

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST

THE “CRAFT OF BRUISING” AND THE LIFE OF AZUMAH
“PROFESSOR OF THE RING” NELSON – A SOCIAL HISTORY OF
GHANAIAI BOXING
(VOLUME TWO)

BY

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Thesis submitted to the Department of History of the Faculty of Arts,
University of Cape Coast in partial fulfilment of the requirements for award of
Doctor of Philosophy degree in History


JUNE 2011

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DECLARATION

Candidate's Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own original work and that no part of it has been presented for another degree in this university or elsewhere.


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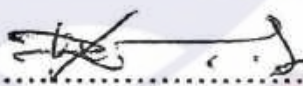
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We hereby declare that the preparation and presentation of the thesis were supervised in accordance with the guidelines on supervision of thesis laid down by the University of Cape Coast.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how boxing emerged in Ghana from both indigenous and foreign (British) inventiveness, how it has shaped aspects of Ghana's popular culture, and also examines boxing's social meaning and impact in the colonial and postcolonial milieux.

Furthermore, this work expands the popular conception of boxing as a "culture of the underprivileged" to embrace its vital significance as a stimulus to social mobility. On that trajectory, this work rethinks another socio-cultural meaning of boxing as a "sado-masochist" manifestation, which is counterproductive to "civilized" human culture,¹ by intellectualising it as a positive shaper of personal and national identities.

Additionally, this study discusses how boxing was resourcefully used by the Ga-Mashie *ethnie* of Ghana, for cultural and economic empowerment, the roles that its boxers, especially Azumah Nelson, have played in shaping the history and form of Ghana's "popular culture," and it uses Bourdieu's concept of *Habitus* to investigate the proverbial gravitation of the *ethnie* to boxing.

¹ For example the World Medical Association (W.M.A.) at its Thirty-fifth Assembly in October 1983, issued and passed a declaration against boxing. The declaration revealed the Association's concern that "[Boxing is a dangerous sport]. Unlike other sports, the basic intent of boxing is to produce bodily harm to the opponent. Boxing can result in death and produces an alarming incidence of chronic brain injury [For this reason, the World Medical Association recommends that boxing be banned]." (See "WMA Statement on Boxing," (Adopted by the 35th World Medical Assembly, Venice, Italy, October 1983 and editorially revised at the 170th Council Session, Divonne-les-Bains, France, May 2005), online, <http://www.wma.net/en/30publications/10policies/b6/index.html> (Information was retrieved on October 4, 2010).

Whilst the W.M.A. must have been aware that a number of sporting activities involved high risks, an influential lobby within the medical profession deemed the case of boxing a special one, which justified the strictest attention and restriction because crudely the nature of boxing "implies that extra points are given for brain damage." See British Medical Association, *The Boxing Debate*, London: B.M.A. 1993, p.10, as mentioned in Jack Anderson, *The Legality of Boxing: Punch Drunk Love?* Oxon: Birbeck Law Press / N.Y., Routledge-Cavendish, 2007. See also chapter 5 and 6 of *The Legality of Boxing: Punch Drunk Love?* which debates "The Physical and psychological dangers of boxing," and Philosophical and Ethical Consideration" respectively.

Moreover, the thesis interrogates the “ghetto” beginnings and legendary career of ex-champion and the International Boxing Hall of Fame inductee, Azumah Nelson, and highlights how “ghetto” boxers can internationalise Ghana, and transcend social obscurity to affluence and fame. The work nourishes the intellectual discourse on identity creation and social empowerment through the popular culture of sports.



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I thank you my father and mother for instilling in me the “spirits” of *Kujichagulia* (self-determination/confidence), *Imani* (faith/conviction), *Nia* (purpose), *Umoja* (harmony with humanity), *Ujima* (communal effort and duty), *Ujamaa* (communal/collective economics), and *Kuumba* (inventiveness). These principles have profoundly assisted my academic pursuits and journey and have placed me at 33⁰ x 33. They gave me the strength to undertake this study. I thank you very much Atm-Imn-Ra for your assistance and guidance.

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De-Valera N.Y.M. Botchway,

2011.



DEDICATION

To the powerful youth of Africa. Marcus says: "Up you Mighty Ones, you can accomplish what you will."



TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DECLARATION	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
DEDICATION	vii
LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS	ix
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER TWO: SPORTS, SOCIETY AND THE RISE OF MODERN BOXING IN THE GLOBAL SETTING: AN INTRODUCTORY HISTORICAL APPRAISAL	50
CHAPTER THREE: THE GA, <i>ASAFO ATWELE</i> AND THE ROOTING OF MODERN BOXING IN GHANA	140
CHAPTER FOUR: ORIGINS? <i>MI TABONNYOBI</i> . <i>MI GA-MASHINYOBI</i> . I AM THE SON OF MY PEOPLE	254
CHAPTER FIVE: THE MAKING OF THE AZUMAH LEGEND	341
CHAPTER SIX: <i>REX</i> OF THE SUPER-FEATHERWEIGHTS: THE AZUMAH LEGEND CONTINUES	425
CHAPTER SEVEN: IS IT JUST ABOUT THE PAIN (AN ETHOS OF BRUISING)?	592
CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION	665
BIBLIOGRAPHY:	672
APPENDIX:	711

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DECLARATION	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
DEDICATION	vii
LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS	ix
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER TWO: SPORTS, SOCIETY AND THE RISE OF MODERN BOXING IN THE GLOBAL SETTING: AN INTRODUCTORY HISTORICAL APPRAISAL	50
CHAPTER THREE: THE GA, <i>ASAFO ATWELE</i> AND THE ROOTING OF MODERN BOXING IN GHANA	140
CHAPTER FOUR: ORIGINS? <i>MI TABONNYOBI.</i> <i>MI GA-MASHINYOBI. I AM THE SON OF MY PEOPLE</i>	254
CHAPTER FIVE: THE MAKING OF THE AZUMAH LEGEND	341
CHAPTER SIX: <i>REX OF THE SUPER-FEATHERWEIGHTS:</i> THE AZUMAH LEGEND CONTINUES	425
CHAPTER SEVEN: IS IT JUST ABOUT THE PAIN (AN ETHOS OF BRUISING)?	592
CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION	665
BIBLIOGRAPHY:	672
APPENDIX:	711

LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

- (A.B.C.) African Boxing Confederation
- (A.B.C.) American Broadcasting Company
- (A.B.U.) African Boxing Union
- (A.F.L.) Australian Football League
- (A.F.R.C.) Armed Forces Revolutionary Council
- (A.I.B.A.) Association Internationale de Boxe Amateur
- (A.M.A.) Australian Medical Association
- (A.N.F.) Azumah Nelson Foundation
- (A.R.P.S.) Aborigines Right Protection Society
- (A.R.S.) Apostles Revelation Society
- (A.S.) *Africa Sports*
- (B.B.B.C.) British Boxing Board of Control
- (B.B.C.) British Broadcasting Corporation
- (C.B.A.) Commonwealth Broadcasting Association
- (C.B.C.) Commonwealth Boxing Council
- (C.B.E.) Commander of the Order of the British Empire
- (C.B.S.) Columbia Broadcasting System
- (C.D) Compact Disc
- (C.E.O.) Chief Executive Officer
- (C.O.S.) Central Organisation of Sports
- (C.P.P.) Convention Peoples Party
- (C.S.A.C.) California State Athletic Commission
- (C.Y.O.) Catholic Youth Organisation

- (D.A.B.A.) District Amateur Boxing Associations
- (D.G.) *Daily Graphic*
- (D.S.O.) Distinguished Service Order
- (D.V.D.) Digital Versatile/Video Disc
- (DFID) Department for International Development
- (ECOFEST) Eco-Tourism Festival
- (EThOS) Electronic Theses Online System
- (F.C.) Furley Collection
- (G.A.B.A.) Ghana Amateur Boxing Association.
- (G.A.F.A.) Ghana Amateur Football Association
- (G.A.S.C.) Ghana Amateur Sports Council
- (G.B.A.) Ghana Boxing Authority
- (G.B.B.C.) Ghana Boxing Board of Control
- (G.B.C.) Ghana Broadcasting Corporation
- (G.B.P.S.) Ghana Boxing Promotion Syndicate [Council]
- (G.C.A.B.A.) Gold Coast [Colony] Amateur Boxing Association
- (G.C.A.S.C.) Gold Coast Amateur Sports Council
- (G.C.B.B.C.) Gold Coast Boxing Board of Control
- (G.D.P.) Gross Domestic Product
- (G.F.A.) Ghana Football Authority
- (G.N.A.) Ghana News Agency
- (G.S.) *Graphic Sports*
- (G.T.) *Ghanaian Times*
- (GANEF0) Games of the New Emerging Forces

- (H.B.O.) Home Box Office
- (H.I.V.) Human Immune Virus
- (H.S.G.) Historical Society of Ghana
- (I.B.A.) International Boxing Authority
- (I.B.C.) International Boxing Council
- (I.B.F.) International Boxing Federation
- (I.M.F.) International Monetary Fund
- (I.O.C.) International Olympic Committee
- (JSTOR) Journal Storage
- (K.B.E.) Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire
- (K.O.) Knockout
- (L.P.R.R.) London Prize Ring Rules
- (M.) *Mirror*
- (M.B.E.) Member of the Order of the British Empire
- (M.C.C.) Marylebone Cricket Club
- (M.D.) Majority Decision
- (N.A.B.F.) North American Boxing Association
- (N.B.C.) National Broadcasting Company
- (N.C.B.W.A.) National Congress of British West Africa
- (n.d.) No Date
- (N.L.C.D.) National Liberation Council Decree
- (n.p.) No Publisher
- (N.S.C.) National Sports Council
- (N.S.C.) National Sports Council

- (N.Y.C.) National Youth Council
- (O.B.E.) Officer of the Order of the British Empire
- (P.) Point
- (P.B.C.S.B.) Professional Boxing and Combat Sport Board
- (P.D.F.) Portable Document Format
- (P.D.G.) *People's Daily Graphic*
- (P.N.D.C.) Provisional National Defence Council government
- (P.N.P.) People's National Party
- (P.P.V.) Pay Per View
- (P.R.A.A.D.) Public Records and Archives Administration Department
- (R.A.B.A.) Regional Amateur Boxing Associations
- (R.A.F.) Royal Air Force
- (S) *Statesman*
- (S.B.) *Sportsbeat*
- (S.D.) Split Decision
- (S.E.) *Sporting Events*
- (S.M.C.) Supreme Military Council
- (S.M.C.D.) Supreme Military Council Decree
- (S.O.S.) Save Our Souls
- (S.S.) *Super Sports*
- (S.T.) *Sporting Times*
- (S.W.A.G.) Sports Writers Association of Ghana
- (T.G.) *Gossip*
- (T.G.V.) *Ghanaian Voice*

- (T.K.O.) Technical Knockout
- (T.S.S.) *Sports Star*
- (U.A.R.) United Arab Republic
- (U.C.C.) University of Cape Coast
- (U.K.) United Kingdom
- (U.N.) United Nations
- (U.S.A.) United States of America
- (U.S.F.) University of South Florida
- (U.S.S.R.) Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
- (U.T.C.) United Trading Company
- (UNESCO) United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
- (V.H.S.) Video Home System
- (V.I.P.) Very Important Personality
- (W.B.A.) World Boxing Association
- (W.B.C.) World Boxing Council
- (W.B.F.) World Boxing Federation
- (W.B.O.) World Boxing Organisation
- (W.M.A.) World Medical Association
- (W.N.B.A.) Women's National Basketball Association
- (W.U.S.A.) Women's United Soccer Association
- (Y.M.C.A.) Young Men's Christian Association

who had defended his title on December 12, 1981 in a split verdict over England's Pat Cowdell. He had also defended it from Jorge "Rocky" Garcia on May 8, 1982, by winning in a unanimous verdict. After these fights Sanchez wanted the W.B.C. number one contender Mario Miranda, from Columbia, to have a challenge at the belt first. However, Miranda was nursing an ear injury, which he sustained in an earlier bout. It was while stopping Marcos Villasana of Mexico in Miranda's native Colombia, that he sustained the ear injury. He also had a hand injury.²⁸ Because of the injury, he dropped out and that enabled Ringcraft to convince Don King, who was desperately searching for a substitute, to arrange Azumah Nelson as an emergency replacement for Miranda.

