

# The hard Road to Wembley

*From a British borstal to the gyms of Brooklyn, nobody can accuse world-rated Londoner Ashley Theophane of doing things the easy way. But now he's back on home turf and set to challenge for Lenny Daws's British title. He tells the incredible story of how he got there to* **GLYNN EVANS**

**O**n first appraisal, being locked up in a cell at the Feltham Young Offenders Institution in south-west London is not a great place to realise childhood dreams of becoming a global boxing star. There is another way of considering the situation, though: such enforced confinement can concentrate the mind wonderfully on how a life needs to be turned onto a different path.

In June 2000, this was the situation confronting **Ashley Theophane**. Then not yet 20, he was on the remand wing, facing a 10-year stretch after being charged with stealing jewellery at gunpoint.

"Various stuff built up in my life," reflected the Paddington-born light-welter, who returns from being based in the U.S. to challenge British champion Lenny Daws on 19 February.

"At school, though I weren't stupid, I couldn't get on with authority types and was twice expelled.

"Around 13, I started to see friends and members of my extended family making money from crime — I never wanted to be working for a fiver an hour — so I began running with a crew, jumping rich people for their Rolexes and diamonds.

"I became heavily involved in gangs — hung with people who carried knives and guns — and it got to a stage where rivals tried to kidnap me. I had guns pointed at my head and, for a year, I had to stay low and wear a bulletproof vest. Several involved are in jail now, others dead, but you never know when these things might catch up with me. I could still get hurt."

The solitude of a prison cell provided the ideal environment in which to contemplate the direction he was taking.

"I'd never considered how I was affecting people's lives, taking property they'd worked hard for, putting fear into them. To me, it was probably insured and they'd get another," said the box-fighter who has won 28 of his 33 pro starts (one draw, seven stoppages).

"I got shoved on the wing for armed robbers with some very violent crims. A dispute between a family and some screws [prison officers] developed into a riot and, because I was nearby — making a phone call, not involved — I was assaulted, stripped... Not nice.

"That apart, I handled the experience pretty well. I continued my education, passed exams with distinction in media studies and

leisure and tourism. Inside, I witnessed several real nice kids who'd fallen into the wrong environment, ended up getting 15–20 years. I didn't want to waste my life. I vowed if I got a not guilty I'd ditch crime and commit everything to achieving my optimum in boxing."

His release after six months without a conviction gave him a second chance, but expectations of ring success still seemed a distant dream. Having begun aged seven at west London's All Stars gym under Isola Akay, Theophane won barely half of his 40 amateur bouts and failed to advance beyond the north-west London divisional stage in any of his four senior ABA campaigns.

"I've a lot of love for Mr Akay and his club," he said. "Whenever I was boxing, I kept out of trouble. It was only when the season finished and I was out on the streets that I'd stray,"

