

Twenty-five years have failed to dim the triumph and glory of James “Buster” Douglas’ masterful dismantling of Mike Tyson in a boxing ring in Japan. Relive the fight, its tragic run-up and its glowing aftermath through the voices of the people who were there.

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**UNDISPUTED**  
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PHOTOS BY **TESSA BERG**



# JAMES DOUGLAS IS DANCING.

He should be sitting, relaxing, meditating, but he's bouncing around his Tokyo Dome dressing room to a blaring boombox. The red and white tassels on his shoes bob in rhythm to the hip-hop beats as sweat begins to fleck his rangy 6-foot-4-inch frame. The 29-year-old is in the best shape of his life. He knows it, and his team knows it. In nine years as a professional boxer, Douglas' fighting weight has seesawed between 208 and 260 pounds. This afternoon, the former college basketball player is at a taut 231. His body language, loose and lively, radiates cool.

At a glance, you'd never know he's moments from a championship fight against "Iron" Mike Tyson, the 23-year-old king of the heavy-weight division, whose professional record had improved to 37-0 the previous July following his 93-second knockout of Carl Williams. You'd never know, just the day before, that Douglas had been injected with penicillin to combat bronchitis, the flu and swollen tonsils. You'd never know the mother of his son had recently been admitted to an American hospital with a potentially fatal kidney ailment. And you'd never know his mother and best friend, Lula, had died 23 days ago in her Linden home following a hypertension-induced stroke.

From across the room, J.D. McCauley eyes his nephew. Since leaving behind a job loading tractor-trailers to train Douglas some seven years ago, this is the day they've been working for, waiting for, and here it is, unfolding in a haze of surreality.

In the six months leading to this mild February afternoon, Team Douglas didn't misstep, McCauley's sure of it. The trainer's mind wanders to their camp back in Columbus, to his daily runs with Douglas in Sharon Woods, to the high-octane sparring sessions with pro boxers like James Pritchard and Fred Whitaker.

"He did everything that a trainer, a manager, a coach could ask for," McCauley says of Douglas.

It didn't matter no one gave Douglas a chance in hell at beating Tyson; McCauley and Douglas' manager, John Johnson, were convinced their fighter had the physical talent and mental discipline to do what 37 others couldn't.

Yet, there was the weight. The shakable weight that couldn't be seen, couldn't be touched. And it was heavy on Douglas' heart and mind. It had to be.

Nearly every day since his mother's death, Johnson posed the same question to McCauley: "What do you think?" Translation: Do we call this off? Day after day, Douglas would dismiss the notion.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," he'd insist. "I'ma kill this guy."

McCauley walks over to Douglas and puts a hand on his shoulder.

"How do you feel?" he asks over the music.

Douglas keeps bouncing. A slight smile.

"I'ma kill this guy, J.D. I'ma kill this guy."

Moments later, McCauley and Johnson are whisking Douglas to the ring. It feels more like floating. The whole Douglas posse, in matching black coats and red hats, is shouting, fist-pumping, almost galloping. To most of the 40,000 in attendance, it's a cute scene; Douglas and his team are the only ones who don't believe he's trotting to his execution.

Public Enemy sounds over the loudspeakers, and Tyson emerges in a tattered white shirt. Word near ringside is the champ has been pounding the wall in his dressing room with his fists for the last 30 minutes. The same story circulated before his knockouts of Larry Holmes and Michael Spinks two years earlier; the latter took 91 seconds.

Tyson enters the ring and paces behind promoter Don King and trainer Aaron Snowell. A Japanese boxing commissioner tries to present the champ with a "Joe Louis heavyweight superbelt," but Tyson turns his back to the man, whom King begins waving away. They're not interested. There's a get-in-and-get-out vibe among the Tyson camp. Snowell and his assistants didn't even bring an enswell and ice to treat cuts. They won't need them.

"All right, fans, here we go," ring announcer Jimmy Lennon Jr. trumpets. "This is it. The main event scheduled for 12 rounds of boxing. Introducing to you the challenger on my right in the blue corner. He's entering the ring wearing white trunks with red trim and fighting out of Columbus, Ohio. ... Please welcome the challenger, James 'Buster' Douglas!"