Uncertain of his chances, but having hoped that someday he would get a chance to fight for the title, he had maintained his normal training. When rumour and information from the grapevine circulated that Don King was desperately searching for replacement, the tempo of the boxer's training started to quicken. As his managers strove to open an opportunity for him, and his fans in Accra learnt about the possibility that he might have a fight many fans became eager to see him in training. His training centre and place of sparring quickly became a centre of beehive activities, as his fans and inquisitive people trooped there and if the fight was to take place in July then it meant that he had less than a month to prepare for the contest. That he hurriedly did. His training session included skipping gracefully before mirrors, whilst he watched himself perspire with gleaming sweat gliding off his ebony coloured skin, and the exhibition of rapid hitting of the speed ball and

²⁸Awudu Ali, "What Next Azumah?" *Spectator* (hereafter *T.S.*), August 21, 1982, p. 7.

punching bag. His floor exercises and sparring with top-flight sparring partners from Bukom and other gyms in Accra attracted fans. Fans from Bukom and supporters also did frequent such places to sing inspiring songs in Ga to cheer him up and boost his morale. Girls – admirers and those who were just inquisitive – boxing promoters, and the scribes of sports news of Accra, also went to such training grounds to watch him work out with his trainer Robertson, who was very dedicated to the task of producing a world champion out of his trainee. Robertson naturally must have known that a title fight and a victory for his trainee meant fame and a “fat pocket” for himself. As a boxer, he had failed to grab the title when he had the opportunity in the 1960s and that disappointment never left him. Envisaging the fight, which he was preparing for his protégé to win, he must have seen it as a great opportunity for him to use to show the world that he could produce a fighting machine to snatch the title if he could not do it. Therefore, apart from profiting from the pay roll of Ringcraft, Robertson was also interested in the success of Champ and so remained by his side.

The search by Don King had apparently been a desperate one since Ruben Castillo, Juan La Porte and Rocky Lockridge had all turned down King’s offer because of the short notice to prepare.²⁹ Since fighters rated by the W.B.C. in the top ten were eligible to challenge, King’s search had to widen its scope and look in the direction of Pat Cowdell, who had already been defeated by Sanchez. Cowdell therefore was not the favourite challenger. The other possible contenders that were available were Azumah Nelson, Tony

²⁹“SPORTS PEOPLE; No Challengers, Yet,” [July 1, 1982]. See the webpage of the *New York Times*, (Sports) Friday, July 16, 2010, on <http://www.nytimes.com/1982/07/01/sports/sports-people-no-challengers-yet.html> (Information was retrieved on August 2, 2010).

Santana of New York, who considered himself a junior lightweight, Jorge “Rocky” Garcia, Sanchez’s last opponent, José Caba, who was recuperating from a broken nose, and Marcos Villasana.³⁰

It was out of that desperate search by Don King that the not-so-well-known African boxer, who had hoped for a title fight, was chosen as the preferred and qualified contender against Salvador, who snatched the title from D.K. Poison’s nemesis – Danny Lopez. He did that through a K.O. in round thirteen on February 2, 1980.

Fascinatingly, before Don King signed him up for the bout, the flamboyant boxing promoter and entrepreneur asked the boxer to prove himself in a short exhibition that he was up to the task ahead. The boxer beat the sparring partner and demonstrated to the promoter that he was a “strong fighter.”³¹ It is of interest to note that Mickey Duff, a well-known boxing promoter who also represented Azumah Nelson overseas,³² played a role in getting the Azumah Nelson – Salvador Sanchez fight together. As part of the arrangement Don King approached Duff and offered him promotional rights for several championships under his control including those of Sanchez and world heavyweight champion Larry Holmes.³³

Interestingly, it was about two weeks to July 21 that news filtered to the public and the boxer that a deal had formally been reached, and that Azumah Nelson was to fight on the above-mentioned date. His managers

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ See interview of Azumah Nelson in, *Zoom Zoom – The Professor: The career of Azumah Nelson*, directed by Sam A. Kissie, D.V.D., Sankofa Pictures, Geodrill, and Azumah Nelson Foundation, 2010.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ “Azumah’s Managers Sure of Victory,” *D.G.*, July 15, 1982, p. 6.

quickly handled the documentation and immigration processes for his travel. In the haste, his local coach encountered some problems with his travelling documents and their processing. These problems were going to make him unable to travel to the U.S.A. Having gone through the immigration process with rush, because of the short notice to the fight, the boxer left Accra for the U.S.A.

Azumah Nelson and John Kermah, chairman of Ringcraft, travelled together to New York. They, at last, succeeded in doing the necessary formal paper work for the fight. Coach Robertson could not acquire a U.S.A. visa in Accra. Unable to travel with the coach, Ringcraft planned for Robertson to join Azumah Nelson later, to assist in a comprehensive training.³⁴ Apart from doing the paper work for the fight and finally succeeding in staging the fight itself, Ringcraft, Azumah Nelson, and Don King agreed that Don King should exercise his management and promotional rights over the boxer's work and fights. John Kermah and Ringcraft represented for Azumah Nelson and Don King represented Don King Incorporated.

The 24 years old challenger, who was making history as the third Ghanaian, after Floyd Klutei Robertson and D.K. Poison, to battle for the world crown, missed his local trainer. The trainer could not go to the U.S.A. to assist in the preparation of the boxer. Because he could not obtain a U.S.A. visa in Accra,³⁵ the trainer tried to go to the U.S.A. through London, England. However, because he failed to meet all the immigration requirements needed to go to the U.S.A., he got detained in London.

³⁴"Azuma[h] in U.S.," *D.G.*, July 7, 1982, p. 7.

³⁵"Azumah's Big Break," *D.G.*, July 21, 1982, p. 7.

Meanwhile, as he nurtured the fear that his coach might not make it, the boxer naturally became a bit perturbed. No wonder, although he exuded confidence and went on with his training, he “cabled” his managers to ask Ghanaians to pray for his success. This absence of a coach dealt a situation of psychological set back to the boxer. It also, eventually, dragged Robertson through a period of emotional crises.

Although he was disappointed that his coach would not be with him, the Ghanaian boxer trained. His U.S.A.-based assistants and Ringcraft granted interviews to sports journalists and newspapers that were interested in knowing the boxer from Ga-Mashie and what power he could bring into the ring. Meanwhile, in the absence of Robertson, L.C. Morgan, an American trainer with a record of more than 200 fights in a career which spanned many years, was asked by the handlers of the boxer to coach Azumah Nelson and assist him to train. The managers brought Morgan to New York from Los Angeles. The boxer’s work outs and shape- up sparring were confined to the Times Square Gym. Interestingly and curiously, it was in that same vicinity that Sanchez also trained. The separate trainings of the two individuals attracted a number of fans. The sessions of Azumah Nelson continued to attract a growing number of Ghanaian fans.³⁶ Staying at the Milford Plaza Hotel, in New York’s theatre district, a hotel, which also accommodated Sanchez, Azumah Nelson met Sanchez for the first time on Wednesday, July 14, at a pre-match news conference.³⁷ It was at that conference that the boxers

³⁶Eugene Forson, “Azumah: It will be over in 10,” *D.G.*, July 20, 1982, p. 7.

³⁷*Ibid.*

were formally introduced to the “Solons,”³⁸ fans, promoters, and journalists of the world of international professional boxing, who were all waiting eagerly for the imminent clash between the two fighters. Meanwhile, Sanchez, it was reported, had been sending spies to the camp of Champ to watch the Ghanaian train, study his moves and accordingly inform Sanchez.³⁹ For this reason, it appears that Sanchez, who was not familiar with the underdog, entertained some fears. Consequently, he took those steps of espionage to study the boxer to be able to prevent a possible upset from a challenger who, under difficult circumstances, had been preparing enthusiastically to fight Sanchez.

Within the chain of training sessions he had during the limited time he stayed in New York before the fight, the challenger demonstrated intelligence, poise and precision not only to the awareness and delight of the spies and fans that trooped to watch him but also to his U.S.A.-based coach. Morgan was wowed by the discipline and finesse of the Ghanaian right from the beginning of their relationship. In an interview with the Ghana News Agency (G.N.A.), Morgan, after a training session with his ward, told the G.N.A. that his ward was an intelligent boxer and a good puncher who followed instructions well.⁴⁰ Of course, that had been a long standing trademark of that determined and disciplined boxer, which undoubtedly contributed to his early victories. The challenger had other doses of meet-the-media sessions, in which his managers spoke with the ever curious and want-something-to-write scribes of the city of New York. At such meetings, he consistently expressed his intention to unseat Sanchez. He articulated such ideas in Ga and his humorous fractured English

³⁸In boxing terminology “Solon” is an informal name for a boxing commissioner. It originates from a man named Solon who was known as the lawmaker of Athens.

³⁹Eugene Forson, “Azumah: It will be over in 10,” *op.cit.*

⁴⁰“Azumah’s Managers Sure of Victory,” *op.cit.*

which at times were clarified in English by his managers. Most of the scribes, who were familiar with Sanchez, felt that the Ghanaian contender was a “no match” for Sanchez. Many of such sceptics were quick in registering their opinions at such meetings and in their newspaper article. Because of his record, Sanchez was the favourite of most of the scribes and commentators in the U.S.A. It was widely a regarded notion in boxing circles in New York that a win by the Ghanaian would be a major upset indeed. However, according to reports, such a “win” and “upset” were exactly what the challenger kept saying he wanted ever since his arrival in New York,⁴¹ “the Big Apple.”⁴² The Ghanaian must have seen himself as an underdog, but he surely did not think that he was incompetent. He knew that he was not a *palooka*⁴³ and was determined to give Sanchez a good competition. His confident handlers, particularly Morgan showing respect to and not fear of Sanchez told the G.N.A. “We are not underrating Sanchez. He is a great champion, a proud champion. But there is no way Sanchez can beat Nelson.” He then added, “This is the time for Ghana to redeem the title (which Poison lost to Lopez).”⁴⁴ These were articulations that gave testament that confidence was not lacking in the camp of the Ghanaian boxer. Meanwhile, possibly in their attempt to discredit and psychologically fight and break him, through tactics of

⁴¹“Azumah’s Big Break,” *op.cit.*

⁴²“The Big Apple” is a nickname for New York City. John J. Fitz Gerald, a sports writer for the *New York Morning Telegraph* popularised the use of that phrase in the 1920s. See The Society for New York City History Education Committee, “Why do they call it ‘The Big Apple’,” *circa* 2005, online posting, <http://salwen.com/apple.html> (Information was retrieved on July 29, 2010).

