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Sports Weekend

Saturday, June 8th, 2024 **Editor** Noel O'Reilly **email** sports@irishtimes.com

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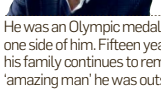

Paul Howard

He was an Olympic medallist, but that was only one side of him. Fifteen years after his death, his family continues to remember him as the 'amazing man' he was outside the ring

Often, when they talk about him now, they make the habit of lapsing into the present tense, like he's still here, because to Tony and Shaneika Sutherland, his father and youngest sister, that's exactly how it is. Some people lead short lives but leave an impression so deep that their not being in the world anymore is too unconscionable to acknowledge in speech. Fifteen years of separation hasn't changed that.

"Darren doesn't do anything by halves," Shaneika says. "If he's going to learn a song, he's going to learn every line. If he's going to study, he's going to know every word in the book. If he's going to do a sport, he's going to be the best at it."

As those closest to him tell it, Darren was nothing like the haunted figure that emerged from the inquest into his death, the depressive recluse who was "too sensitive and too intelligent" to be a professional boxer and who took his own life when he realised that he'd made a bad career move and couldn't see a way out of it.

"It annoyed me," his youngest sister says, "when some of his team-mates came out and said he was a loner and he'd always sit in his room after fights. It was just because he didn't party. He was there for a reason. He had a mission and a vision. Outside the ring, they never knew him."

He wasn't *crazie* in the conventional Irish sense. He wasn't a drinker. He wasn't a centre-of-the-room kind of guy. He was serious about the things that required him to be serious. His boxing. His studies. His singing. Even his gaming.

There was no Olympic "journey" as such. He wasn't a Michael Carruth, or a Kenneth Egan, or a Wayne McCullough, who first ducked through the ring ropes as children and whose entire lives seemed to be one long continuum of achievements building to a place on an Olympic podium. Darren didn't box until he was well into his teens. By then he'd tried a lot of other things. He was going to be a Grammy-winning R&B artist. He rapped, even break-danced, at talent contests and at the annual community clean-up days in Blanchardstown. Tony bought him an electric organ. An incurable insomniac, Darren played it at all hours of the day and night until he had it mastered.

The course of his life changed at the age of 14, the night he arrived home in the back of a Garda car. He'd been sitting on a wall with a group of friends when the car rolled up and his friends scarpered. Darren figured that because they weren't doing anything, he had no reason to run. One of the guards asked him if he was Tony the driving instructor's son. He told her yes and she offered him a lift home.

"She said to me, 'Get him something to do'," Tony remembers. Darren was always a natural athlete. "In school, when they had sports day, the teacher had to say, 'Darren, sit down. You're winning everything. All the running events, all the jumping events. Give the other kids a chance.'

"One day, I was teaching a guy to drive up in Cordduff and he said, 'Why doesn't he try boxing?' I thought, why not? We used to watch all the big fights together. Nigel Benn. Michael Watson. Lennox Lewis."

He took him to St Mochta's on the Clonsilla Road, a club founded by Gary Keegan, the future Irish Athletic Boxing Association high performance director. At first, Keegan was dubious. "He said, 'He's 14. He's too old'," Tony recalls, "because they were bringing them in from the age of 12. And I said, 'Please give him a chance. I'll pay the sub for a month.' My wife would drop him off if I was working. Or I'd drop him off and pick him up again after work. One evening, Gary said, 'I need you to see something. I have him sparring,' and I was concerned. I said, 'He's only here three or four weeks and you have him sparring?' because I know a bit about boxing. I went in and Darren was knocking seven bells out of this young fella in the ring. Gary says, 'Tony, that's the Leinster champion.' Honestly, my hair stood on end when I saw him."

Darren was a quiet, self-contained kid with a work ethic instilled in him by his parents. "My mam had three cleaning jobs," Shaneika says. "My dad worked six days a week. He's still working six days a week and he's 72. He had this saying, 'If you can't afford it, you can't have it. But if you want it, you have to work for it.' That was the theme of our whole lives.