A modest reaction from the otherwise hushed crowd.

"And his opponent, the defending champion on my left, really needing no introduction the world over ..."

Douglas gazes off into the black of the arena.

"Had I not been in the ring, had somewhere to go to explode, no telling where I'd be," he says. "And I had every reason to go out and put on some bullshit performance. People would have said, 'Well, I understand, man. I don't know how many people could do that after that happens.' I didn't want that to be my legacy to her—like I was unable to continue because she passed. She wasn't that type of woman, and

she wouldn't have allowed me to be like that."

The two men are toe to toe in the center of the ring. Douglas looks through Tyson's unwavering glare. Fear was the champ's weapon as much as his punching power and hand speed. But what did Douglas have to fear? The worst had already happened.

"Gentleman, remember the dressing room instructions," referee Octavio Meyran says. "Shake hands, and good luck both."

HBO commentator Jim Lampley, stationed ringside, makes one last proclamation about the challenger: "He would shock most of the world if he could make it into the middle rounds."

*Dingggggggggggg.*

The fighters charge, Douglas from the left, Tyson from the right, whirling counterclockwise.



**IT WASN'T ALWAYS EASY** for James Douglas to be his father's son. Bill "Dynamite" Douglas, a rock-hard middleweight and light-heavyweight in the 1960s and '70s, had a light-switch temper and an unbridled desire to win, no matter the cost. "You don't say much to Bill Douglas, else you come in with your hands up," Douglas says. "He was a pistol. An intense guy."

Bill was the boxing trainer at Blackburn Community Recreation Center on Columbus' East Side. When Douglas was 10, his dad began training him as an amateur. But by the time he was 15, he was focused on football and basketball at Linden-McKinley High School, eventually leading the basketball team to a state championship in 1977. It wasn't until Douglas was playing ball at Coffeyville Community College in Kansas that he started to miss the heavy bag.

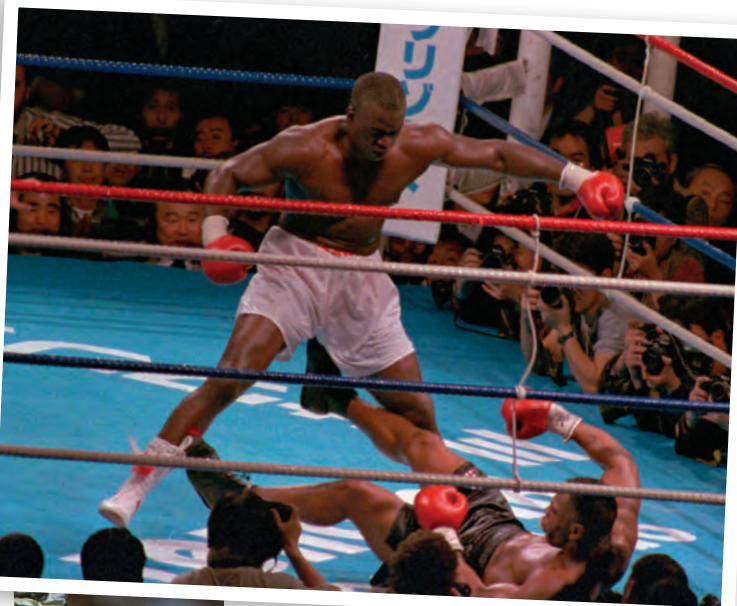
"You'd be depending on other guys," he says of basketball. "And of eight of the top players that played, four would show up. The other four had something else on their mind, and you'd come up short. That's what drew me back to boxing. Because it was a one-on-one thing."

When he told his dad he wanted to turn pro in 1981, Bill was ecstatic. Naturally, he became his son's trainer. But the results were mixed. Douglas didn't respond to Bill's methods. After dropping a couple fights to less-than-stellar opponents, Douglas visited his uncle, J.D. McCauley, also a retired boxer. He needed change.