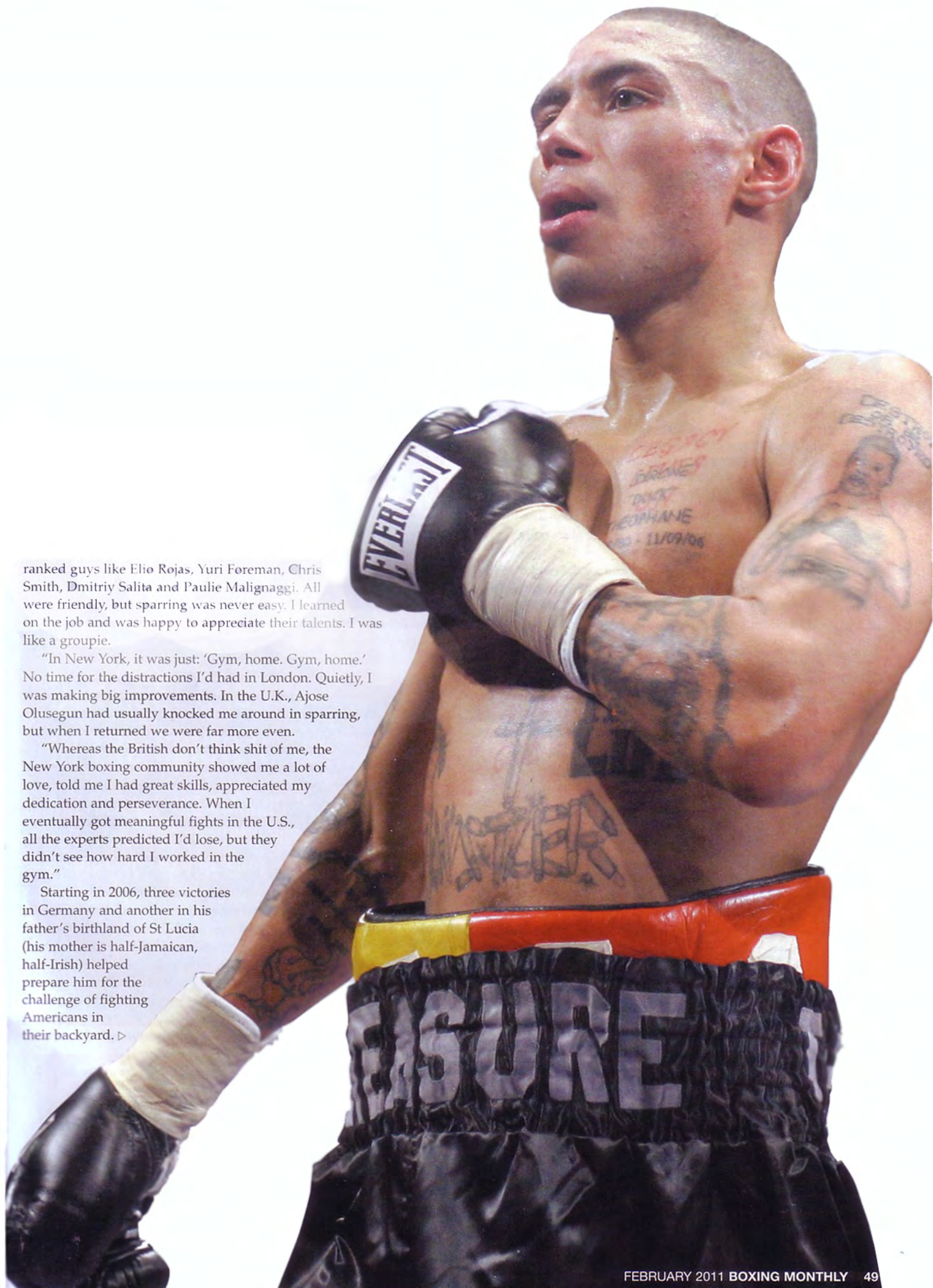
"Because the amateurs never panned out for me, there was no money put behind me when I turned pro. But also no pressure. I just wanted to be the best I could. I knew I had the ability to be British champion. Several top overseas pros passed through the gym when fighting in Britain and commented how talented I was."

His lonely trek around the small halls began in June 2003, aged 22. By fight 14, he'd already dropped disputed decisions to Judex Meemea and Oscar Milkitas, and drew against Daniel Thorpe. He was thoroughly disenchanted with the U.K. scene.

"Without a promoter, I felt an outcast... Things really came to head after I stopped Alan Bosworth [in the seventh round] in an official eliminator four years ago. I should've been next in line to Lenny [Daws], but he lost to Barry Morrison, who lost to Colin Lynes, who challenged for the European, leaving me in limbo. Instead, the Board offered me an English title fight, but I took offence and chose to cut out the British and European scene. Who, of any talent, ever won an English title?

"Anyway, while others wanted to be British champion, from a young boy watching fights with my dad I was always inspired by Brits who went to America and fought the big stars: your Kirkland Laings, Lloyd Honeyghans, Nigel Bennis. Mum has a sister in upstate New York and in 2005 I thought: 'It's now or never.'

"I always went over there to work, never to holiday or party. I ended up at Gleason's Gym in Brooklyn. There, I was picking up bits from all the top trainers and got to watch and spar world-



ranked guys like Elio Rojas, Yuri Foreman, Chris Smith, Dmitriy Salita and Paulie Malignaggi. All were friendly, but sparring was never easy. I learned on the job and was happy to appreciate their talents. I was like a groupie.

"In New York, it was just: 'Gym, home. Gym, home.' No time for the distractions I'd had in London. Quietly, I was making big improvements. In the U.K., Ajose Olusegun had usually knocked me around in sparring, but when I returned we were far more even.

"Whereas the British don't think shit of me, the New York boxing community showed me a lot of love, told me I had great skills, appreciated my dedication and perseverance. When I eventually got meaningful fights in the U.S., all the experts predicted I'd lose, but they didn't see how hard I worked in the gym."

Starting in 2006, three victories in Germany and another in his father's birthland of St Lucia (his mother is half-Jamaican, half-Irish) helped prepare him for the challenge of fighting Americans in their backyard. ▷

THEOPHANE'S U.S. CAMPAIGN brought him great credit, with significant wins and good performances in defeat, such as when he lost a split decision to Golden Boy prospect Danny Garcia



“It’s a risky detour. I’ve only a limited time to crack the U.S. and I can’t get sidetracked”

ASHLEY THEOPHANE

Though beaten over 10 by Ali Oubaali on his U.S. debut, upset wins over one-time WBO king DeMarcus Corley (on points over eight in July 2008) and ex-IBF welter challenger Delvin Rodriguez (over 10 rounds in July last year), either side of a split-decision loss to undefeated Golden Boy prospect Danny Garcia, allowed him to creep up the world ratings.