The Greatest Irish Olympic Stories
Never Told

48 days to go

"Our parents brought us up to know that there were opportunities out there for us, but nothing would be handed to us. We lived in a council house in Parslickstown in Mulhuddart. You could be a victim of your environment or you could believe that you were capable of doing anything. And that's what Darren did when he started boxing.

"He could see the success people had on the TV. Saturday night was boxing night in our house. That's our whole childhood. Watching boxing on TV at the weekend. It was a family thing we did together. Darren could see that anyone could do this. You just have to work hard."

> **He was serious about the things that required him to be serious. His boxing. His studies. His singing**

He'd been training for just more than a year when he was hired to work as an extra on Sparrow's Trap, Brendan O'Carroll's ill-fated boxing movie. Brendan Ingle, the Dublin-born, Sheffield-based trainer, who was behind the successes of Herol Graham and Naseem Hamed, had been hired as a consultant for the fight scenes. Darren saw his opportunity. He got in Ingle's ear, lodged himself there, telling him that he was going to be the champion of the world one day until Ingle finally agreed to talk to the boy's parents.

"We knew Brendan from watching Prince Naseem on television," Tony remembers. "He told me, 'That kid of yours is going to be brilliant. I know it from just talking to him.' Darren wanted to go to Sheffield to train with him. I said no, that's not going to happen. And Shaneika will tell you, when I say no, I mean no! Then me and Darren's mother sat down and we talked about it. And to try to incite him to do well in school, I opened my mouth and I put my foot in it. I said, if you bring home good results from the Junior Cert, we'll think about it. And, boy, did he!"

"It was As all the time," Shaneika adds.

Packed a bag for England

Darren was still only 16 when he packed a bag for England. But he'd seen enough of the world not to be scared by the sudden change of setting. He'd already lived in London, St Vincent and the Grenadines in the West Indies, where Tony was born, and Dublin, where his mother Linda was from.

He settled in well at Ingle's Wincobank dream factory. Sportswriters who made the journey there in the mid-1990s to interview "Prince" Naseem – then one of the biggest names in British sport – were always directed to have a word with this kid that Ingle had brought over from Dublin. "He's going to be an even bigger star than Naz," Ingle would assure everyone.

Tony insisted that Darren's education continued while he was in Sheffield. Ingle got him registered at the local school, where his attendance was patchy and he was best remembered for turning up late one morning in the front passenger seat of Hamed's fire-engine-red Porsche.

Boxing in the Olympics still hadn't entered Darren's mind. His rainbow's end was to turn pro once he was old enough, to earn enough money to buy a big house for his parents and to retire with his mental faculties still intact, just like every prize-fighter who ever signed on the dotted line. But Darren was a born worrier. After four years in Sheffield, he developed a presentiment – for the first, but, tragically, not the last time – that life as a professional boxer was not for him.

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Darren Sutherland was nothing like the haunted figure that emerged from the inquest into his death, those closest to him say. 'It annoyed me,' his youngest sister Shaneika says, 'when some of his team-mates came out and said he was a loner.' PHOTOGRAPH: JAMES CROMBIE/INPHO

The life and death of Darren Sutherland

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It happened after one of his boxer friends injured his hand and wound up working as a security guard in a local shopping centre. "Darren was shocked that you could put your entire life into something," says Tony, "and then you could suddenly find yourself with nothing."

It scared him enough to return home to Dublin and pronounce himself finished with boxing. He even told friends that he hated the sport. "Literally, he hung up his gloves," Tony remembers. "He was done with it. What he really wanted to do then was become a sports psychologist."

At 21, he made up his mind to go back to school to sit his Leaving Cert. He squeezed his supermiddleweight, adult frame into the uniform of St Peter's, Dunboyne, and he arrived to school each morning in a black Opel Corsa with the music pulsating and the two sisters who idolised him sitting in the back.