PHOTOS: TOP LEFT, TSUGUFUMI MATSUMOTO/JAP. TOP RIGHT, SADAYUKI MIKAMI/JAP





As of February 1990, 33 of Mike Tyson's 37 wins had been by knockout. His title defenses, when averaged, lasted no longer than five rounds. James Douglas was a 42-to-1 underdog going into their fight.

McCauley always believed there was something special about Douglas. The kind of something that could propel him to the top of the sport.

"Buster wasn't just a boxer; he was an athlete," McCauley says. "He could do anything—he could play tight end. But the one thing he could do better than anything else was box. He'd been sitting around that gym his whole life watching his dad. See, everybody don't understand that. When you're that age, guess what you're doing while you're watching? You're learning."

He pauses. A deep breath.

"Only thing with Buster was he was lazy. And you have to separate the two. It came so easy to him; he had to work harder to keep his edge."

McCauley knew he could help his nephew, but he was reluctant to accept the gig. It would create tension with Bill, he knew, with whom McCauley, at the time, was the best of friends. So he visited Lula, his sister, for advice. Unlike her husband, Lula was known to be a kind, patient woman, the voice of reason in the often chaotic Douglas household.

"At first, I really didn't want to do it," McCauley says. "But [Lula] said, 'Just go ahead and do what Buster wants. I'll take care of Bill; don't worry about it.'"

Bill wouldn't be expelled from the corner, though, so McCauley knew he'd need help. He called an old friend, John Johnson, a former assistant football coach at Ohio State under Woody Hayes. Douglas met Johnson at his house to discuss their new strategy.

"For whatever reason," Johnson says, "I went into the kitchen, got a paper plate and dropped



Douglas comes from a family of athletes. His father, Bill, and uncle J.D. were both pro boxers, and his aunt Peggy was a member of the Columbus RoadRunners softball team.





"Buster's always been more comfortable around kids than adults," says Douglas' manager John Johnson. "He loves kids. It's just his personality. He's a really laid back, kind, gentle person."

it on the floor between us and said, 'This is what we've got.' And there was nothing on that plate. 'But if you listen and pay the price, someday you'll be champ, and that plate will be full.' "

McCauley and Johnson threw out Douglas' old training routine and started over. Uncle and nephew started running through Sharon Woods at 8 o'clock every morning, rain or shine. McCauley also hired a professional weight lifter to oversee Douglas' strength training. Johnson, tapping connections at Ohio State, even retrieved workout regimens designed for the football team's offensive linemen.

"We had Buster doing wind sprints, 40-yard dashes and all the stuff those guys had to do," McCauley says. "It was crazy, but it worked. It changed everything."

A string of victories earned Douglas a high-profile fight against undefeated Tony Tucker in Las Vegas in May 1987 for the vacant International Boxing Federation heavyweight title. But in the months leading to the fight, Douglas' corner unraveled. Bill had tired of Johnson and McCauley's influence over his son. He wanted to be in control. He wanted to see that his son achieved everything he never did—but it would happen his way. Douglas remembers a lot of shouting matches, a lot of tension in the gym.

"Bill figured he knew more than both of us," Johnson says. "Which he probably did. But it became a very, very volatile situation. He was involved, then he wasn't; he was, and then he wasn't. You never knew when something was going to blow, and it was horrible going into the Tucker fight. I think it really affected [Douglas] big time emotionally."

Come fight time, McCauley and Johnson were seated ringside. Bill was working the corner.

Starting with a right-left combo that stunned Tucker late in the fifth round, Douglas controlled the action. Going into the ninth, unofficial HBO scorer Harold Lederman had the bout tied on points. Commentator Larry Merchant had Douglas ahead. About a minute into the 10th, Douglas was caught with a swift right hook and stopped blocking. After about 30 seconds of punishment, referee Mills Lane called the fight, giving Tucker the win by technical knockout. Most analysts said Douglas simply ran out of gas. He says he was distracted.

When he got home, Douglas sat down his entire family, Bill included,

and explained why he had to move on without his dad in his corner.

