

# THE LAST MAN STANDING



## THE BARRY MICHAEL STORY

A story of resilience  
and determination  
to be the IBF World  
Super Featherweight  
Boxing Champion

**Barry Michael**

**Foreword by Lester Ellis**

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First published by New Holland Publishers

[newholland.com.au](http://newholland.com.au)

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ISBN: 9781760798406

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## Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank:

First and foremost my father. For teaching me how to hold my hands up and being my Rock of Gibraltar for *sixty-five years of my life*.

My mother, Margaret, for being a wonderful mother, for always being so supportive.

My late brother Alan, for introducing me to the gymnasium.

David Elliot for getting me started.

Alan Meaker, for creating my style.

Ray 'Kid Lewis' Styles for getting me in the best shape of my life to fight for the world title.

Glen Walsh and Charles Dando, for being lifelong friends and sparring partners.

My late third wife, Sue, for 23 years of happiness.

My second wife, Narelle, for giving me my daughter, Chili-Rose and my youngest son, Bodie Michael.

My first wife, Sandy, for giving me my eldest son Zac Michael.

Tony Barber and his first wife Helen, for doing more for me than nearly anyone else when I was climbing the ranks. They set up a gym for me on their property in Red Hill. They took me overseas with their family. They were just wonderful.

Mike Ryan, editor and owner of *Fighter Magazine*, and John 'Shocker' Myles, for believing in me and promoting me in some of my biggest fights.

Shane Trewin. I met him on a Monsanto building site in 1976. He reckoned he could fight. We sparred. I proved to him that he had a lot to learn. But from then on he became my faithful training partner and corner man throughout my career. Rest in peace, Shane.

Graeme 'Porky' Brooke, for being a friend and sparring partner for decades and for giving me my shot to regain my Commonwealth Lightweight title, which I'd lost to former world champion Claude Noel.

And lastly, but not leastly, I want to thank Lester Ellis. Without you, Lester, I would never have had my IBF Super Featherweight world title. I value our life-long friendship more than words can say.

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## Dedication

In loving memory of the love of my life,  
Susan Swettenham – née Barker – 1957–2023.

And to the other three other loves of my life,  
my children Zac Michael, Chili-Rose and Bodie Michael.



13 March 2004 with my eldest son, Zac Michael Swettenham, on the day of my marriage to Sue. Zac is fifteen in this picture.



Susan being a fantastic stepmum to the two little ones.

## Foreword by Lester Ellis

So I'm this little kid, no mum, being raised as best as they could by my Dad and my brother.

There's no money. My Dad was a butcher. We weren't too badly off but we were hardly rich.

In about March 1977 I've just turned twelve and wagging school and I had a couple of dollars in my pocket and I see a poster for a movie called *Rocky*. I watch the movie, and at the end of it, I decide then and there that *that's* what I was going to do with my life.

I was an angry kid. I couldn't read, I couldn't write, but because there was no such thing as videos of boxing I could look at back then, I'd borrow boxing books from the library and learned to read that way.

I'd scour the streets of Sunshine, looking for old coke bottles to cash them in so I could afford the \$4 entrance fee so that I could box at the local gym – the Glengala Amateur Boxing Club. I could just manage to go three times a week because that's when Matt Quinn was able to train the juniors.

This went on for a few months or so, then one day in about August 1977 Matt Quinn invites the 22-year-old version of Barry Michael in to have a look at some of the local talent. I didn't know Barry from a bar of soap, but we sparred for three or four rounds.

By the end of that, Barry says to Matt, with me watching, "This kid's going to be a future world champion. I'd like to train him."

I was amazed. I loved boxing that much. I was shocked. I didn't believe it. But true to his word, Barry would show up once a week, once a fortnight, whenever he had the time, and we'd spar and train. Typically, after the training he'd say to me, "How about we do some roadwork and run back to my place?" So we'd run the four miles from Sunshine to Altona and then we'd have a lemonade and then he'd drive me back home.

After a few months, I started to believe in me, because *Barry believed in me*, when practically nobody else did. I can honestly say that I worked so hard to succeed not only to prove to myself that I could do it, but to prove to Barry too that his faith in me was justified.

And in the end, it was.

The rest is history.