⁴³There was a comic strip created by Ham Fisher in 1928 that featured a good-hearted but slow-witted and inarticulate boxer named Joe Palooka. In boxing terminology “palooka” is a tenth rater and “nobody” boxer who usually loses his/her fights in four or six rounds to beginner career boxers. A boxer of such low calibre is also known as “a tomato can” or “a ham and egger.”

⁴⁴“Azumah’s Managers Sure of Victory,” *op.cit.*

mudslinging and propaganda, certain pro-Sanchez newspapers resorted and continued to write uncomplimentary articles about the Ghanaian. Such media spawned writings angered the boxer, his camp, fans and particularly most of his inquisitive and never-say-die supporters in Ghana. The *New York Post*, for example carried a critique from one of its sports columnists, which said of the challenger, who was about 1.65m (165cm) shorter than the about 1.71m (171cm) Sanchez,⁴⁵ “he (Azumah Nelson) looks like he should be the water boy in the corner.”⁴⁶ This obvious insult had come a day after the Ghanaian was presented and introduced to New York City’s sports writers at a forum at Madison Square Garden. Another *New York Post* writer, it was reported, also commented that:

Even if his (the challenger’s) unbeaten pro[fe]ssional record is authentic, he looks so small. He figured to be an [sic] hoire d’oeuvre [sic] (*hors d’œuvre* or appetizer) for the monstrous fistic appetite of Sanchez who has an impressive record.⁴⁷

Replying to their doubts and reacting to their “pranks” the handlers of the Ghanaian boxer assured the interfering scribes that their ward would cause a big upset to them. The challenger, after completing the closing stages of a gruelling training on the last day before the bout, told the G.N.A. that he was not afraid of Sanchez, but respected him. Exuding confidence, but maybe over confidence he added that: “The fight will not go beyond 10 rounds.”⁴⁸ He predicted a K.O. but did not say the round, which was going to bring that.⁴⁹ In another situation, he, in confidence, told his managers when he would stop Sanchez. He made that prediction in the hotel room of John Kermah. After

⁴⁵“Azumah’s Big Break,” *op.cit.*

⁴⁶“Azumah’s Managers Sure of Victory,” *op.cit.*

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Eugene Forson, “Azumah: It will be over in 10,” *op.cit.*

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

walking into the room of his handler, to watch a video about Sanchez, the challenger left the room in the midst of the show. When he was asked why he, in the midst of watching that educational material, was leaving, he replied that he would take the champion out by round ten. Turning to a representative of the G.N.A., the boxer declared, “Tell the fans that.”⁵⁰

On the day of the fight, Champ had a little warm-up in the early part of the day. He also took some time to be alone in his room to meditate. “I was asking God to guide me and let His will be.”⁵¹ His coach and managers gave him some pep-talk, and he availed himself to some inspirational songs in Ga, which were sung in his quarters.

In the evening the challenger, his coach, and the “dons” of Ringcraft went to “the Garden.” King and Duff were there to watch the 124 pounds boxer from Ghana who was undefeated in thirteen professional fights, with ten K.Os.⁵² The challenger emerged from his dressing room wearing a robe and pants made in the Ghanaian national colours – Red, Yellow, Green and Black. Oko Kwatekwei carried the Ghana national flag and led the boxer’s entourage, which contained a group of Ghanaian fans who beat out rhythms from *kolomashi*⁵³ drums and waved white handkerchiefs to signify a victory for the challenger. This fight, which formed part of the official inauguration of the Don King Sports and Entertainment Network Cable Television at “the

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, Foodies Restaurant, Osu, R.E., Accra, March 23, 2010.

⁵² See *Azumah Nelson vs Salvador Sanchez 1-2*, YouTube, (9:07 minutes), uploaded by la risyosa, April 28, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kxtbEzFRJGGW&feature=r> elated (Information was retrieved on November 16, 2010).

See the full fight on <http://www.boxingvideonline.com/2008/04/salvador-sanchez-vs-azumah-nelson.html>.

⁵³ *Kolomashi* is a social music and dance from Ghana. It is usually performed by men and women from the coastal area in Accra. As a dance it is rich and mostly performed at social gatherings.

Garden,”⁵⁴ attracted a huge attendance including some of the “famous” and “influential” persons in the city of New York. A good number of the Ghanaian community in the Big Apple were also there to cheer the Ghanaian boxer and give him support. Also for a good measure, there were, at the ringside, some important Ghanaian diplomats including the chairperson of the G.B.A., Lt. Felix Nii Okai, Ghana’s Representative to the United Nations (U.N.) Ambassador James Gbeho and Ghana’s Consul-General Kwabena Kumi.⁵⁵

A huge Hispanic crowd, which was present at the packed boxing arena, was amazed as they looked on the ecstatic drummers play rhythmic *kolomashi* and *kpalongo*⁵⁶ drum patterns. Many members of the crowd looked amused as they heard and watched the scores of Ghanaians among the crowd who chanted inspirational songs and started to dance in their seats to the *kolomashi* rhythms.

The challenger was now facing a bigger crowd than he had originally expected. It was the biggest that he had seen since he started his career. It was also the most enchanting crowd that he had stood within to fight ever since he started boxing as a white collar,⁵⁷ amateur, and professional. He was excited and overwhelmed. In situations like that the confusing movements of an overrated opponent, and the thunderous boos and cheers, could weigh heavily on the physical and mental frame of any underdog and especially a newcomer

⁵⁴ See the full fight on <http://www.boxingvideonline.com/2008/04/salvador-sanchez-vs-azumah-nelson.html> (Information was retrieved on November 16, 2010).

⁵⁵“Azumah Stopped,” *D.G.*, July 23, 1982, p. 7.

⁵⁶*Kpanlogo* is a recreational dance and music form from Ghana. It was first played by the Ga ethnic group in Accra, but it is now performed and enjoyed throughout the country. As a music and dance of celebration it came to popularity around 1960, but is based on much older drumming patterns.

⁵⁷In boxing terminology “white collar boxers” are not registered amateurs or professional boxers. They box (spar with an opponent) in contests or exhibitions where no cash prizes are awarded.

to “the Garden” like Azumah Nelson. Such atmospheres and experiences potentially have the power to either encourage and turn boxers into fighting machines to fight to win or can “blind” and “freeze” boxers and lead to their battering and defeat. Standing on the raised canvas, in the midst of the crowd and cameras, the challenger knew that the world was watching through the eyes of the spectators and camera lenses. The feeling of being exposed under all those lights had their impact on the emotions and psyche of the Ghanaian challenger. “The picture and scene was amazing, electrifying and intimidating at the same time.”⁵⁸

Knowing that the nation of Ghana, including the boxing loving Head of State, expected him to win, the challenger posed well and fought gallantly. He proved to be a strong fighter against Sanchez, but the champion, proving that he possessed a long and rich experience from the scene of world-class professional boxing, managed to win the fight through a T.K.O. in round fifteen. Throughout the fight, the courageous efforts from the challenger elicited strong cheers from the scores of singing and drum beating Ghanaian fans.

Referee Tony Perez stopped the fight at about 1 minute 49 seconds into the last round to save the challenger from further punishment. The stoppage came after the challenger was knocked down by a hard left hook from Sanchez. Searching for a K.O., the challenger swung wildly at his opponent from the beginning of the last round. In fact, it is reported that he had been very aggressive in the early rounds and did unleash thunderous blows to the

⁵⁸ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

head of Sanchez.⁵⁹ He missed one attempt and Sanchez, seizing the opportunity, landed that left hook which sent the Ghanaian boxer down.

Sanchez absorbed the challenger's punches from the beginning of the bout. Studying his various moves Sanchez used his superior ring experience to keep himself on his feet. In round eight Sanchez rained a flurry punches on the challenger. The Ghanaian boxer who could not take the punishment counterattacked and landed a right to the face of Sanchez. The barrage of left and right punches that followed sent Sanchez back to his corner. The two combatants continued to slug it out in the round that followed. The jubilant crowd yelled for more punches and the show of brute strength and skill. By round fourteen, Azumah Nelson was bleeding from the mouth and his right eye was badly swollen. He received two stiches on his cut lip before he went into the last round. This cut was apparently hurting his lips and mouth, which also contained an uncomfortable gum guard which was not his original shield.

From round one, the challenger was put at a significant disadvantage. His custom made mouthpiece was missing. Hence he fought with a makeshift one, which he had purchased from a store and trimmed with a "blade" to fit his mouth.⁶⁰ It felt uncomfortable in his mouth and left him in pain. Ultimately, it made easy for his lip, which was not sitting comfortably on the shield in his mouth, to succumb to a deep cut, after it received a hit from Sanchez about some time in round six.

⁵⁹"Sanchez – Great Champ," *D.G.*, August 14, 1982, p. 7. See the inserted picture and annotation of that picture.

⁶⁰See interview of Azumah Nelson in, *Zoom Zoom – The Professor: The career of Azumah Nelson*, D.V.D., *op.cit.*

Although, he fought bravely, the T.K.O. did not allow him to take the title. Before the fight was stopped, judge Al Reid had the challenger in the lead with 133-132 on the ten point system score. However, Tony Castellano and Artie Aidala had him behind Sanchez 135-131 and 134-131 respectively.⁶¹

The valour and strength, which Azumah Nelson showed in the face of the more experienced Sanchez, was commendable. He received commendation from the fans who, although disappointed in his defeat, were convinced that the Ghanaian boxer had proven that he was worthy to have another title engagement next time. He also received congratulations from some of the notable officials of the W.B.C. international boxing. The president of the W.B.C., José Sulaiman, showed his appreciation to the impressive performance of the challenger by autographing the gloves, which the challenger used, presenting it to him as a souvenir,⁶² and telling the G.N.A. that he (José) was proud of the Ghanaian. Praising the challenger, José Sulaiman announced that the Ghanaian boxer was “a courageous fighter. He took lot of punches but always came back. He is a credit to the W.B.C.”⁶³ Comments, containing praise and criticism, about the Commonwealth featherweight titlist came from other circles. Later commenting on Azumah Nelson’s exploits in the fight, the authoritative voice of the famous and respected sports columnist Jerry Izenberg,⁶⁴ observed that although he lost, the

⁶¹“Azumah Stopped,” *op.cit.*

⁶²“Azumah to Fight in October,” *D.G.*, July 27, 1982, p. 7.