"There was yelling and screaming all the time, and I was in the middle," Douglas says. "And after I told him [that he was out], he said, 'You know you're gonna be by yourself; nobody's gonna be there to help you.' And I said, 'I know that, but I've been raised by you, so I'll be a'ight.' "

For the next two years, Douglas had to dive back into the pit, as he puts it, proving





himself all over again. With new focus and a unified corner, Douglas picked up big wins against contenders Mike Williams, Trevor Berbick and Oliver McCall.

Meanwhile, Tucker lost his IBF strap to Mike Tyson, who, after dispatching Michael Spinks in 1988 for *The Ring* heavyweight title, became undisputed champion. If you could beat Tyson—which was a big “if”—you’d get every major belt in the division.

By 1989, Douglas—who was ranked No. 2 by the IBF, No. 3 by the World Boxing Council and No. 4 by the World Boxing Association—finally had the full attention of Tyson’s promoter, Don King. A title bout was scheduled for Feb. 10, 1990, but it would be in Tokyo; no American venues were interested. Tyson hadn’t been beyond seven rounds in three years and had never been knocked down in his amateur or professional careers. Douglas’ record, on the other hand, had blemishes. Besides, Tyson was projected to meet No. 1 division contender Evander Holyfield in late 1990. The Douglas fight, in King’s mind, would be a warm up.

“Did he fight King Kong?” Douglas quips about being a Tyson challenger. “Well, he

doesn’t have a chance.’ Tyson was so into the stratosphere. Unless you was knocking people out in two seconds, it didn’t matter. It was crazy, the aura he put out. He had everybody fascinated with him.”



When James Douglas was born, his aunt Helen thought his skin color was lighter than that of his relatives, so she called him “Butter.” His skin darkened as he grew, he says, and the nickname, somehow, evolved into “Buster.” “It just stuck,” he says. “I was ‘Buster’ from that time on.”



No matter, Team Douglas was convinced they had designed the road map, McCauley called it, for dismantling the champ: “Work that jab, and don’t stop in front of him and let him get off.”

Adds Johnson: “Mike’s greatest asset was his hand speed, and his worst downfall was his feet or lack of movement. He was always planted—but Buster could move.”

Shortly before Douglas left for Japan, his mom stopped by his house near Blendon Woods Metro Park. Lula’s girlfriends had been filling her mind with stories of the monster Mike Tyson who would pulverize her son. (“Oh, God, Lula, this kid is an animal. Ooh-wee!” Douglas remembers.) So she bought a book about the heavyweight champ, but didn’t appear persuaded by what she read.

“Well, how do you feel?” she asks as they sat down in the living room.

“Eh, I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know? I told ‘em all: ‘Buster’s gonna be all right. Buster’s gonna win the fight.’”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m not worried about this dude, Ma.”

“Ah, ‘cause you so mean!”

They laugh together. Silence follows.

“You know you gonna be all right,” she eventually says, nodding.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m gonna be all right.”



**AT LAST, MIKE TYSON** has arrived. Douglas may have controlled eight straight rounds—always moving, keeping the champ at bay with his jab—but a Tyson uppercut, in the waning seconds of round eight, connected with so much force that Douglas felt as if he was pushed off his feet.