"The size of him," Shaneika laughs when she remembers moving through the corridors of the school. "He was the biggest guy in the whole school. It was great for me and Nicola. I was in first year and we got a lift with him every morning, although we always made him late because we were doing our hair or our faces.

"He had a future in mind for himself. Between classes, I remember, he'd sit in his car, doing the homework he got from his last class, or trying to figure out something in one of his books that he didn't understand. School really appealed to him because he was a great problem-solver. If he didn't know how to do something, he'd sit there for hours if he had to, analysing it until he'd figured it out. He was such an old soul. He was way too wise for someone of his age."

An excellent Leaving Cert. He date led to the offer of a scholarship to study sports science in DCU. And, in time, he drifted back to the ring and the famous St Saviour's Boxing Club, which was based in a former fire station on Dorset Street. As is far from uncommon among boxers, it seems that Darren could never make up his mind whether he loved or loathed the sport.

Whatever misgivings he may have had, he threw himself back into it with the zeal of an obsessive compulsive. He changed the way he boxed. At Ingle's gym, there was a house style, the first principle of which was to avoid being hit, a skill his fighters perfected through sparring rounds in which head shots were forbidden. At St Saviour's, he adopted to a more aggressive, come-forward style that was better suited to the amateur game.

"Darren could copy things," Tony remembers. "He could hear a rap song two or three times and he could repeat it to you word for word. He watched a video of Sugar Ray Leonard and he could suddenly fight in his style. Then one night, in the National Stadium, I watched him doing Muhammad Ali's rope-a-dope. Someone shouted, 'Get off the ropes!' I said, 'Shut up! Shut up! He knows what he's doing!'"

He won the first of his three Irish senior middleweight titles in 2006. Shortly afterwards, he was assimilated into Irish boxing's high performance unit, then under the stewardship of Keegan. Reunited with his very first trainer, he was placed on the Olympic track for Beijing in 2008.

Lifestyle of an elite athlete

The lifestyle of an elite athlete appealed to Darren's appetite for hard work and asceticism. "Everyone now is into their mindfulness and their fitness and their Sam clubs and their ice baths," says Shaneika. "There was none of that when Darren was boxing. He had to do his own thing. I remember him running in the park with two tracksuits on so that he'd sweat more. Then he'd bring his little plastic bowl everywhere so that he'd always have his next meal prepared. He'd go out with his cousin, David, and they'd come back from a nightclub, starving for a kebab or a takeaway, then he'd take out his bowl with his chicken and rice in it and share it with David – to David's disgust! He understood that he was only going to be as great as the energy and effort he put into it."

Tony recalls, many times, seeing in his son that same monastic devotion to his sport. "I remember one day, he was getting ready for the senior championships," he says, "and I could hear him downstairs. It was maybe two, three in the morning. I went down to see what he was doing and he was standing on the weighing scales with a bowl of dry porridge in his hand. He looked down at the scales and he decided that he couldn't have it. I said, 'What are you doing? Eat it!' and he said, 'Dad, if I do, it's going to put me over the weight.' He was starving. He put the porridge down and went upstairs and put two blankets over him in the bed. Then that day he drove from Navan to the National Stadium with a big coat on and a hoodie underneath and the heat on full blast in the car to try to make the weight."

The other boxers in the high performance unit, including fellow Olympic medallists Egan and Paddy Barnes, knew him as The Dazzler, a nickname that created an entirely false impression of him. "I don't think he ever enjoyed the limelight," says Shaneika, reflecting on those years when the Sutherlands' family life revolved around Friday nights at the National Stadium. "People gravitated towards him, but he didn't seek attention. When he won his fight, he'd drive home with the family. He'd get himself a pizza – he could devour a 16-inch pizza by himself – and a packet of fizzy Haribos and he'd just chill.

"I was in sixth year in school when he qualified for the Olympics. Every weekend, I'd go in the car down to St Saviour's with him just to watch him train. He used to think it was to perv on all the boys, but it wasn't. I was just obsessed with him. We'd play on the PlayStation. We'd go everywhere together. We were very, very, very close."