⁶³“Azumah Stopped,” *op.cit.*

⁶⁴This renowned sports journalist was born in 1930. His career with the *Star-Ledger* began in 1951 while he was still a student at Rutgers University, Newark. Izenberg has covered many memorable sporting events and figures of the late twentieth century, including Sonny Werblin’s ownership of the New York Jets, and the boxing career of Muhammad Ali. “Mr. Izenberg was inducted into the National Sportscasters and Sportswriters Hall of Fame in March 2000, joining 63 of the world’s leading sports journalists. In May 2000, he received the

Ghanaian boxer “was within distance to the title,” and it seemed so to the spectators in “the Garden.” Adding that the challenger did his homework well he remarked that:

he had learned to tuck his elbow in and curl the ebony rock God gave him for a body into a tight little shell. And against one of the most feared punchers in this business, Azumah stole round after round.⁶⁵

Mickey Duff who had worked in the corner of Sanchez’s challengers, did not fail to say that the Ghanaian boxer gave a “fantastic account of himself” but remarked, as a way of explaining the loss that, “Inexperience cost him the fight.” However, he added that “several other fights and Azumah would be champion.”⁶⁶

Although it can be said that inexperience cost him, there were other factors that also facilitated his defeat. It can be suggested that the apparent lack of time for proper preparation and training, and the psychological feeling of insecurity because of the absence of Robertson in his camp, were important factors. Other pressures like the continuous intimidation from the scribes of the city of New York and lack of some basic logistics, including the use of a homemade gum shield, naturally must have induced in the fighter some physical and psychological discomforts, which contributed to his defeat.

Azumah Nelson who had proven himself a great fighter, drew homage and praise from Sanchez. Speaking through an interpreter after the fight, the champion said that the challenger from Ghana was, “a great fighter with a lot

Red Smith Award—the highest honor given by the Associated Press Sports Editors.” See New Jersey Boxing Hall of Fame, “Jerry Izenberg,” n.d. <http://www.njboxinghof.org/cgi-bin/henryseehof.pl?30> (Information was retrieved on October 2, 2010).

⁶⁵These statements were culled from an observation, which were, reportedly, made by Jerry Izenberg in July 1982. See “Azumah to Fight in October,” *op.cit.*

⁶⁶“Azumah Stopped,” *op.cit.*

of heart.”⁶⁷ Don King who was also impressed by the challenger’s show intimated at a post bout news conference that he was going to use “the talented young man who with more experience would shake the world and boxing history.”⁶⁸

The ability of Azumah Nelson to go the full length of the match with Sanchez and the tough time he gave the champion endeared him to many of the Big Apple’s we-have-seen-it-all and hard-to-please boxing fans as well. Hence, as he and his handlers stood outside “the Garden,” waiting in the dark cold night of the city for a ride back to his hotel, many fans came to shake hands and asked for his autographs.⁶⁹

Before returning to Ghana, the boxer became the formal mentee of Don King who asked his stepson Carl King to professionally take charge of the promotion of the Ghanaian boxer. Through the local Ghanaian guardianship of Ringcraft, the boxer was bound by a contract to the Kings, for ten years, after which new negotiations could be made.

The boxer wanted a rematch but as it turned out the W.B.C. and some contenders to the title had already matched Juan La Porte of New York against Sanchez in a future fight. New York’s *Daily News*, according to Ghana’s *Daily Graphic*, also revealed that La Porte, who had already signed to fight Sanchez for the title on September 15, 1982, had “watched the proceedings of the fight with growing apprehension, fearful that the opportunity might be lost as Azumah went to work on the Mexican [Sanchez].”⁷⁰ La Porte, like the other

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ “Azumah to Fight in October,” *op.cit.*

admirers of Azumah Nelson, must have been impressed by the valiant performance that was put up by the Ghanaian boxer. As a point of interest, La Porte and the Ghanaian boxer, as they travelled the path of professional boxing would clash, sometime in the future to show the world their skills and prowess in the ring.

After losing to Sanchez, Champ had to fight other contenders to prepare before he could possibly get another shot at the title. His handlers planned and promised to get him such fights.⁷¹ Although he lost to Sanchez the entire contest in New York was good for the Ghanaian boxer's popularity and burgeoning professional career. This was because it gave him an uncommon exposure to high echelons of the W.B.C. Additionally, he gained a high recognition in the international world of boxing and John Kermah claimed that: "If he (Azumah Nelson) had not taken the chance he would still be in Africa [and not recognised on the world level of professional boxing]." He added that: "at least we made our mark."⁷² Oko Kwatekwei also predicted that: "Having acquitted himself creditably and with boxing writers and fans talking about him, Azumah has hit it big time. Don King would be coming after us."⁷³ This was a good observation and prediction. True to his estimation, Don King went after the Ghanaian boxer and worked with him for a long time in his boxing career. The boxer went into his debut as an underdog and left New York as a force to reckon with in boxing. He became the toast of the Big Apple's boxing writers and fans who hailed him as a "hottest" in the featherweight class. He gave the world a good performance and a valuable

⁷¹*Ibid.*

⁷²"Azumah Stopped," *op.cit.*

⁷³"Azumah to Fight in October," *op.cit.*

match. In reverence to the powerful aura which the match commanded, because of the high pedigree of boxing which Azumah Nelson exhibited in the bout, and the sheer strength which Sanchez demonstrated, it was reported that Izenberg conferred some historic greatness on it. Seeing it as a fight of epic proportion, he compared that match to some notable classical historical bouts of boxing greats in the fistic sports history of the U.S.A. He stated in an article “Featherweights wage war in Garden” that “The Marriage” of the 15th round “coupled with the battle which preceded it conjured up memories of shadowy buildings with names like St Nick’s (St. Nicholas Arena) and Eastern Parkway and Laurel Garden.” In sum, “the fight,” he remarked, “was not a 1982 prize fight. If you do not know what that means then you had better stick with whatever television gives you.”⁷⁴ The places he referred to, which he argued had been invoked by the power and importance that came with the fight between Champ and Sanchez, were scenes of great classical boxing matches in the old days.⁷⁵

The *Daily Graphic* reported that a Spanish newspaper in New York praised Azumah Nelson for his courageous and skilful performance. The report stated that “the *Mundo Diard* [sic],” which was predominately published for the large Hispanic community in the Big Apple, confessed that Sanchez was “lucky to win.”⁷⁶

Meanwhile boxing authorities in Ghana wanted him to give a home show to his fans in Ghana. The idea was to have him fight against his boxing

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Mundo Diard*, quoted in “Azumah To Fight in October,” *ibid.* The reported *Mundo Diard* could probably be the renowned *El Diaro*, which, in New York, is a Hispanic community newspaper in Spanish.

compatriot Thunder Clottey, in defence of the Commonwealth Crown.⁷⁷ However, that did not materialise because he engaged in some fights outside Ghana. These build up fights were occasioned to build his strength. In addition they were staged because they could improve his verve and enable him “to toughen his muscles and build on his stamina,” which according to one writer the boxer needed.⁷⁸ Furthermore, the fights were arranged to financially “build” his and the pockets of his handlers, who were still bent on getting another attempt at the title after, possibly, a Sanchez-La Porte showdown.

In Ghana it seemed that the general feeling among disappointed fans, many of whom kept vigil⁷⁹ on July 21, to support Azumah Nelson, was that the African champion had been robbed in his bid to annex the title. However, as one writer observed, “ [it] came as a relief to all those who loved fair play when promoter Don King made it known that he would consider Azumah for the title [possibly a rematch with Sanchez] after a couple of fights in the States.”⁸⁰ Nevertheless, as fate must have had it Azumah Nelson and Sanchez were never going to meet and have a rematch. However, as one writer put it, “Azumah would have loved to meet Sanchez in a return match but this was not destined.”⁸¹ The fight on July 21, 1982, was the last for Sanchez. The boxing world and Sanchez’s native Santiago Tianguistenco, on August 12, almost one month after the bout in New York City, faced the sad tragedy of the death of

⁷⁷Awudu Ali, “What Next Azumah?” *op.cit.*

⁷⁸*Ibid.*

⁷⁹The G.B.A. organised a vigil for the supporters of Azumah Nelson, on July 21, at the Bukom Square in Accra to show solidarity and support for their hero. See for example, “Vigil at Bukom,” *P.D.F.*, July 15, 1982, p. 6.

⁸⁰Awudu Ali, “What Next Azumah?” *op.cit.*

⁸¹*Ibid.*

Sanchez. He died in a gruesome motor accident⁸² in Mexico City.⁸³ This was not going to be the only loss to boxing and the career ambitions of Azumah Nelson. Azumah Nelson lost the opportunity of ever having a rematch with Sanchez. Moreover, he also in that same year lost his coach Robertson to death. This coach, who was unable to become a world champion when he was an active boxer, had wanted to accomplish that feat through his trainee Azumah Nelson. As stressed, he was unable to go to New York to help his trainee to snatch the title from Sanchez and was unhappy. Moreover, he became disappointed with the outcome of the fight. After the fight he returned to Ghana from London and became very emotional for not being able to get the fame he had long sought after. A clear chance to get the title had passed. Not knowing when another chance would come again, and uncertain about whether or not his services as local coach last for long, he became a pale shadow of his normal energetic self, even as he extended training assistance to Azumah Nelson. He started to drink. His health deteriorated and that led to his quick death on November 23, 1982.

The world of boxing's loss of Sanchez made the W.B.C. featherweight title vacant for a contest. The handlers of Azumah Nelson quickly went into action to bid for a possible showdown between Juan La Porte, who was an automatic candidate for a bout for the world title, and Azumah Nelson. However, the W.B.C. arranged a showdown between La Porte and Mario Marinda. Note that Miranda should have boxed Sanchez on the July 21, 1982,

⁸²As he was training for a rematch with La Porte, set for September, he crashed on the early morning of August 12, 1982, while driving his Porsche 928 sports car along the federal highway from Santiago de Querétaro to San Luis Potosí, dying instantly. Sanchez was posthumously inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 1991.

⁸³For a short biographical profile and career history of Salvador "Chava" Sanchez see "Sanchez – Great Champ," *D.G.*, August 14, 1982, p. 7.

but was substituted by Azumah Nelson, because of an injury. Therefore, when the time came for a challenge, W.B.C. found him better positioned, not more capable, than Azumah Nelson to compete La Porte for the vacant title. Azumah Nelson, who was now one of the leading world favourites, was disappointed but he remained calm and patient, because he envisaged that the winner would possibly meet him in the near future. This dream of having a shot at the crown did not come quickly. This was because after beating Miranda through a round ten K.O. at “the Garden” on September 15, La Porte avoided a challenge from the Ghanaian boxer. In the interim, Azumah Nelson with fury embarked on a triumph spree in build-up fights. As he added more victories to his record his handlers lobbied so that he would have a title fight. Ultimately, they got the slot for him in 1984. The W.B.C. endorsed him to fight Wilfredo “Bazooka” Gomez.

In Search of the Golden Fleece: Azumah Nelson Grabs the W.B.C. Featherweight Title in 1984

Gomez who was a powerful fighter and fistic genius⁸⁴ from the poor area of Las Monjas in San Juan, Puerto Rico proceeded from the super-bantamweight and took the featherweight title from the talented La Porte.⁸⁵

⁸⁴Born on October 29, 1956, he is a former boxer and three time world champion. Nicknamed “Bazooka,” Gomez had one of the highest K.O. win percentages in professional boxing. He won 88 percent of his bouts by K.O. In 2003, *The Ring* ranked Gomez as thirteenth on a list of the 100 greatest punchers of all time.