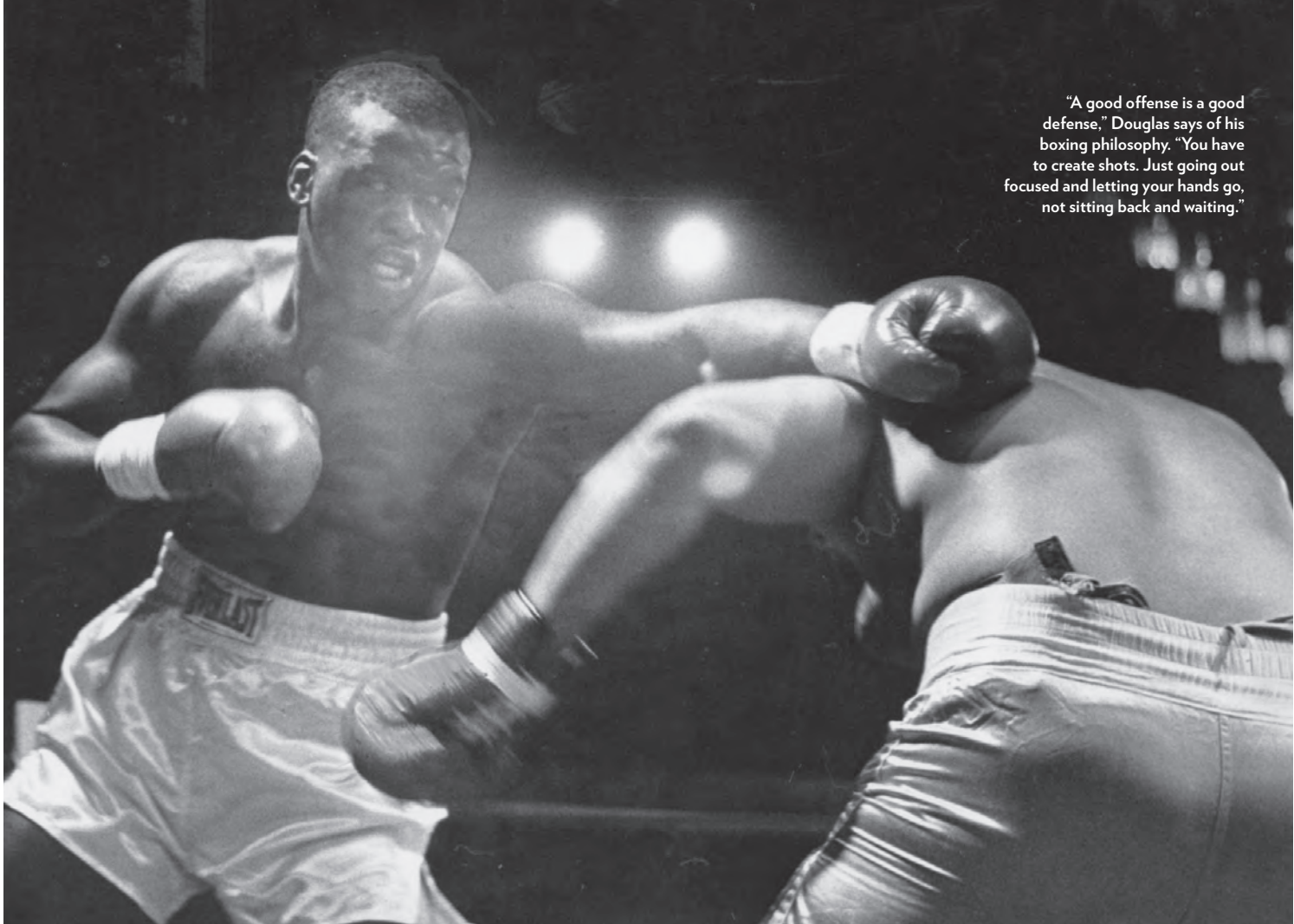
Now, the challenger from Columbus, as everyone expected so many rounds earlier, is on his back.

“It was the only time I lost sight, lost focus,” Douglas says of the uppercut. “I stopped fighting and was like, ‘Damn, can you believe this?’ Wanting to look at my work and all. Then ... bop! He dropped me.”

McCauley and Johnson are frozen, unsure whether Douglas is actually hurt.



Douglas’ championship run was a team effort. “They knew I had the potential, and they made me believe even more,” he says of J.D. McCauley, his uncle, left, and Johnson, right.



"A good offense is a good defense," Douglas says of his boxing philosophy. "You have to create shots. Just going out focused and letting your hands go, not sitting back and waiting."

PHOTOS: TOP: KEN CHAMBERLAIN/SPATCH FILE; BOTTOM: JEFF HINCKLEY/ISPATCH FILE

"ONE. TWO."

The fighter, now propped on his side, smacks the canvas with his glove and yells, "Shit!" His cornermen start breathing again.

"THREE. FOUR."

Douglas is searching for his equilibrium. He needs to stand on strong, not wobbly legs.

"FIVE. SIX."

Douglas rolls to his knees and begins pushing himself upright.

"SEVEN. EIGHT."

He plants one foot firmly on the canvas. The other's coming.