After our famous fight, Barry told Howard Lee, the MC, “Lester Ellis is only a kid. He will go on to win another world title.”

Barry was right.

As usual.

I would go on to win another *four* more world titles.

In a very real way, Barry made me, and I, later, in a way, returned the favor, even though it was all a bit bittersweet at the time.

I hope that everybody who reads Barry’s story gets a sense of what life was for a boxer way back then, where we’d come from and what we did with what we had given to us, making the most of it.

It hasn’t changed all that much.

Well, maybe the money’s a little better.

It’s been a long while since I cashed in coke bottles for pocket money.

27 March 2025

## Introduction

I’m not going to bullshit about anything in this book. Growing up as I did, and how I did there wasn’t much room for lying to yourself about anything.

For example, growing up in the area I grew up in there were drugs everywhere, I lost a lot of friends from heroin and my brother Alan was a heroin addict. Myself, I’ve always been a drinker, and a marijuana smoker (I’ve never smoked nicotine, I hate nicotine). I mean, I don’t smoke marijuana all the time, but people might be shocked at all that, given what I achieved in the ring, but it’s no big news that the fight game is full of drugs and more than its fair share of organized crime.

This sort of thing takes its toll in many ways. A lot of the people I’m going to talk about are dead now, often way before their time. Now you can pretty much say whatever you like about the dead, especially if it’s a matter of public record, but some very important people in my life are still alive, and I don’t think it’s right to tell the world about what’s still private stuff and not in the public record.

So if you find yourself asking, “Why isn’t he talking more about so-and-so, or about such-and-such?”, well, now you know. And of course, I’ve changed some names and places to protect the innocent, and the guilty, and of course, myself!

Everything else though, is up for grabs.

I would like the reader to understand that I’ve done my best to recollect names, times places and events.

Most of the boxing statistics have come from **BoxRec.com** – a great site but I have spotted some errors there. That’s inevitable when you’re trying to record the very complicated history of world boxing, but for the most part, BoxRec.com is an extremely valuable resource.

As for the other facts and figures, they have come from the not-always-reliable memories of other people, as well as my own not-always-reliable memory, so bear with me.

In the end, this is my book, so I take full responsibility for any inaccuracies.

I fully expect to have people challenge and correct me on facts and recollection of events, because I'm not perfect.

Feel free to engage, I love a 'lively discussion'.

## CHAPTER I

# The Morning After the Fight

13 July 1985

After winning the International Boxing Super Featherweight World Title after a gruelling 15-rounds resulting in a unanimous decision against Lester Ellis, I was on top of the world.

Our team and a lot of supporters went out and partied and celebrated all night. My management team had organised a drink at some Chinese restaurant where we first went to celebrate. I really was looking forward to a drink, but I was passing blood and, to be honest, I was a bit of a mess, so I started drinking Kahlua and milk.

Everybody had a great time. It was one of the great piss-ups of my life. We ended up at a hotel in Port Melbourne early in the morning. By then, the early morning edition *Herald Sun* was out. I was truly on my second wind at that time, possibly my third.

The whole back page of the paper was dominated by a headline:

**"BOY! BARRY GETS HIS TITLE AT LAST."**

And I quote:

"His opponent called him a fossil and last night Barry Michael showed that like a true fossil, he has stood the test of time and passed."

It was an awesome feeling to realise that I had finally achieved what I had set for as a dream and goal many years before.

I went home, finally, and had a few hours' sleep. Usually, after a fight, win or lose, it takes me a while to wind down, and always after a big fight I would feel like this tremendous surge of power, and it was an amazing feeling. Imagine drinking 20 cups of coffee and buzzing that much but at the same time being in pain and knowing that you've taken some damage and that you'll have to pay for it later. And that particular morning the adrenalin surging through me was unbelievable, so I didn't care.

In any case, sleep was a luxury that I couldn't afford right then and there. Phone calls and interviews were happening flat out, and television stations wanted a piece of me, or several, too.

*It was great.*



And always after a bout it takes a couple of days to really feel the soreness. It was two days later that I really felt the pain. *Every* part of my body was sore. As usual, as in every fight, I'd pushed my body beyond anywhere I was supposed to. But that's the game.

Fortunately I had stopped passing blood, so whatever damage Lester had done to me on the inside was healing.

