend of McGuigan, but Frampton can't conceal his admiration when remembering how his manager straddled the sectarian divide - so much so that both sides often reached for a mantra of "Leave the fighting to McGuigan." As a Catholic married to a Protestant,

Sandra, with whom he is still happily together in Kent 30 years later, McGuigan showed unbreakable qualities as a fighter and as a man in winning the adoration of two bitterly divided communities.

"The words 'legend' and 'hero' get overused these days," Frampton says, "but I can promise you they're the only words to think of when you talk about Barry McGuigan. When I was a kid I was just amazed the first time I saw him at the Holy Family Club in Belfast. I was shocked and in awe of him. He was an incredible figure and that's why I'm so honoured to now be working with him. It's the same with Gerry Storey. Gerry used to go into the cages at the Maze prison to train fighters from both sides, Loyalist and Republican. He would put on shows in the Maze. He also once got a team of British paratroopers to fight the Holy Family boys. The Republicans hammered the paras 11-0 and not a shot was fired. Boxing bought peace for a while - but Barry did more than anyone.

"Belfast has changed dramatically and it's all about dialogue now. But I remember when I was younger, being a Protestant, I would have to walk a long way round to get to Belfast city centre. It was a good 15-minute walk. If I wanted to go directly there it would have meant walking through a Nationalist area. It would have cut 10 minutes off my time but I would never do it. Now people can just walk where they like. Of course some people want to bring the dark days back but we'll never return to that. The city was wrecked once but it's lovely now and I'm proud to be from Belfast."

In a parallel story to that of Barry and Sandra McGuigan, Frampton is engaged to a Catholic -

Christine. "It's a similar situation," Frampton says, "but there's no drama in me being Protestant and Christine being Catholic. It was far harder and more dangerous for Barry and Sandra. I now feel just as comfortable on the [Republican] Falls Road as I do in Tiger Bay."

It also helps Frampton that Christine is interested in boxing - even if he grins wryly at her taste in fighters. "At my fights Christine watches closely and quietly. She doesn't shout but she likes boxing and she respects it. I think every fight of mine, though, is getting harder for her to watch. But she's always liked boxing and I have to admit she loved Amir Khan before she knew me. She still likes him as he's a good-looking lad. But she's well into Vitali Klitschko these days. And I'm only a wee man."

Frampton laughs helplessly - secure in his relationship with Christine. He is also amused when remembering how Shane McGuigan did him a favour a few years ago. "Shane boxed in the Ulster Seniors against a guy called Terry Garland who used to go out with Christine for a few months. I was supporting Shane big time and he gave the guy a right hammering. I've been close to Shane ever since."

His friendship with Shane, and McGuigan's 24-year-old son, Jake, runs deep. But Frampton insists his views aren't coloured when he argues that, "Shane is on his way to becoming one of the world's great boxing trainers. I really believe that. We share this dream. I want to become a world champion and Shane wants to train a world champion. We want to do this together - with Barry behind us every step of the way."

"Carl is very calm," Shane says, "and he believes in me and Dad. You know the boxing community and how it thrives on gossip. Carl gets it all the time. People who doubt him and who doubt me. It's often people who don't know what they're talking about who make the most noise. But if people don't respect me that's fine. I'll just concentrate on training. It might seem strange that, at 23, I'm a year younger than Carl, but what we're doing in terms of nutrition and strength and conditioning is more advanced and scientific than a lot of people in boxing.

"I've been lucky enough to study with the best people in the world in strength and conditioning and, with my work in nutrition, we've been able to take six kilos of fat off Carl while packing on two kilos of muscle. He's a naturally lean guy but he's incredibly strong now. He's twice as fit and strong as guys like Kris Hughes. Once we've got Hughes out of the way we really want Quigg before Martinez. I really believe that Quigg hasn't been in the deep waters where Carl will take him. I think Carl Frampton will be Scott Quigg's nightmare and, from there, we'll be ready for a much harder fight against Martinez. But I see Carl winning that decisively and moving onto the world stage next year."

In the end, it's left to the old master to give the most compelling voice to this shared conviction. "I truly believe we've got an exceptional talent in Carl Frampton," Barry McGuigan says quietly. "I've been in this business a long time and I know it inside out. Can I pick a winner after all these years?"

McGuigan lets his question hang in the air. But his voice is without doubt as he finally answers himself. "I think I can pick out a winner. I really do. And I honestly believe I've found myself a complete winner in Carl Frampton." **BN**

BRIGHT FUTURE:
Frampton is pleased things are more peaceful in his home city, for many reasons