"NINE—"

He's up. Referee Octavio Meyran motions Tyson to continue fighting. The champ rushes toward Douglas but is stopped by the bell. The round's over.

Douglas drops on his corner stool, and he's swarmed by McCauley, Johnson and cut man John Russell.

"Are you okay?" McCauley asks.

"Don't worry about it. I got this. I got him."

Johnson chimes in.

"Buster, he's gonna come like hell."

"I know."

Seconds before the ninth round bell, Douglas observes a shift in Tyson's body lan-

guage from across the ring, as if he's bulking. The momentum is now in his favor. He's ready to end this and go home.

"If I went the distance with that fool, he woulda won," Douglas says. "Those judges weren't even watching the fight. You had to kill him to get him. That was the only way you was gonna beat Mike."

*Dinggggggggggg.*

The champ, as expected, comes out swinging. Douglas is quick to clinch when Tyson, the smaller fighter, gets close—a strategy that has frustrated Tyson the entire fight. About 30 seconds into the round, Douglas starts throwing lefts and rights. They're connecting, and Tyson's backpedaling.

"I started cracking him, *bap-bap-bap*," Douglas says. "'Let's go back to where it was. That was your moment; now I'm back.'"

Now Tyson's clinching—out of necessity. The fighters break, and Tyson buckles Douglas with a left cross.

"Neither man playing much defense at this moment," Jim Lampley calls at ringside. "They are just trading

shots. ... This is high drama, and the crowd here is greeting it by and large with stony silence."

"Probably disbelief, Jim," Larry Merchant says.

Two minutes in, Douglas starts unloading to the head and body. Tyson stumbles into the ropes near his corner. They're all that's keeping him afloat.





Meyran separates the two, and the action resumes in the center of the ring—for a moment. A flurry of lefts and rights sends Tyson reeling and, again, he clinches.

Thirty seconds left. Meyran intervenes and the fighters recalibrate. Fifteen seconds. Douglas cracks Tyson with a right hook. The champ's just trying to survive the round.

*Ding ding ding ding ding.*

"The most action-filled, heavy-punching-exchange round of Mike Tyson's career," Lampley proclaims.

As Douglas takes a breather, Tyson's corner is focused on the champ's left eye. After eating jabs for nine rounds, it has swollen shut. Trainer Aaron Snowell has been trying, unsuccessfully, to combat the swelling with a water-filled latex glove.

"Tyson, you could count his punches," McCauley says. "One, two, three, and he'd throw. That beat, Buster had that rhythm, and he was wearing him out with it. Every time he'd go one, two—Buster would hit him with a jab."

When the bell sounds for round 10, the champ's still on his stool, slow to rise. When they meet, he fires a vengeful right hook. Douglas absorbs the blow and ties up.

"He wasn't strong," Douglas says. "When I tied him up, he didn't try to get out; he waited for the ref. But he was still fast and hit hard."

The fighters wrestle and separate about a minute into the round. Douglas pumps his left jab. Tyson's not throwing back. His gloves, once instinctively glued to his nose, are drooping. An uppercut finds Tyson's chin and rattles his core. This is Douglas' chance, he knows, and maybe his only one. He attacks with a left-right-left, and the crowd clamors. Tyson collapses into Douglas' corner, his mouthpiece popping out and onto the canvas.

"ONE. TWO. THREE."

Through a fog, Tyson's looking for his mouthpiece.

"FOUR. FIVE. SIX."

He's on his knees, trying to pick it up with his gloves.

"SEVEN. EIGHT."

He's grabbing Meyran's leg.

"NINE—"

Meyran waves his arms and embraces Tyson. McCauley's vaulting the top rope, screaming, arms outstretched. Douglas, panting

After returning from Japan, Douglas was honored by a crowd of 25,000 in front of City Hall on Feb. 17, 1990.



and sweat-soaked, raises his arms as high as they'll go. His cornermen are wrapped around him. The ring is filling with bodies.

"Ladies and gentleman," Jimmy Lennon Jr. announces. "The winner by way of knockout and new heavyweight champion of the world—James 'Buster' Douglas."

Merchant, microphone in hand, makes his way to Douglas from ringside.