But whatever aches and pains, bashings and bruises I'd taken were all worth it.

A little boy had made a promise to himself so long ago, and the man had kept that promise.

## CHAPTER 2

# Born in England, Growing Up in Victoria, Early Doors

## The Early Years – 1955 to 1967

Where did I start from that turned me into the sort of person who thought it would be a good idea to punch people up for a living?

I was born Barry Michael Swettenham on 2nd of June 1955. I'm a Gemini. You can read anything you like into that.

In Watford, just northwest of London, England. But I'm Australian.

But I wasn't *always* Australian. The ten-pound poms who came to Australia in the fifties and sixties hoping for a better life in Australia included among them my parents. That was in 1957, when I was two. In today's money that's about \$500 or \$600 Australian. I can't remember if it was ten bob per person, or for the whole family. In any case, there we were my Dad, my Mum and my brother Alan Thomas Joseph Swettenham – who was born 1 April 1953 in London, and me. Either way it was a bargain. An offer my parents couldn't refuse.

My parents had both been born in London. My father, born in Sheppard's Bush on 14 October 1923, was Leonard Thomas George Swettenham. Swettenham is fine old English name from a village, south of Manchester. There was a port of Swettenham in Malaysia now called the Port of Port Klang. There's a Swettenham stud in Mitchellstown in Victoria south of Shepparton, owned by the Sangster family.

The Swettenhams even have a coat of arms.

My mother Margaret nee Curl was born in Watford 12 May 1927.

My parents married relatively young on 27 March 1948 when my Dad was 24 and my Mum was 20. Before any of his children were born my Dad had joined the Air Force at the age of 19. I don't have a clue what he did before that.

But in the Airforce he became a Lancaster bomber. He was the man who pressed the button. When the bomber captain said, "Bomb aimer, let's go!", he dropped the bomb. It's in the air-force that he got the nickname 'Butch'. Nobody ever called him 'Leonard' back then.



In those days, to do what they called a 'tour' over Germany, it was 30 trips in the Lancaster bombers, which were instrumental in winning the war for the United Kingdom and for the Western world. There was about a one in three chance of completing a tour. Dad did 29 trips and the war was over. So he beat the odds. Big time.

My dad had decided that he thought that the United Kingdom was going in the wrong direction.

He thought Australia would be a great new start for his family. And he was right.

We sailed to Australia on a boat called the *Castel Felice* and arrived in Melbourne in the Australian Spring of 1957. Fun fact, the *Castel Felice* brought a lot of people to Australia and New Zealand. In 101 voyages between 1952 and 1970, she brought over 100,000 people, including actress Chantel Contouri, ABC journalist Robyn Williams and film director Bruce Beresford. The *Castel Felice* had a lot to answer for, but she was broken up in Taiwan in 1970.

We weren't in Melbourne for very long, starting first in Hamilton, in the west of Victoria, south of the Grampians.

The reason we went to Hamilton was because my Dad's Skipper in the Lancaster Bombers – the boss, the main pilot – was a doctor, and his name was Johnny Reimer. He had lived in Hamilton. He had gone to the UK to fight, and he and my father became good friends. They weren't just superior officer and enlisted man.

He was the connection that helped us settle in, through the Apex Club who had sponsored us to go to Australia.

Dad became the caretaker and groundskeeper of the Catholic girls' college there. We actually lived in a house on the grounds of the girls' college. We had pet ducks, and we used to live off the land quite a bit, grow our own vegetables. It was also the first time that I ever went hunting. We used to go out with the ferrets and rifles and shoot rabbits. I had ferrets for many years. I love rabbits still to this day. You've got to know how to cook them – slow cook them.

In 1960, when I was about five, we moved to Glenbervie, right next to Essendon. Glenbervie is a tiny suburb that nobody's ever heard of, except that

the train station in North Essendon which is called Glenbervie. Glenbervie's was where my sister Rose-Marie was born, and where I first heard of Australian Rules Football and when I became an Essendon supporter. We were dubbed Bomber supporters back then.

My father then worked as a postman there and were in housing commission flats in Glenbervie, but after a couple of years we moved to Williamstown where my father worked at the Williamstown Post Office.