A whole new world had opened up for her brother. Boxing took him to Bulgaria, France, Russia, Georgia, Poland and the United States. Through various international competitions he got to know most of the boxers who stood between him and his plan for a place on the Olympic podium. They included James DeGale, the future Olympic gold medallist and IBF super-middleweight world champion, who would later wear Darren's initials on his shorts for most of his professional career in memory of his old adversary.

"Darren fought him once in England," Tony recalls, "and I was over there with him. We were staying in a hotel and we were going up in the lift. These two guys got in and they go, 'Are you Darren Sutherland?' And Darren said, 'Yeah.' They said, 'You're fighting DeGale tomorrow. You better be afraid. You better be very afraid.' And Darren says, 'Do I look afraid?' Oh, boy! I said, 'Let's get out of here!'

"The thing is, Darren already knew how to beat him. I remember he was fighting in a four-nations tournament and he was watching him beat this Scottish guy. He said to me, 'Da, he keeps dropping his left hand.' When Darren fought him next, he nailed him with a trombone-action right jab on the way to a points victory. "He loved figuring things out," Tony says. "Everything was a problem to be solved."

The height of his ambition for the Olympics was a medal of any denomination. "He told me that all he wanted was to get his foot on the podium," Tony says, "because he wanted to turn pro and if he won a medal there was a better chance that someone would notice him".

None of the Sutherland family travelled to Beijing. They couldn't afford the trip so instead they followed Darren's Olympic story on the television with their friends and neighbours. In his first fight, he stopped the Algerian Nabil Kassel in three rounds, then faced Alonso Blanco in the quarter-final to secure at least a bronze medal. Blanco's was a name that already appeared on his dance-card. They met at the World Championships in Chicago, where Darren struggled to come to grips with the Venezuelan's spidery reach and lost on points.

Now, the night before their second meeting, Darren phoned from China to tell his father not to worry. "He'd figured out a way of getting inside," says Tony, "by stopping the punches with his arms. It was a gruelling fight. By the end, his arms were very badly bruised and he could barely lift them. But he won."

The guarantee of a medal meant that the entire family was now part of the story and the Sutherlands watched the dream of an Olympic gold medal fizzle out in the livingroom of their Navan home in the company of newspaper photographers and TV cameramen. His semi-final opponent was, again, DeGale, whom he'd beaten three times in the past.

"I could never put my finger on why he allowed DeGale to get so close to him," says Tony. But this time it was the English-man who was the problem-solver and he won easily on his way to becoming the Olympic middleweight champion.

"It just wasn't his day," Shaneika remembers. "But one thing Darren doesn't do is dwell. We spoke to him a couple of hours after the fight. He'd only call when he was ready. He'd have his shower, speak to his trainer and one or two other people and then he'd ring. But he was so happy. Even when he got off the plane, he was beaming. He was an Olympian. He brought home a medal."

"He said, 'Where's the pizza?'" Tony remembers.

Shaneika laughs. "He did say, 'Where's the pizza?' Then it was, right, let's go shopping for what's next."

World title target

His plan, he announced at the time, was to become the first black Irishman to win a world title belt. He signed a deal to fight professionally for the London boxing promoter Kellie Maloney, who came out as a trans woman in 2014. Darren had just turned 26 and there was a buzz about him. It almost defied belief that, one year later, this brilliant, bright young man with the smiling eyes and the big future would be gone. After four professional fights – all victories – he developed a fear that he'd made a bad career choice, only he couldn't see a way out for himself.

Members of the Sutherland family have always disputed the testimony offered at the 2012 inquest that Darren had been suffering from depression for years before his death by asphyxiation in his apartment in Bromley. "I didn't know the word bipolar until Lawrence [Darren's trainer, Brian Lawrence] said it," Tony recalls. "I had to ask someone, 'What does bipolar mean?'"

Rather than depressed, Shaneika believes her brother was simply stuck in an unhappy situation from which he saw no escape. Maloney was a bad match for him. Darren was miserable almost from the start. He didn't feel supported like he had been in the clubbable atmosphere of Ingle's gym or Keegan's high performance unit in Dublin.