Before he fought for the title in 1984, Azumah Nelson “victimised” about six different fighters within and outside Africa. His victories attracted the strong interest of the P.N.D.C., its Chairman, D.F. Annan, and Amarkai Amarteifio. The Secretary for Youth and Sports, in particular felt that the boxer was perceptibly inching close to bringing a world title to Ghana. He threw his personal and ministerial support behind him and encouraged him to excel to overhaul Ghana sports and boxing. His build up fight engagements outside Ghana served as ways of further exposing him to the fans outside Ghana. They were also ways of boosting further his confidence, and exposing him to better training facilities.

The year of 1983 was a period when “nature and man conspired against Ghana”⁸⁵ because the country experienced a bad drought and a lot of bush fires which destroyed much of the fertile land and farms in the country. Consequently there was food shortage. Moreover, a lot of Ghanaians in Nigeria were deported, by the Nigerian government, in their thousands to Ghana, which put a lot of pressure on the already scarce food in the country and worsened the situation. During that period when nature and man (Nigeria) conspired against Ghana and ushered the country, which was also ailing economically, into a period of food shortage and rise in the prices of basic consumables, the boxer did some fighting outside Ghana. Taking those occasions to temporarily escape that period of hardship he also improved his record by defeating four contestants. Before entering the year 1983 to establish those four victories, he chalked one victory on October 31, 1982. On that date,

⁸⁵He beat La Porte by a 12 round unanimous decision.

⁸⁶ Amarkai Amarteifio, personal interview, *op.cit.*

he defeated an undefeated fringe contender Irving Mitchell in McAfee, New Jersey in a T.K.O., in round five. His next victim was Ricky Wallace who was beaten on February 12, 1983, at Public Hall, in Cleveland, Ohio by a win in round ten. Then Alvin Fowler followed, by a T.K.O., in round two at the Showboat Hotel and Casino, in Las Vegas, Nevada, on August 17. On September 23, in a match refereed by Pete Rademacher, Alberto Collazo was defeated in a T.K.O., in round two at Richfield Coliseum, Richfield, Ohio. Back in Africa he, on November 23, gave a second defeat to Kabiru Akindele in Lagos, Nigeria through a K.O. in round nine, when the challenger contested him for the Commonwealth crown. Azumah Nelson's record was becoming an impressive one and he continued to eye the big title. Amarkai Amarteifio did not have a doubt that the boxer would seize a title soon. According to Amarteifio:

That was something the country needed. I thought that there was the need for an international laurel for Ghana in the realm of sports and especially boxing . . . there was the need for something to get us all cheering even though the conspiracy of nature and man had brought hardship to many in the country. People needed something to smile about so I encouraged this promising boxer [Azumah Nelson] to work hard to get the title for Ghana and himself.⁸⁷

In 1984, Champ outboxed another skilful boxer Hector Cortez and defeated him on March 9 at the Convention Centre in Las Vegas in round ten. Gomez, by then, had taken the W.B.C. featherweight title and he was receiving a lot of public attention and requests from different contenders for a fight. Azumah Nelson's handlers pressured the champion for a fight. They implored the W.B.C. to grant a bout between the champion and the Ghanaian, who in

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

the eyes of many boxing pundits had been in the “wilderness” for a long time even though he was the “best” contender around. Finally, they succeeded in getting the W.B.C. to accept and sanction a mandatory challenge from Azumah Nelson against Gomez. The titlist accepted the challenge. In the eyes of any fair-minded boxer Las Vegas or New York would have been fair grounds for both boxers. However, was the challenger going back, or did he get the opportunity, couched in fairness, to go to those places? No, he did not. The fight did not take place in New York, Accra or Las Vegas or any of the venues that was familiar to the challenger. Nonetheless, the challenger was ready to fight anywhere. Amarkai Amarteifio encouraged him and said that the nation was solidly behind him. The Secretary also agreed to join the team of the boxer and support him at wherever it took place. As it turned out the fight was finally shifted to Puerto Rico, the country of Gomez. That was an apparent advantage to the champion. However, the contender was not perturbed. This was because he was “hungry” for the title. His fearlessness also must have been intact, possibly because of his rich experiences from “the Garden” and other outside-Africa engagements. He must have got used to the tension, intimidation, and strangeness that accompanied fights fought by boxers outside their home countries and familiar terrains. He therefore agreed to “chase” Gomez to his country Puerto Rico. Having lost Floyd Klutei Roberston, he did have stints of training with F.A. Moses. Moses was a Ghanaian coach who, for some time, coached the Black Bombers. Receiving such coaching in Ghana, Azumah Nelson further honed his skills. On his quest for the coveted world title, the ultimate “Golden Fleece,” craved by all aspiring professional featherweights, the Ghanaian boxer, in 1984, journeyed

to San Juan, Puerto Rico. According to him, he was determined to teach Gomez a lesson and make him pay for derogatorily referring to Ghanaians, who it was true experienced shortage of food in 1983, “as hungry people.”⁸⁸ He also wanted to punish Gomez because he said that Azumah Nelson would be “hungrier” after he had tasted defeat in the fight.⁸⁹ Amarkai Amarteifio disclosed that:

Gomez said these things when the two boxers met for the traditional weighing before fights. . . . I told Azumah to “teach Gomez a lesson.” In my determination to psyche him for the fight I went to him in the dressing room just before he went into the ring to fight and said to him: “This fight is for Ghana. Close your eyes and visualise Ghana, the airport, the cheering crowd and Chairman Rawlings, bare-chested and walking towards you to congratulate you for taking the title. Can you see?” Azumah responded “yes.” Then I said to him: “That is what awaits you. So go now and get the title for the country.” He then told me he would do that.⁹⁰

The boxer promised the government official of a victory for Ghana and it was with that mind that he went in to the fight and all other fights. In the judgement of Amarteifio: “Azumah Nelson fought for the country and Africa.”⁹¹

The boxer also promised the official to defend the name of Ghanaians and make Gomez pay for his uncomplimentary statements. True to his promise Azumah Nelson, in a match, which was refereed by Octavio Meyran, beat Gomez and de-titled him by a K.O. in round eleven at the Hiram Bithorn Stadium in San Juan.⁹² This happened in front of a crowd of “about 40 to 50

⁸⁸ See interview of Azumah Nelson in, *Zoom Zoom – The Professor: The career of Azumah Nelson*, D.V.D., *op.cit.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Amarkai Amarteifio, personal interview, *op.cit.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² See *Wilfredo Gomez vs Azumah Nelson – Parte 4* [sic], YouTube, (7:03 minutes), uploaded by garfieldlambda, July 29, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tyOuoK>

thousand live audience who came to watch Gomez and Azumah.”⁹³ Trailing behind on the scorecards of judges Dick Young, Marcello Bertini and Mike Jacobs, the challenger from Ghana was further inspired by Amarkai Amarteifio who, at the end of round ten, went near the challenger’s corner and shouted in Ga, “shi le o gbe shi,”⁹⁴ meaning, push him (knock him) down. With renewed vigour the challenger rallied strongly in the last two rounds to “demolish” Gomez to become champion. Elated that the challenger had made Ghana proud, the P.N.D.C. Secretary for Youth and Sports, jumped into the ring and raised the new champion shoulder high to celebrate his triumph. This picture or scene, of a politician “raising” a sports man – a politician idolizing and venerating a sports person – was a clear evidence and testament to the tremendous power inherent in sports. Amarkai Amarteifio recounted that:

I was happy because I knew that he had brought glory to Ghana and himself. I knew that Ghanaians would have something to smile about even though they had encountered a lot of economic and social hardships in the last two years. The victory indeed did that. Ghanaians rejoiced in his and the country’s accomplishment in boxing.⁹⁵

After the fight, the ring announcer proclaimed, “ladies and gentlemen” and, in his baritone voice, declared to the world of boxing and to the hearing of a delighted boxer and his jubilant fans that there was a new W.B.C. featherweight champion “Azumah Nelson, from Ghana.” It was at this juncture in his career that he earned from his fans the alias “The Terrible Warrior.” After this fight, he returned to Ghana as an honourable titlist. The

P3QAA&feature=related (Information was retrieved on November 16, 2010).

⁹³See interview of John Kermah in, *Zoom Zoom – The Professor: The career of Azumah Nelson*, D.V.D., *op.cit.*

⁹⁴See interview of Amarkai Amarteifio in, *Zoom Zoom – The Professor: The career of Azumah Nelson*, D.V.D., *op.cit.*

⁹⁵ Amarkai Amarteifio, personal interview, *op.cit.*

fight was significant to him because it made the boxer, his promoter and managers proud and richer. It was also a fight which he used to avenge D.K. Poison, to bring pride and joy to Ghana, and to fulfil his dream of becoming a world champion and famous. He held on and protected that title for three years. Within that period, he, as royalty of that division, successfully defended his title on six occasions from very aggressive and skilful boxers.

He received a heroic welcome from the people and government of the P.N.D.C. at the national airport. He paid a courtesy call on Chairman Rawlings. The chairman congratulated the champion and registered the nation's appreciation for his feat. Additionally, the boxer was given audience by the Ga-Mashie nation. Such audience led him to pay a courtesy call on the Ga Mantse and his elders. Their praises and congratulations made him to see himself as a hero of his people. With these recognitions, songs of praises from his neighbours and folks in Mamprobi, Bukom, and Timber Market, where a fan club the Adedemkpo Azumah Nelson Boxing Fan Club, had emerged, Azumah Nelson without a doubt had finally become a national idol. His position as a champion and national hero made many Ghanaians to know and respect him. He became the toast of many sports journalists, commentators and followers of boxing in the country. He featured and gave interviews on television and radio shows and sports programmes. He also received invitations to become guest of honour at different private and national functions. Boxing and the accomplishment of the champion in the sport so far could not have worked any other way for him. It could not have brought any other miracle into his life, except for the respect, fame, fulfilment and wealth that it was unleashing into his life. True to his expectations, his social image

and identity got transformed overnight. They had been rapidly changed through boxing and the winning of an international title. The sport, as he envisaged, had allowed him to incarnate as a national and international celebrity. For the first nine months the world champion revelled in his newly found fame, paid attention to his family – wife, mother and siblings and friends.⁹⁶ He also trained and put his battered body and psyche in shape. Hence he, during that period of tending to family, friends and self, did not engage any contender in a fight. When he returned into the ring for action, his first encounter was against the tough Chilean, Juvenal Ordenes.