I don't know what prompted the move to Williamstown in 1963, when I was 8, but from that moment on Williamstown would be the place that defined me, that shaped me, and the place, no matter where I would later live, that I would always think of as 'home'.

My first memory is always the commission flats. It was rugged. There were four-story buildings. We were flat 1, number 99. They were quite comfortable, three-bedrooms. But it was ... How can I put this? You know, *all types* of people living in the commission flats. We saw alcoholics. We saw drug addicts.

There were fights, and Dad got in a few fights. It was a real mixture of immigrants and people, you know, people that didn't have a lot of money, basically.

But I've loved growing up in Williamstown. Williamstown's got probably more history than almost any other part of Melbourne.

My mother was not an educated person, but was just a wonderful person and loving mother. Mum always had jobs. She had cleaning jobs, but the one I most remember was splitting scallops at the scallop factory in Williamstown. She did that for years, because every boat back then used to go out from the Gem Pier and Ferguson Street Pier, and every boat would bring in 100 bags of scallops a day, like a big potato sack bag full of scallops, back then, when they were going out.

I have really good memories of knocking off school, Williamstown State School, and going to the scallop factory after school. I used to split scallops myself, and they used to pay us, by the scallop. It was good pocket money back then as a young kid. It was peanuts to us then, you know, but at least it was something. You enjoyed earning the money.

There were mussels too, and we used to take the mussels for bait.

Then there were blue ring octopuses, which are deadly poisonous. There were also Moreton Bay bugs, too, which people don't know are in our bay, and back then, we used to not cook them, because they were so ugly, we didn't need them. We used to use them as mullet bait. But today I love Moreton Bay bugs.

They don't do it anymore. They stopped the scalloping over 40 years ago, because that was basically the main food, I believe, for the snapper. They fished the snapper, and they started to deteriorate, so it was banned. Scalloping in the bay was banned and has been banned ever since. I would imagine now the bay's full of snapper again, so I imagine it's full of scallops, too.

To this day, I love scallops.

There was the Ferguson Street Pier where hundreds of people were fishing there, almost every day, in particular a lot of Europeans. We used to call them 'wog poles' – not politically correct, but those were the times – because they used to have these big poles, big bamboo poles, and they'd just fish with them with floats and pull mullet in. Massive schools of mullet used to come into this part of the bay every year. I haven't seen them in forever. You know, they've been gone, 30, 40 years.

But a lot of people still fish here today and I was walking the dogs in late 2024, and this guy, got a bite. I watched him, and he hooked it, he reeled it in, and it was a rock cod. And I said, "Shit! I haven't seen one of these for 30-odd years!" And he goes, have a look at this. And he opened the bag, and he had three more. Well, they were a species that completely disappeared. There's fish that I've seen disappear in the bay and are coming back in certain areas, nothing like they were in the amount in the old days.

Because in the old days I could say to mum, "I'm going fishing, Mum." I used to fish after school every night.

"What do you want me to catch?" There was plenty of everything.

"You know, leatherjacket, bream, flathead," she'd say.

Back then, flathead was as cheap as chips, and now it's like \$69 a kilo skinned and boned!

I used to say they should call it 'flaté', not flathead, you know, like with a bit of a French name to it, because it was cheap. It was so cheap.

I was a mad fisherman and just loved it. And we fished under the piers, and we used to have to sneak on the piers, because you weren't allowed on

them then, because they were all oil piers. The security got sick of throwing us off, so they ended up becoming friends with us and would let us stay overnight, because we used to fish all night at time. Parents used to let us go down there and fish for the big rock ling, which are big rock fish.

That was exciting, to be honest.

So the fish that you'd catch, because sometimes you'd catch huge amounts of them, you'd end up freezing them, or giving them away. And, you know, my parents always had friends that were looking for fresh fish. And I look at it now as I drive you around, there's so many piers that are closed that as a young bloke we could get on illegally, and everything's closed off now today.

And I think it's a real travesty, to be honest, because fishing is a great sport, and I think it should be promoted a bit more.

That's what it was like, growing up in Williamston back then, in the sixties and early seventies. Just kids enjoying the outdoors.

I didn't have any problems at school. It was pretty okay.

Well, just fights after school.

There *was* the fighting.