"Why did it happen, James?"

"'Cause I wanted it."

"But why did you win this fight that nobody on this planet—"

"My mother. My mother. God bless her heart."

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**MERCHANT SAID IT BEST** after the fight: "Suddenly, Mike Tyson, perceived as this giant monolith, has been reduced to being another heavy champ who got defeated." After losing to Douglas, he would go 13-5 in his remaining bouts, with two no-contests, before retiring in 2005. In interviews, Tyson often calls the fight against Douglas the best performance of his career.

In turn, 1990 was the year of Busermania. He returned from Japan to find his house decorated and his city proud. He was honored with a parade through Downtown Columbus and a one-of-a-kind state license plate from Gov. Dick Celeste that read "KO 10". He appeared on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* with the headline, "Rocky Lives!," made talk show appearances with Johnny Carson and David Letterman, guest refereed a World Wrestling Federation match between Hulk Hogan and Randy Savage and was even the face of Sega's "James 'Buster' Douglas Knockout Boxing" video game.

In October 1990, following a brief Las Vegas-based training camp coordinated by his father, Douglas would lose his undisputed heavyweight title to Evander Holyfield, electing to retire after the fight. After a life-threatening diabetic episode, Douglas would shape up and come out of retirement in 1995, fighting six more times before retiring for good in 1999, the year his dad died of colon cancer. His professional record stands 38-6-1.

Today, you'll find Douglas, now 54, in the boxing gym of the Thompson Community Recreation Center on Dennison Avenue in Victorian Village. After the renovated facility reopened in June 2014, Douglas took up Mayor Michael B. Coleman's offer to run its boxing program. Five

days a week, he trains children, teens, adults and a small group working through a drug rehabilitation program. Last summer, one of his amateur fighters made it to the championship bout of the Ohio State Fair's annual boxing tournament. And in December, he hosted the Thompson's first amateur event, attracting dozens of boxers from around the state.

"I used to dream about this, man," he says with wide eyes and a bright grin. "This is like a reward, really, to me. I remember seeing my dad with the kids at Blackburn and how they gravitated toward him, how he was a dad to a lot of them, too. I get that now. I love getting up every day and working with them. I find myself, on the weekends, thinking about what I'm gonna do with them next week. It's good therapy all the way around, for me as well. As long as my health is good, I'm gonna stay here forever."

Douglas, McCauley and Johnson remain close. Johnson, 70, still trains fighters under his Coach Boxing banner. He recently negotiated a contract to adapt Douglas' story for a Hollywood movie.

"We had some great victories and devastating losses, but we never gave up," Johnson says. "We made history together, and you can never change that."

McCauley, 69, left the sport altogether in 2000.

"My wife would kill me if I started talking about it again," he says. "Ain't no way. I just knew when I pulled away from it, I pulled away from it."

Still, McCauley thinks of the fight often, sometimes choosing to live in that moment, to tap into those emotions. Twenty five years later, they're still potent. When asked to talk about

it, his eyes well with tears.

"I don't think there was ever a feeling that could compare to that," he says slowly. "But you know what's so amazing about it? It happened, and you know it happened, but at times it seems like it didn't happen. Like it's a dream. It seems like it was yesterday. In the same way, it's been so long ago—was I really in Japan? Did I see that?"

He pauses. Then a smile.

"King was talking about, 'Y'all were lucky.' We wasn't lucky. We was good."

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On June 25, 1971, J.D. McCauley fought Muhammad Ali in an exhibition match at Hara Arena in Dayton, Ohio, with Joe Louis as the guest referee. Ali's boxing license had recently been reinstated—it had been stripped four years earlier for his refusal to enlist in the Vietnam War—and he was taking a promotional tour of the country, fighting largely unknown opponents. Ali won the rounds, but he was more focused on Louis than McCauley, the fighter-turned-trainer remembers with a laugh. "It was crazy because they got along but was always at each other about who was the best fighter, always picking at each other."

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*Postscript: In 1993, the city dedicated the Lula Pearl Douglas Recreation Center on Windsor Avenue, a 24,000-square-foot facility for neighborhood children.*