

Who's the daddy?

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He is trained by his nonboxing dad, got bullied at school and has a phobia about flying. So how come Joe Calzaghe is a world champ, asks Celia Dodd

Since Joe Calzaghe took the WBO world super middleweight boxing title from Chris Eubank ten years ago, the Welshman has won 18 fights and remained the champ. In fact, he hasn't lost a single fight since he was 18. That makes him a great fighter; some say the greatest British boxer of our time.

What makes him unique is the fact that he has been coached since the age of 9 by his dad, Enzo, a former rock musician who has never thrown a professional punch in his life. As far as son-dad relationships go, it's bound to get fraught at times. Calzaghe has had his own demons, too, such as mood swings, a morbid fear of flying and the memory of being bullied at school. So how do he and dad manage to keep it together personally and professionally?

Father and son, who live near each other in the Welsh Valleys where Calzaghe, 35, grew up, have had huge bust-ups within days or even hours of big fights. Calzaghe describes his dad in his new autobiography *No Ordinary Joe* (Century, £18.99), as a "temperamental Italian". Indeed, he's from Sicily. Calzaghe, who has a strong Welsh accent, says: "At times I hated him. When I was a teenager he kept pushing me into training when I wanted to go out with girls and have a drink like everybody else my age. He's a hard taskmaster and I wanted to rebel, but he knew how far to push me. One day I'd say I was quitting, but the next I'd be back asking him for a lift to the gym.

"Now I can see straight away when he's in a mood. If I'm in a mood, too, it kicks off pretty quickly: he has a little rant and I start effing and blinding. But ten minutes later it's forgotten. It's like any close relationship, when you see each other every day you start arguing about tiny things. But we don't hold grudges."

Calzaghe believes that the pair remain close, despite all this, because they are careful to keep their professional and personal lives separate. He says: "My dad is like my best friend but in the gym, you have to take the father-son thing out; you can't do it otherwise. And outside the gym we never talk about boxing, we just forget about it. As soon as we leave, we go to the bookies and have a bet or have some food and talk about normal things."

Yet, eight years ago, "Calzaghe Sacks His Dad" was splashed across the sports pages. People were always on at Calzaghe to get a "proper" trainer to replace Enzo. Calzaghe, then at a low point in his career, was tempted. He recalls: "When Dad saw the headlines he was absolutely gutted. I could see it was ripping him up inside, but all he said was, 'You're my son, first and foremost; do what's best for you.' After a few days we had a heart-to-heart and I decided that it was because of injuries that I wasn't fighting well. I thought, who can train me as well as my dad? Who am I going to respect as much as my dad?" It was a wise move.

Outside the ring Calzaghe doesn't look like a boxer, perhaps because his nose has

never been broken, and he's tall and slim rather than muscle-bound, with a thick silver earring and shades. He never trains with weights and he's proud that he has only one barely visible scar, next to his left eye, because the lack of damage is proof of his immense skill and speed. He is also, he admits, quite vain. But the upside to that, he insists, is that he'll never run to flab, as older boxers often do.

That's not to say that Calzaghe's weight doesn't give him grief: making the weight has been torture since he started boxing at 9. Between fights, the six-footer's weight creeps up to 14st (89kg), and he gets down to the required 12st by starving (just before a fight he's on 500 calories a day) and training in "sauna suits". He has been known to lose as much as 10lb in two days. He says: "Fighting is easy compared to making the weight. For eight weeks before a fight I get obsessed. I weigh myself six or seven times a day, have a little sip of water and then see how much I've put on. It's painful: when you haven't eaten you get so edgy, everything irritates you. I used to pick on my girlfriend if I saw her eating a biscuit. Then, after a fight, I binge on all the stuff that was forbidden: biscuits, cakes, crisps, curries, beer, wine. I eat even when I'm not hungry. I love food. My dad's an amazing cook and my two uncles work in kitchens. What keeps me happy before a fight is thinking about what I'll eat afterwards."

He admits that the mood swings, caused by the dieting, the anxiety in the build-up to a fight and the comedown afterwards, can make him hard to live with at times. He lives with his girlfriend, Jo-Emma, a model whom he met three years ago, and his two sons, Joe, 13, and Connor, 10, who divide their time equally between Calzaghe and his ex-wife Mandy.

What makes it all worthwhile is the sheer elation of winning. "It's an amazing feeling of relief, happiness and excitement all at the same time; it's better than any buzz you can possibly think of. It lasts for a good few days, or if I've fought particularly well, weeks, as it did when I beat Jeff Lacy last year. But then you've got to come back down, and what do you do if you haven't got another fight for six months? So sometimes I can get a bit, I'm not going to say depressed, that's too strong, but a bit down and bored. I get bored easily. I whinge and whine about training, but I love it. It's when I feel best."

Calzaghe has always felt frustrated by a lack of quality opponents. At times he has been dogged by injury to his left hand, which is still swollen after several fractures and tissue damage. But his darkest hour came with his divorce three years ago. The court case dragged on for over a year and was a distraction. His training suffered, he went out drinking and socialising more than he ought and lost motivation. He recalls: "I was in court the week before a fight in Scotland and I wasn't really thinking about the match. It was a horrible way to be: in the ring and just not there. With boxing you have to be totally focused. Usually I'm totally in the zone: I don't see anybody apart from my opponent. This time I really struggled and, if I had fought a good boxer that night, I would have lost."