“Corley entered with his face masked and all the crowd yelling: ‘USA, USA’ and, initially, I was star struck. But after a couple of rounds, I showed him no respect. I got the fight on 10 days’ notice, had to drop 10 pounds and couldn’t punch with my right hand, but still won.

“Critics dismissed ‘Chop Chop’ as washed up, but two years after he took Marcos Maidana 12 rounds for the WBA interim title. Other boxers knew it was a good win. Zab Judah and Victor Ortiz both turned me down because, for the money involved, I wasn’t deemed worth the risk. I tried to capitalise, but it takes two to get in the ring.

“If I’m honest, my heart was never in the Garcia fight — my management pushed it when I’d have preferred a fight with Kendall Holt. Yet even away from home, I still only lost a split to a guy who’s now rated in the WBC Top 10.

“Delvin and myself had sparred previously and he probably left feeling he’d got the better of it. But in sparring I just work on my thoughts and plans. I produced when it counted. People say I was fortunate, but listen, American promoters and TV aren’t there to do me favours — and I won. What other Brit can claim that? I’ve really earned my successes.

“After Rodriguez, the IBF rated me fourth, but when a fight in Montreal fell through, I took a week’s vacation in Vegas to celebrate my 30th birthday. Upon returning, the IBF offered an eliminator with Randall Bailey, but it was too short notice. I declined so they dropped me to No. 11.”

If his muscular torso, heavily inked with gangsta motifs such as “Thuglife” and “Outlaw”, provides a permanent reminder of his troubled history, today, aged 30, Theophane is rehabilitated to model-citizen status and freely offers testimony of his reformation at local schools and behavioural units.

“I got my first tat[too] — Mike Tyson — in ‘98 and they represent a timeline of my life: my time as a crim, to those I’ve loved and lost,” he explained.

“I’m still cool with the guys I hung with, but I no longer associate with them. That was just one stage of my life. I’m just happy I turned the road. You only live once and there’s so much else to do: travel, education. After boxing, I want to start another

journey. My college teachers wanted me to pursue university. I’ve always been big on learning.

“Today, I speak to troubled kids, see if I can do anything to help them change their lives around. I didn’t have the best start in life, but made a choice to change and follow my dream. Not many Brits have made a

career in the U.S.. Hopefully, that inspires them.”

Save for a few airings on the ESPN channel, British exposure thus far has been nominal and, beyond those who’ve seen him box live or who frequent the London gyms he uses, Theophane remains a bit of a mystery man. So what can we expect?

“I might not be the very fastest or strongest, but I’m a very well rounded package,” he claimed.

“I’ve got good eyes, read opponents well and I’m big on the art of it. I’ve a good jab, tight defence and, above all, I’m well conditioned. I’ve fought and sparred some very heavy hitters, yet I’ve never been down.”

His decision to return home to meet Daws has its roots in obliging the patriotic urges of his U.S.-based Greek-Brit management team of Gina Iacovou and Mike Michael as well as inheriting Daws’s WBC rating (19).

“It’s a risky detour,” admitted Theophane, who, after sparring Salita in New York, has split his U.K. preparation between trainers Dave Brown at All Stars and Don Charles in Finchley.

“I’ve only a limited time to crack the U.S. and don’t want to get sidetracked. I’d rather compete against the best and lose but finish knowing I fought the best. I can return, aged 35, and pick up a Lonsdale Belt.

“Lenny wants to be where Ashley Theophane is: world rated and known in the USA. Basically, he’s a 12-round amateur, nowhere near as skilful as guys I’ve fought and sparred. Whereas he’s struggled with your Barry Morrisons, Jason Cooks and Steve Williamses, I’ve been mixing with Garcia and Rodriguez, fighters on an altogether different level. All bookies have me underdog [but] I’m too big a step, a better boxer and more experienced. Sure, Lenny’s well conditioned, but he’ll find I’m a fitness freak myself. I may throw 300 less punches, but mine will be far better quality. Mick Hennessy’s going to get his fighter hurt.”

If he is victorious, Theophane will still be heading straight back across the Atlantic to stalk the global belt holders.

“I stay realistic and don’t call out names. Anyone in the Top 10 of the three main organisations [will suffice],” he said.

“I’d prefer to fight at 140[lbs] but, realistically, [Devon] Alexander, [Tim] Bradley and [Amir] Khan aren’t going to fight me and anyway, some of the world champions at 147[lbs] — Jan Zaveck [IBF holder] and the WBA guy [Vyacheslav Senchenko] are more my level, guys I could beat.

“The next five years I see myself being involved in some big fights. HBO is where the big money is, where I want to be. I’ve come a long way. It’s been some journey.”