"He changed," says Shaneika. "Being professional wasn't what he thought it was going to be. I think how the dream was sold to him versus the reality was very different."

Darren wanted to walk away from the deal with his promoter. Typically, he sat down and attempted to puzzle the problem out, like it was a maths equation, or a ring opponent with a seemingly unbreachable defence. A friend later told Croydon coroner's court that he had helped Darren write the note found close to his body, in which the likely consequences of breaking his contract with Maloney were spelled out in bleak terms.

There was the not insignificant sum of £75,000 plus VAT that he'd been paid as a signing-on fee, which would have to be returned. He would also lose the car and the flat that came with the deal. But there was also the possibility that Maloney might sue him for loss of earnings.

Heather Pearson, a sports therapist who worked with the boxer, described his state of mind as "anxious" in the days before he died. "Darren was a worrier," she said at the inquest. And, for perhaps the first time in his short life, here was a problem that he couldn't figure out, no matter how many times he circled it.

"I think there was an element of your pride being hurt," says Shaneika, "because you were the star of the family, you were the star of the country, and you were on a particular trajectory, where you thought you'd hit the Lotto, but you'd actually landed in a nightmare. He was in a hole and he didn't have the financial means to get himself out of that hole.

"Things took a turn very quickly. You feel very helpless. But there was never depression. That's the thing we can't stand over."

The coroner at the inquest recorded the cause of death as hanging before returning an open verdict. Afterwards, in a statement, the Sutherland family called for more help and support for people transitioning from amateur to professional boxing.

Sometimes, Shaneika says, she wishes that she was the age then that she is now. "Then I might have been in a position to advise him. But we don't harbour any hate, any grudge, any negativity, because what's the point? A situation like this can either consume you and you become a victim – look at me, poor me – or you can let it fuel you to do better. And that's what we've tried to do. We just want to be good people and keep Darren's name alive in the right way."

His Olympic bronze medal has been packed away now along with his Beijing 2008 kitbag and all of the trophies and belts he won along the way. The Sutherlands don't need to go trawling through the ephemera of his boxing career to remember the son and the brother they loved and lost way before his time.

"Everyone celebrates Darren as the boxer," his sister says. "We don't. Darren is not the boxer to us. Darren is my brother. Darren is his son. He's the guy who played loud music in the house, who danced around in a towel until you told him to go and put some clothes on, the guy I sat up with once for 24 hours straight while he completed Grand Theft Auto.

"The photos we have out of him are family pictures. They're not pictures of him with a belt or in the ring. Boxing was 10 per cent of what he was to us. It was his hobby. The best conversations I ever had with Darren had nothing to do with boxing. So when people celebrate him as the Olympic medallist, I say, you only saw that side of him. But you don't even understand the amazing man he was outside the sport. *That* was Darren. *That* was who *we* loved."

If you are affected by any of the issues in this story, please contact The Samaritans at 116 123 or email at jo@samaritans.ie.

> **I don't think he ever enjoyed the limelight. People gravitated towards him, but he didn't seek attention. When he won his fight, he'd drive home with the family. He'd get himself a pizza**

Top: Darren Sutherland celebrates after beating Algeria's Nabil Kassel at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Above left: With his sister Shaneika after the fight against Georgi Riev in 2008. PHOTOGRAPHS: LORRAINE O'SULLIVAN AND MORGAN TREACY/INPHO

> **You were on a particular trajectory, where you thought you'd hit the Lotto, but you'd actually landed in a nightmare. He was in a hole and he didn't have the financial means to get himself out of that hole**

Left: Darren's father Tony Sutherland carries the torch during the London 2012 Olympic Torch Relay. Above: Paddy Barnes, Darren Sutherland and Kenny Egan arrive back with their medals from the 2008 Olympics. PHOTOGRAPHS: MORGAN TREACY AND BILLY STICKLAND/INPHO