Fighting to Defend Title in the Ring and Defend His Person against a Charge of Dope use made Against Him: 1985 to 1987

He, in a match refereed by Steve Crosson, beat the challenger in a round five K.O. to retain his title at the Tamiami Fairgrounds Auditorium in Miami, Florida, on September 6, 1985. After Ordenes was vanquished, there came discussions and informal requests, among and from the world of international boxing journalists and fans, within the sphere of professional boxing, for a showdown between the W.B.C. featherweight champion and the W.B.A. world featherweight champion, Barry McGuigan, alias Finbarr Patrick MacGuigan, who was another skilful fighter. The discussed fight was seen by the boxing pundits as one that would reveal to the world the best fighter in the featherweight division. Before any formal agreement could be reached by the managers of two boxers, the handlers of the Ghanaian boxer took him into a different fighting engagement. Apparently that new challenge was arranged

⁹⁶A detailed exploration and discussion of this dimension of his life, including his marriage, will be made in the next chapter.

just shortly after his bout in September. Consequently, in October 1985, Azumah Nelson made a stand, in defence of his title. This fight was against the ferocious, extremely skilful, and stubborn British boxer Pat “The Warley Wonder” Cowdell. Promoted by Frank Warren⁹⁷ and Don King, the match took place in Birmingham, West Midlands, England. This implies that the champion carried the title to the backyard of the challenger, a move which undoubtedly seemed advantageous to the challenger. However, the champion was confident of a win. He later disclosed that:

I remember telling the [English] fans that they should come to the fight early, because we goin’ to finish the fight early . . . but you know as a black man say something they don’t believe him until they see it with their . . . eyes.⁹⁸

The bout, which most boxing cognoscenti and dabblers predicted was going to be a massively difficult one for the champion, was used by him to impress and amaze the world of boxing about his superior prowess in the sport and the ring. The world of boxing fans and connoisseurs had eagerly anticipated this “match up” and expected it to be a tough competitive fight. The British were hopeful of victory for their homeboy. This was because Cowdell, after turning professional in 1977 and winning his debut against Albert Coley on May 7, 1977, had demonstrated to the British fans that he was a good fighter. He had given Salvador Sanchez “a hard time” in a closely and hard-fought bout in Houston, Texas, in 1981. This show of strength from

⁹⁷Frank Warren is a prominent English boxing manager and promoter. His promotional company is Sports Network, and he has promoted many important bouts in Great Britain and throughout the world. As a leading figure in British boxing, he has managed some of Britain’s best boxers including Prince Naseem Hamed, Nigel Benn, Joe Calzaghe, Ricky Hatton and Amir Khan. In December 2007, Warren was elected for induction in the International Boxing Hall of Fame, and inducted in June 2008.

⁹⁸See interview of Azumah Nelson in, *Zoom Zoom – The Professor: The career of Azumah Nelson*, (D.V.D.) *op.cit.*

Cowdell happened when he challenged the W.B.C. featherweight champion, and lost to him in a close split decision. Cowdell was dropped, but not kayoed, in round fifteen. But not for that drop in the last round, it was highly possible, and the British fans must have also thought that, that the verdict at the end of the fight would have been in favour of the English boxer. Apart from his loss to Sanchez, Cowdell had been beaten just on two other occasions. In 1978, one Alan Robertson stopped him by T.K.O in the second round of a bout, because of a serious abrasion of the eye, and in 1979, he lost on points in a fifteen rounds bout to Dave Needham.

The night for the fight between Azumah Nelson and Pat Cowdell finally arrived. The National Exhibition Centre, on October 12, was buzzing with the British crowd and especially a big population of English fans who had turned up in their numbers to show their patriotism, and support for the representative of the United Kingdom. They were there to cheer their boxing hero who had never been kayoed in a career, which had seen him lose only three out of thirty-three fights. The English crowd in attendance could just not stop shouting with joy and cheering Pat Cowdell. Apparently they also could not stop booing Azumah Nelson. The crooning voice of the ring announcer was then heard introducing the two boxers to the crowd. The atmosphere was further charged with jubilation when a beautiful English woman in a glittering bareback dinner dress held up the Union Jack in the ring and the national anthem of England, "God save the Queen," was played at the venue.⁹⁹ Calm as usual and spotting a seraphic smile Azumah Nelson did wave to the crowd in

⁹⁹ See *Azumah Nelson vs. Pat Cowdell – Part 1*, YouTube, (9:32 minutes), uploaded by zendo 59, June 22, 2008, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pgXJgSJ_u_rQ (Information was retrieved on November 16, 2010).

acknowledgement of the announcer's introduction of him. After the formalities he stood in the ring and waited for the bell to commence round one to toll. He had received some boos already from the patriotic crowd and, not surprising, from some hooligan elements. Pat's braggadocio and loud mouth that he would upset the champion, which he had intermittently exhibited at some interviews before the bout, was also fresh in the mind of the champion. As the champion waited calmly for the first toll of the bell to go, and obviously aware of the booing and the challenger's claim to upset him, what major thought could have exercised his mind? The only logical thing that he could have thought about was victory. Could he have thought to himself "finish him quickly and go to bed"? Did he say to himself, "Surprise and astound 'em"? Logically one thing was apparent. He was there because he wanted to win. The referee spelt out the rules to the two boxers, and the crowd braced themselves for a "competitive" fight. However, the crowd that was waiting was about to see one of the most chilling sights that had ever been seen in a W.B.C. featherweight championship and in a boxing ring. The bell sounded and the referee, Octavio Meyran, signalled them to battle. The champion went straight to "kill." He, in orthodox hands-held-up- high style, charged at Pat. He then quickly circled. Employing a fleet of foot moves, he also shot out light and heavy jabs. Pat responded with his own punches and jabs to the body and hands of the Ghanaian. People were still filing in. the corner men were still arguing about where each of them would sit. The journalists were still yelling at the photographers to get down. All of a sudden a punch flew from the champion, Wham! Within a couple of seconds, Pat hit the floor, *Poom!* He remained in a supine position like a beached whale. Almost in unison,

everyone asked, “What happened?” What happened was that Azumah Nelson had performed a superb magical feat. He had ended the fight after 2 minutes 24 seconds into round one. Before the fight he hinted fans of a quick victory and asked them to be there early. He in fact predicted a round two K.O. This K.O. came rather too fast and unexpectedly. Pat after being at the end of a murderous left hook crumpled to the canvas, like a marionette lying motionless, and temporarily separated from his senses. Azumah Nelson gave judges Harry Gibbs, Roy Ankrah and Richard Steele an easy task of scoring and a short night of work. Most of the cheering English crowd were totally devastated. The Ghanaian boxer had successfully done his work and he had every reason to be happy and to go home. Some of his close fans and corner men and handlers ran into the ring and carried him high to congratulate him.¹⁰⁰ His joyous wife also joined her husband in the ring and, showing a public display of affection hugged and held him tight with her arms around him.¹⁰¹ The champion had in fact shocked the crowd. Many at the ringside did not see the punch, which did the damage. It was short but power-filled. Reviews of the video of the fight showed that the unorthodox left-hand punch began somewhere near the bottom of Azumah Nelson’s trunks.¹⁰² It was not an upper-cut and it certainly was not a cross. However, one thing was for sure. Cowdell certainly never saw it coming.

Like a flash, it caught Pat Cowdell on the chin and half lifted the European super-featherweight champion before he hit the canvas. The punch

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* See also *Azumah Nelson vs. Pat Cowdell – Part 2*, YouTube, (8:19 minutes), uploaded by zendo 59, June 22, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?=KknIYaMmGSg> (Information was retrieved on November 16, 2010).

¹⁰¹ *Azumah Nelson vs. Pat Cowdell – Part 2, Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

had exploded like a computer-controlled missile on the side of his head, and boom, he was on the floor. The bitterly disappointed Cowdell was heartbroken. In the in-the-ring post fight interview Pat, responding to his interviewer's opening statement "That was sensational," said, amidst clear disappointment and tears that: "Wha' can I say. I am the most disappointed man in the world." In confessing to the fistic superiority of Azumah Nelson, he finally added that: ". . . he was a better fighter."¹⁰³ Clearly heartbroken, he walked away from his interviewer. Sad he clearly was, for he had not been given a chance by the Ghanaian to even get into the fight. Had he been crucified with the famous *sucker punch*, which is one of the wicked and brutal punches in boxing? Indeed, he had been kayoed by a *sucker punch*,¹⁰⁴ which having momentarily incapacitated Cowdell, was also a *Sunday punch*.¹⁰⁵ The defeat from Azumah Nelson was ego shattering for Pat Cowdell. No wonder Pat looked devastated and inconsolable in the post-match interview. However, Azumah Nelson, indubitably the number one in the international W.B.C. 126-pound fight category, was happy to win. He was proud that he had just "seen off" one of the most talent filled challengers with seemingly effortless efficiency. He knew he was the best, and Pat certainly could not disagree with such thinking! This perhaps was the shortest K.O. in the history of the division which made Azumah Nelson also possibly the hardest puncher in the division at the time.¹⁰⁶ In a post-match interview in the ring, Azumah Nelson took the time to pontificate on how he did it and why out of frustration he did what he

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ In boxing terminology a "sucker punch" is an unexpected punch that catches a person completely off guard. The term sucker punch dates back to 1947 in the sport of boxing.

¹⁰⁵ In boxing terminology, a "Sunday punch" is a hard punch and K.O. blow that renders an opponent unable to continue fighting.

¹⁰⁶ Joe Aggrey, "Azumah Still the Champion," *P.D.G.*, October 14, 1985, p. 1.

did. He spoke about his disdain for the way he and his team were mishandled by some fans in Birmingham and at the venue. Apparently, his group did not receive very warm and cordial reception throughout their stay in Birmingham. They had been verbally abused and insulted even along the lines of race.

Reacting to the opening statement from the interviewer, who articulated that the K.O. was “absolutely shocking,” he stated that: “That is right. You kno’, I came in to knock him out in the first round.” Explaining why he decided to do that he said:

That is what I make (made) my mind [to do] because the people here [in Birmingham] did not treat us good, yu kno’. They . . . making all kinds of ways [insulting, calling names, and booing] to get the title from us. But . . . I want[ed] to prove to them that I am the best in the world.¹⁰⁷

An interesting feature of the interview was that while he spoke about his victory, he also made gestures and articulated words which were nuanced with Pan African and trans-nationalist messages. Clearly the joy of the victory he chalked under trying and uncomfortable circumstances gave him a free licence to express his disdain. Moreover, boxing and the uncommon diplomatic platform and international exposure that the sport gave him allowed him to spontaneously articulate his personal expression and conceptual interpretation of his national and Pan African character and views. Symbolically showing his anger at the invectives, some of which had racist connotations that were hurled at him, obviously by hooligan sections of the Birmingham crowd, he impulsively picked the flag of Ghana and, displaying it in front of him, clearly affirmed his pride in being Ghanaian and, trans-nationally, African. He loudly remarked and declared that: “This is my

¹⁰⁷ *Azumah Nelson vs. Pat Cowdell – Part 2, op.cit.*

national flag. I am proud of it and I am proud of Africa, yu kno' wha' I mean."¹⁰⁸

Throughout his distinguished boxing career, which contributed in inserting the country of Ghana in the international consciousness, Azumah Nelson, who indubitably had a sense of Pan Africanism, which he demonstrated, verbally and symbolically, at Birmingham, continued to see his victories and successes as victories and accomplishments from and for African creativity and ability. The boxer, evidently, was also a Pan Africanist.