What got him out of this slough of despond was pride and a formidable will to win. He hates losing; he still remembers crying bitterly every time he was defeated as a boy. He's not sure where this inner steel comes from, but it has seen him through several rounds with a fractured hand and coming back from being knocked out to win a fight. "That's when you find out who you are," he says. "It's something you can't

train for.” He also has a strong but very personal Catholic faith.

Although he doesn't go to church, he prays every day, and says: “I honestly believe that when I go into the ring I'm looked after. I feel protected and I feel stronger for it. So that helps me.” What's puzzling is that while Calzaghe is regarded as a legend by anyone in the know (and anyone from Wales) he's hardly a household name in the way that Chris Eubank or Frank Bruno were. So when he was recently up against Zara Phillips for BBC Sports Personality of the Year it seemed unfair, but hardly surprising, that he didn't get enough votes. He blames his lack of fame on timing: when he took the title from Chris Eubank the fight was watched by only 35,000 fans on Sky, whereas many better-known boxers made their debut on terrestrial television.

But it must also have something to do with the fact that Calzaghe shuns the celebrity circuit. When Marks & Spencer asked him to model underwear he turned it down, partly because his ex-wife didn't like the idea. Nor is he one for gimmicky showmanship or stagey entrances. And, unusually for a boxer, he needs no entourage to big him up; he prefers to spend the hours before a fight alone with his iPod.

Nevertheless, he has not been without his “diva moments”. In the past few years he has developed a fear of flying, after a few turbulent flights and watching too many air-crash documentaries. At one point it got so bad that he refused to get on a plane at the eleventh hour. He had checked in at Gatwick on his way to join the promoter Frank Warren for a press conference in New York, but when he discovered that the plane wasn't a jumbo, he panicked. The whole team had to get their luggage off and transfer to Heathrow, where they took off six hours later. These days he takes medication to control his fear.

Calzaghe recognises the need to “sell himself” more, and to be more open; that's partly why he wrote his autobiography. But deep down he clearly feels slightly aggrieved that, given what he's achieved, he can't just be taken on his own merits. He is also quite shy. He blames it partly on a horrible period at secondary school when he was bullied and ostracised by the entire class. He says: “In my third year I started getting picked on. I was quiet and one of the smallest boys in the year and they'd call me names and take the mickey. No one would talk to me, and I just went into my shell. It really, really affected me, but I didn't tell my mum and dad. I bottled everything up and got really depressed. I hated school and my schoolwork was badly affected.”

What's so ironic is that, at the time, he was British schoolboy boxing champion. It's not hard to see why the ring became such a welcome escape. He says: “I was these two personalities; I'd come home and go to the gym and punch bags and be happy, then I'd go to school and be this other person. I couldn't be myself at school. But even when the bullying stopped, when I was about 15 and I'd finally grown, I was still a nervous wreck at school.”

Although boxing has been his life, Calzaghe hopes that his two sons won't follow him into the ring. He couldn't bear to watch them get bashed about. Perhaps he now understands why his mum has never watched him box. He's happy for his boys to train, but encourages them to try sports that don't involve getting the hell beaten out of you if you're not very good.

Calzaghe is already worrying about retirement and the boredom of life without the highs and lows of building up to the next fight. That will be it: he doesn't want to repeat the mistakes of former champions who have made comebacks at great cost to their health.

But, for now, there is his next fight in September, against the Danish boxer Mikkel Kessler, to focus on. He is optimistic about his chances of retiring unbeaten: "I'm 35, but I feel 25. I'm running in the same hills, at the same speed, and I'm as fast in the gym as I was ten years ago.

"Obviously, it will come to an end soon and I will slow down but, at the moment, I'm at my peak, and there's no reason why I can't stay at the top for another two years."

On the ropes

Some of the most common boxing-related injuries

Detached retina

A detached retina, when the retina peels away from the back wall of the eye, causes blurred vision and can lead to blindness. The Olympic boxer "Sugar" Ray Leonard returned to boxing just ten months after eye surgery for retinal detachment. Despite many successive retirements and comebacks he never reclaimed his welterweight title.

Punch-drunk syndrome

Also known as dementia pugilistica, this is a neurological disorder that develops over 12 to 16 years and is caused by repeated concussions from being punched in the head. Short-term symptoms include slurred speech, lack of coordination, memory problems. In some cases, such as that of the former world heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali, sufferers go on to develop symptoms similar to Parkinson's disease.

Subdural haematoma

A form of brain injury in which blood from a broken vein collects between two of the brain's protective outer layers, the dura mater and the arachnoid, causing swelling and putting pressure on the delicate tissue. It can lead to coma and death. In 2005 the American boxer Leavander Johnson collapsed and died after his lightweight title fight with Jesús Chávez, during which Johnson received a barrage of punches to the head.

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/life/families/article1852747.ece>