

CHANGING FACE OF SPORT

TIGER WOODS



1978 Plays an early round with Bob Hope... Classic.



2001 Woods gets gangsta and channels Eminem.



2005 The Tiger shows his peroxidized stripes.



2007 Ebony and ivory, live together in perfect harmony.



2008 With a wife like that, you'd look worn out, too.

ONE LAST JAB

Legendary boxers with a combined age of 93 lace-up the gloves once more. *Alpha* tries to find out why

There is nothing like a Jeff Fenech boxing press conference. We thought we'd seen the last of them, but they are back; and he is back, mouth and all.

At a Sydney harbourside restaurant to launch "Fenech-Nelson III - The Final Round" (as it's being billed) everyone mills around, waiting for the TV cameras. Some of those present are in very good shape and sharp suits, others are in very bad shape and T-shirts, but everyone's very friendly.

Someone asks if I want to talk to Fenech, but I decide against it. Fenech has already said everything, and when the Seven Network rocks up, he'll say it all again. It's his opponent I want.

Fenech is 44 and skipping a trillion skips a day. He's lost umpteen kilos. But Azumah Nelson is 49. A 49-year-old boxer! Nelson wears an immaculate brown pinstripe suit, has a very round head, salt-and-pepper moustache and looks like a pocket tank. His voice is as gentle as his handshake, his English is only fair, and he thinks he's in Melbourne. It's not surprising - a short while ago he was at home on his farm in Accra, Ghana, and no-one in the world wanted to punch him in the face any more. Then Fenech rang.

"When Jeff called I asked him what was going on and if he was alright," he says. Fenech had apparently woken up one morning, 16 years after catching two left hooks and a right cross to lose his second Nelson fight, and decided he wanted revenge. "He said he just wants us to fight again. I said, 'Let's go.'"

Let's go? Why would a peacefully retired man of nearly 50 say "let's go" to that? Does a man wait 16 years for revenge against a man he now calls a friend? I don't understand. Nelson talks about how hard training is, and the pain when his sparring partners hit him. He's never lost his skills, he says, but his body is hard to move, and he can't judge the distances to give and take punches. "The reflexes aren't there yet, but it's coming. The body is slow."

I ask if it'll be hard to hit a friend. "No, that's not a problem at all," says Nelson. His big shoulders move forward suddenly and I'm reminded that Azumah Nelson is still a warrior.

"I'm a man and this is like business. If my son was a boxer and he's in my way, I'm gonna fight him."

His own son?

"Oh, yes. That is being a man," he says matter-of-factly.

But does he think that people will take his upcoming fight with Fenech seriously?

"I want people to come and watch. Before the fight they might say we are two old men, but after they will say we're good enough to beat the young ones. We will surprise them," he says.

It's possible Nelson may have a point here. Fenech is the fastest fighter Nelson fought, and Nelson didn't lose either bout. He knows boxing, he says; he feels confident.

At the press conference, screens show younger, slimmer Fenechs and Nelsons unloading mayhem. One diplomatically cuts just before Nelson's left glove impacts Fenech's chin.

Fenech thanks everyone he can think of, past and present. He says he wants revenge. He says Azumah Nelson is his friend and the greatest fighter ever out of Africa. It's very confusing. Nelson says the President of Ghana rang him up and asked him why he was going to fight. Even the Ghanaian President is confused.

Someone asks if they are doing it for the money. Fenech says he's doing it for a down-syndrome children's charity. Nelson mentions a charity foundation. I check: yes, this is a boxing press conference. It doesn't feel like a revenge mission, though, it feels like a cuddle.

Trainer Johnny Lewis talks about "two old classy boxers" and he's right. June 24 will be strange, but good. Nelson is a warrior; Fenech is Australia's greatest boxer. Be rude not to watch. Just don't ask why.

LIFE AND TIMES OF HARBHAJAN SINGH



FENECH-NEILSON: WORDS BY IVAN SMITH; PHOTO BY PHIL HILLIARD. PHOTOGRAPHY: DAVID MARTIN (WOODS 01); GETTY IMAGES (WOODS 05); PHIL HILLIARD (SINGH 2001); STEPHEN COOPER (UMPIRE).