When he was asked to talk about how he executed the K.O. of Pat Cowdell, he said that:

I thought Pat Cowdell will move around (away) from me, yu kno'. But as soon as the bell go on he just come straight to me, and I say O.K. that is the way am gonna knock him out in first round. So, I take my time. . . . He start using the jabs. I start bobbing it, yu kno' and I got him . . . when he start he start jabbing, oh yu kno' what I mean, I am too bad baby!¹⁰⁹

As part of his declaration to the world about his superiority in the featherweight fight category, he added that he was ready to fight any of the so called big shots in his division, especially Barry McGuigan. In his bid to taunt McGuigan and lure him into a fight, he called McGuigan a "girl." He said "I want to fight McGuigan, that girl, and I will knock him out anywhere I fight him. I am ready to fight McGuigan anytime, anywhere." He declared that: "McGuigan is [a] fighter . . . but there is no way he can go four rounds with me . . . because I got power, I got experience . . . I got everything too much and I want that girl." He explained that the Irish boxer, also known as "The Clones Cyclone," was a girl because "she don't [sic] want to fight me. She is

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

scared of me. She knows who I am and what I can do.” Azumah Nelson added that: “I know his trainers don’t want [him] to fight me. I took that title from a young man. Ei, any old man who want to fight me I’m a kill him.”¹¹⁰

Definitely, it was a sweet victory for the champion, his supporters, and Ghana. After making his declarations in the ring that he was the “best,” his wife accompanied him to his hotel as a proud champion. He was followed by a jubilant group of social and business associates. The spectacular K.O, which upset some zealous supporters of Cowdell, precipitated some unruly behaviour among such elements. Such disappointed hooligans and alcohol intoxicated fans in Birmingham,¹¹¹ in despicable anger called the champion uncomplimentary names. Others threw beverage containers into the crowd and ring, and smashed chairs and furniture.¹¹²

The situation on the other side of the Atlantic – Africa – was different. The victory once again threw Ghana into a state of frenzy as most Ghanaians celebrated the feat of their hero with singing, dancing and partying. In that state many boxing fans in Ghana, believing that there was no stopping to Azumah Nelson, revived the long standing conversation about a fight between him and McGuigan, who took the W.B.A. featherweight title from Eusebio Pedroza of Panama on June 8, 1985, to assess who was the best. Prior to the Azumah Nelson-Pat Cowdell fight some fans had eagerly waited to see if the two boxers would meet to ascertain the best among the two boxers whose handlers had kept an eye on the boxing feats of each other’s ward.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Joe Aggrey, “Azumah Still the Champion,” *op.cit.*, p. 5.

¹¹² Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

After defeating Cowdell the champion dared McGuigan, whose manager Barney Eastwood was at the ring side and witnessed Azumah Nelson's victory over Cowdell and how the champion gained his easiest pay-day. One can only imagine how Eastwood felt and thought about the proposed unification bout for the two champions. Did he think "Will Barry suffer the same predicament if he meets Azumah Nelson in Belfast or anywhere? Will I be able to make a big financial profit from the fight or in the case of a victory for Azumah Nelson will Don King take the bigger part of the purse?" By the way, Eastwood did not push his ward into a fight with the Ghanaian boxer. Consequently, the two boxers never met in an encounter, even though a match between them would have been one of the greats to be staged in the history of world featherweight fights.

Nevertheless, the victory of Azumah Nelson in Birmingham has gone down in history as one of the fastest knockouts in the history of the featherweights. The combat and the K.O. of Cowdell, which became a highlight film material: Cowdell was left frozen on the canvas by Azumah Nelson's sucker punch, are remembered with different sentiments by boxing aficionados in Ghana and England. The fight was a great triumph for Ghana and Ghanaians. Conversely, it was a sad and disappointing defeat for Cowdell's boxing fans in the U.K., especially in England.

What happened to the ambitions of Cowdell? It is interesting to note that he never realised his world title dreams.¹¹³ Azumah Nelson rode on after

¹¹³Incidentally, Pat Cowdell only fought eight more times after the crushing loss to Azumah Nelson. He won the British super-featherweight title during this time, but then lost it via a first round K.O., to Najib Daho, in his first defence. Although he got his revenge over Daho a year

1985 as his handlers provided him with two strong bouts the following year. He retained the title two times in 1986. He first beat the future world champion Marcos Villasana, on February 25, in the “Fight for Life, match which was refereed by John Thomas. James Jen-Kin, Rudy Ortega, and Lou Filippo, were the judges. Villasana was a great fighter who had a lot of heart. He went the full length of the bout with the champion who was notorious for his generosity with K.Os., and T.K.Os. However, Azumah Nelson was declared as winner by a majority decision after twelve rounds of fighting at the Forum, Inglewood, California. He then met and defeated a former Barry McGuigan challenger Danilo “Cuero Duro” Cabrera, from Santiago de los Caballeros, in Dominican Republic, on June 22 at Hiram Bithorn Stadium, in San Juan, Puerto Rico. He beat Cabrera by a T.K.O. in round ten in a match which was refereed by Jesus Arias Torres and judged by Lou Filippo, José Juan Guerra and Dave Moretti. Clearly the match with Villasana proved to be a tougher one than the one with Pat Coddell and Cabrera.

It is interesting to note that before he fought Villasana, the much talked about possible fight between Azumah Nelson and McGuigan – a multi-million dollar clash – continued to echo in the world of boxing. It was frequently discussed, informally and formally, by the sporting press, and among boxing gurus, pundits, and fans. The handlers of Azumah Nelson, who felt that McGuigan had been rated over and above his real calibre as a boxer, made overtures to the Irish idol, but possibly, because of what Barney Eastwood saw

later, in 1987, thus regaining the British title, it was clear that Coddell was approaching the end. He retired in 1988, after a T.K.O. loss to Floyd Havard.

Azumah Nelson do at Birmingham, the Irish and his handlers kept ducking. They persistently turned down million dollar offers for a showdown.¹¹⁴

It was later in February 1988, when Azumah Nelson was preparing to fight Mario “Sabache”¹¹⁵ Martinez, for the vacant W.B.C. super-featherweight title, that McGuigan, dared him for a fight. The Irish whose crown was taken on June 26, 1986, by Steve Cruz from the U.S.A. declared his intention to fight Azumah Nelson for the super-featherweight title.¹¹⁶ But the dynamic and advancing Azumah Nelson who was preparing to progress into the super-featherweight title against a W.B.C. nominated contender did not show interest in such a late challenge. In fact McGuigan’s pyrrhic defeat of a stand-in challenger Danilo Cabrera, in Dublin, on February 15, 1986, had earlier led many British newspapers to articulate that until McGuigan, who finished the fight in round fourteen with six stitches, faced Azumah Nelson, the Irish could not claim to be the best in the featherweight category. Azumah Nelson who was delighted with the contention of the British newspaper, apparently, was ready for him anytime, but because he could not wait any longer for McGuigan, who was delaying, he mandatorily had to fight other challengers. He knew that he had to fight available and ready contenders in order to keep his record and reputation intact. It was in line with satisfying his mandatory obligation as a W.B.C. champion to fight the W.B.C. approved challengers that he fought and defeated Villasana.

It is of interest to note that a bout with Villasana should have taken place in April 1985. However a mishap prevented that fight, which the

¹¹⁴Eugene Thompson, “McGuigan now wants Azuma[h],” *G.T.*, February 22, 1988, p. 7.

¹¹⁵It can also be spelt as Azabache.

¹¹⁶Eugene Thompson, “McGuigan now wants Azuma[h],” *op.cit.*

American press labelled as “The Bloodiest fight of the year (1985)” because it was a contest between two of the big punchers in the featherweight division,¹¹⁷ from occurring. The arrangement for it became a fiasco because Azumah Nelson pulled out at the last minute because of complications with appendicitis. The world did not see how “bloody” that fight could have been. Nevertheless, it eventually saw how merciless and shocking Azumah Nelson, without appendicitis, could be when he demolished Pat Coddell. Having disappointed Villasana in 1985, the champion pacified him by accepting his challenge in 1986, and none of the boxers fell ill or came up with an excuse to stay out of that fight. Villasana who had waited since April 1985 was delighted with the champion’s agreement to fight him in 1986.

As underscored, Azumah Nelson defeated Villasana who was Mexico’s featherweight champion and ranked number one to the W.B.C. title. He started his professional career in 1978. Out of about 51 fights, he had lost only four times. The defeats included one from a fellow Mexican Lenny Valdez, which happened on July 6, 1985, in a ten rounds warm-up fight, in anticipation of a fight with Azumah Nelson.¹¹⁸ Villasana’s tale of the tape also contained just a draw. Out of his winnings 41 came through the short routes – K.Os., and T.K.Os. He was a real brawler with a hard-hitting punch that had knocked out numerous 126-pounders.

Many boxing fans, prior to the fight, considered that Villasana was a real threat to the champion. The fear, from the champion’s fans in particular, was that Villasana could take the one prize, which all Ghanaians cherished –

¹¹⁷John Baiden, “Azumah’s Stumbling Block,” *Mirror* (hereafter *M.*), Accra, February 22, 1986, p. 7.

¹¹⁸Other defeats came from Mario Miranda in 1982, Ambrosio Luna in 1979, and Artemio Ramirez in 1979.

the championship belt that Azumah Nelson proudly wore. The champion who apparently was not a boxer who could easily be scared out of his wits defeated Villasana and demonstrated that he had the hardest punch in his division.

Shortly after the defeat of Villasana the joy, which that victory had freely given to Ghanaians and Africans in general, was threatened and short-circuited, because many thought and feared that because of an unfounded allegation against Azumah Nelson of misconduct and cheating in the match, the W.B.C. would strip him of his title – a prize, which his country and continent held dear. What exactly happened? Why were his fans agitated? They were upset because the California State Athletic Commission (C.S.A.C.) accused the champion of using dope in his fight against the Mexican boxer. Was the allegation true or it was a ploy by an invisible “mafia” to tarnish the hard-earned reputation of Azumah Nelson and rob Africa of the world title? Was Azumah Nelson going to be exonerated? This allegation and its ramifications surely bothered the minds of Ghanaians, including the government, and many followers of world professional featherweight boxing.

Well, April 11, 1986, was a day, which was set by the W.B.C. and the C.S.A.C. for the hearing of the latter’s accusation. The C.S.A.C. had charged that an anti-illegal drug test that had been conducted on Azumah Nelson in his successful defence of his title proved positive. The champion recounted that “It was not true. I did not take any dope. Villasana was a tough fighter, but I was tougher. I beat him without dope.”¹¹⁹ He vehemently denied the charge and, like Amarkai Amarteifio who believed that it was “simply a malicious

¹¹⁹Azumah Nelson, 52 years old, personal interview, office at Central Accra, October 5, 2010.

endeavour to deprive Azumah Nelson of his title,”¹²⁰ asserted that: “it was a plan by an individual or people to rob him of his championship belt.”¹²¹

The C.S.A.C. was a highly rated institution and its operations were usually regarded as “authentic” and “clean” in California. Was it because of that “consideration” that the W.B.C. left to it the sensitive and delicate responsibility for the execution of the dope test? Maybe that was the reason. Nevertheless, the question that supplicated for answer was: why did the C.S.A.C. not follow the *modus operandi* for anti-narcotic test through and through? Precisely, the rules required that a doctor should be appointed by the local commission to supervise and administer dope tests, but it appeared that there was no doctor present at the test. Secondly, it required that the urine sample of the boxer(s), undergoing a test should be placed in two separate bottles in the presence of the boxers, their representatives, the appointed doctor and any neutral doctor chosen by the boxers for supervision. The bottles, it was required, should be sealed hermetically and should have the signatures of the boxer(s) or their managers, the doctor and/or the local W.B.C. commissioner. Again, this important requirement was overlooked by the C.S.A.C.¹²² Although Azumah Nelson stayed, after the bout, in Los Angeles for six days before emplaning and returning to Ghana,¹ the results were not communicated to him until he returned to Ghana precisely on March 11. That hiatus in communication lasted for fifteen clear days after the bout. This was also improper and created suspicion of a possible sinister plan against the boxer, considering the fact that the C.S.A.C. had again contravened the

¹²⁰ Amarkai Amateifio, personal interview, *op.cit.*

¹²¹ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

¹²² *Ibid.*

mandate that the result of an anti-doping test should be known within seventy-two hours after a bout takes place and urine samples have been obtained. The champion thought that something irregular was going on in the alleys of California's professional boxing and suspected that "someone was after my downfall"¹²³

Did he concoct just a weak counter in 1986 by thinking and saying that it was a plan to rob him? Was he paranoid? Perhaps he was not. Why was he not? Insightful evidence obtainable from the preceding chapters of this study which probed the culture and institution of sports, revealed that sports are more than games people play. They, without the exclusion of boxing, have political, ideological and economic purposes, and they serve such interests for individuals, groups, countries, and continents. This insight, especially in the arena of the sports tradition and the type of boxing culture that Azumah Nelson operated, also revealed that in certain instances scandals, accusations, personal convictions, and incidents have happened in the ring and outside the ring, without having anything to do with the "punch-for-pay" sport at all. A case is Jack Johnson's personal engagement and legal confrontation with the government of the U.S.A., which for a long time had had racist tendencies. His boasting and lavish lifestyle, which he flaunted in the face of a government, which was unkind to Johnson's racial kind, made the sports personality to attract hatred and disdain from the government. That antagonism from the political establishment engineered his troubles with the legal arm of the state and his ultimate fall. Another example can be drawn from 1967. This occurred when an angered political establishment and government made Muhammad

¹²³*Ibid.*

Ali to lose his title outside the ring. He spent three years in exile. In other words, a political establishment that knew how to politicise sports, and frustrate sportspersons that it did not like, exiled and momentarily ostracised Ali from boxing. The government, using its political power, indicted him and seized his passport. For some time organised licenced boxing turned its back on Ali. Why, did the government and the politicians do that to Ali, the boxer? This proud African-American, who converted to Elijah Muhammad's Lost Found Nation of Islam, which was a religious organisation which criticised racism in the U.S.A. and the excesses of the U.S.A. "white" political power structure, refused to be inducted into the army. He refused because he did not want to go to Vietnam and fight what he believed was "America's war." He believed that as a person of African ancestry, he had been discriminated against by the political system and, therefore, he found it illogical to risk his life in a war, which was in the interest of that oppressive establishment. Consequently, he took a stand against the Vietnam War as a conscientious objector. "I ain't got nothing against no Vietcong" was how he explained his resistance. He became a hero for many pacifists in the U.S.A. and especially to African-Americans who opposed the war, because they were not interested in contributing their energies to a conflict which belonged to a political structure, which, they perceived, had continued to discriminate and relegate them to the background of society because of their racial background. Interestingly, a peeved government disgraced "the Greatest," of U.S.A. boxing. Why was he disgraced? This African-American unlike many of his kind "talked too much" and was a bad example for others. He had to be silenced. He had gained an uncommon platform and voice through boxing and was using them to attack

the political policies of the government. He had to be disgraced because of the establishments desire to protect its political interests. Apparently, it was for political reasons, especially the quest to make people conform to its interests, and its display of power that the government went ahead and, from outside the ring, took the title from Ali.

How does the Ali anecdote help to provide an alternative understanding of Azumah Nelson's predicament, which engineered a rebuttal from him in 1986 and his uninterrupted insistence that it was a plan to disgrace him? Possibly far-fetched it is not impossible to suspect and/or posit that considering the improper manner in which it ignored the procedure for the tests and the unprofessional style in which it came out with its alleged results, the C.S.A.C. was out to try to accomplish a feat, which no boxer had accomplished in the ring – take the title from Azumah Nelson. Was it a way employed by some powerful people to disgrace this fighter from Africa who, being an inspiration and proud symbol to Ghanaian and African youth, took the least opportunity to wave the Ghanaian flag in the ring, and tell the whole world how proud he was of his flag and Africa? Was it a way, which had been schemed and was being used by some powers-that-be who, like what the U.S.A. government did to “the Louisville Lip,” wanted to silence this loud mouth boxer from Ghana? Perhaps, yes. If that was the case then it was unfortunate and wrong. This is because he, as a proud champion must have felt that he had every right to be vocal about his exploits in the ring. He must have felt the need to verbally articulate about his pride for his cultural and racial backgrounds, which at certain places, like Birmingham, had attracted insults to his personality and origin. Moreover, why would he not “speak” his mind and

announce his pride to the world? He was the only “black” continental African who held a world title at the time, and being an African youth, owed the title to the youth of Africa. He must have felt right about his sharp articulations, which he knew could make the youth recognise him as their ambassador and champion, help to make them proud about their personality and origin, and inspire them to higher heights in their endeavours.

Maybe, like the “talkative” Louisville Lip whose Black Muslim-inspired utterances went against a status quo, Azumah Nelson, “the Ga-Mashie Lip,” had talked too much. Perhaps such talking and showmanship offended some influential people and establishments, and so those “slighted” elements attempted to break him.

It is worth noting that the entire engagement with Villasana proved to be an encounter that gave Azumah Nelson many extraneous problems, before and after the fight. The dope charge was a post-fight problem, however, prior to the combat he and his team upon reaching Los Angeles were treated unfairly because his camp suffered from espionage activities from the other side. It appeared that the camp of Villasana really needed the title badly and therefore spied on the “inner” preparation activities of the champion. This can be viewed from the background that on the day of the fight the chauffeur who was assigned to Azumah Nelson when he camped in Los Angeles, emerged in the corner of Villasana. “He had, all the time, been Villasana’s man” and must have studied and had information about the inner dealings of the champion’s camp, and must have despatched the information to the challenger. Nevertheless, the fight went the full distance. Surprisingly one of the judges tried to discourage and deprive Azumah Nelson of glory with his verdict. The

judge, Jen-Kin, gave the two boxers 114 points each. That meant that he scored the combat as a draw contest in a fight, which was apparently won by Azumah Nelson. Was the judge trying to “rob” him? Maybe he was trying to be controversial. However, how did such controversial score affect the Ghanaian boxer? Did it break his spirit? Apparently, as he recounted, it did not. “I was upset not discouraged.”¹²⁴

Perhaps, the infamous dope test was the last resort to hit the bull’s eye. Maybe the analysis herein may appear speculative or present itself like a conspiracy theory or far-fetched, but one question petitioning for answer is: If the accusation was not an attempt to get Azumah Nelson annoyed, discouraged, and disgraced, how could the commission have so noticeably flouted aspects of the sanctioned procedure for such tests, which the W.B.C. recognised, and then proceeded to widely publicize the so-called results? In the confusion Bart Plange, a personal physician of the boxer, also looked at the incident from another angle and revealed an interesting interpretation and insight. He hypothesised that if the substance that was allegedly contained in the supposed urine sample of Azumah Nelson could induce drowsiness then how could any wise boxer take such a drug for a match? If the drug was a depressant then could it be, or it could be that someone was trying to drug the champion for an easy victory for Villasana? These were some of the questions that needed to be answered about the whole dope charge. Consequently, the boxing world, Azumah Nelson, Ringcraft and Ghana waited for the day of verdict. Could the national idol and African hero be a dishonest sportsman? Had the government and people been following and cheering for charlatan and

¹²⁴*Ibid.*

imposter? Clearly, a disgrace of Azumah Nelson, a national idol and ambassador of the country, and a threat to his title, meant and would have been a disgrace and threat to the international reputation of the nation as whole.

As the world and Ghanaians waited in anxiety to ultimately know the outcome of the hullabaloo the P.N.D.C., which cherished Azumah Nelson's career and recognised him as a national asset, hero, and symbol of inspiration, discipline, dedication and success to the youth, decided to make it a matter of national concern. It instructed the Secretary of Youth and Sports, Amarkai Amarteifio to take strong interest in the matter and treat it with all seriousness as a national matter. The government official and his secretariat immediately went to work. He assembled experts including medical doctors in Ghana to probe the case. Amarkai Amarteifio recounted that: "That shows you that Azumah Nelson was very important to the government and country and we had trust in his honesty and sense of fair play in boxing."¹²⁵ When the experts interpreted the rules governing the taking of urine samples before and after a fight, and clearly identifying some major flaws committed by the makers of the allegation in the dope test procedure, the ministerial sector communicated its findings, through the G.B.A., to the C.S.A.C. and the W.B.C. In response to the allegation, which was made by the C.S.A.C., the sector of the P.N.D.C. government in charge of sports, protested and clearly advanced its position that the allegation was unfounded.

On the other side of the Atlantic, José Suleiman, who did not doubt the boxer's integrity, forbearance, insisted that in fairness the rules should be pursued to the letter. He insisted that a second bottle containing Azumah

¹²⁵ Amarkai Amarteifio, personal interview, *op.cit.*

at the hearing, was that instead of taking and making two separate samples into two different bottles, the agent who conducted the test, took one sample and divided it into two bottles in direct contravention of the rules. Something definitely went wrong with the whole test and therefore made the findings incredible. Therefore when the side of the accused requested for the specimen B, the other side could not produce it. A blunder had been committed by the latter and the former found that out. No wonder the C.S.A.C. ultimately beat a retreat, and the accused was acquitted. As a point of interest, Ghana, in the midst of the crises, did not desert its champion. The fans and admirers of the boxer spoke against the accusation. It was obvious that the flood of protests from Ghana compelled the C.A.S.C., to seriously review the laboratory report of the so-called test and the conduct of the agent who administered the test. Consequently, after realising that the flaws therein, were known by others, the C.S.A.C. came to the conclusion that it would be honourable to leave Azumah Nelson alone.

On his return to Ghana, after the hearing, Amarkai Amarteifio, whose longstanding relationship with the boxer had revealed to him that the athlete who had strong faith in the potency of physical training and mental condition and did not believe in drugs or any other unnatural means of building his stamina or extra weight,¹²⁷ intimated to the nation that the C.A.S.C., in a bid to avoid shame, carefully withdrew its invalid allegation.¹²⁸

Another vital aspect of the hearing was a testimony by a physician called Schwartz who examined Azumah Nelson and Marcos Villasana before

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*
¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

and after the match. Although none was in the urine of the boxer, the doctor is reported to have said that the Ghanaian boxer never benefited from any drug or narcotic substance. Azumah Nelson had been exonerated. It is worth noting that the champion stayed off drugs all his time as a professional. He retired without showing physical signs of a boxer who kept a “dark” secret of drug use during his heydays as a boxer.¹²⁹

Meanwhile some cynical boxing pundits, particularly those on the side of Villasana, were already calling for a re-match, within ninety days, to finally ascertain who among the two boxers was superior in the ring. This bout eventually occurred when Azumah Nelson gave Villasana a rematch in 1987.

After triumphing over an alleged use of drugs – one of the many major trials in the dangerous and intricate, as well as the scandal prone world of international professional boxing – Azumah Nelson returned to Ghana as a contented man. His fans and family received him with happiness and jubilation. They were contented because he was still the champion and the title was still where “it belonged.” Returning to his professional duties, he settled for his training for the other bigger fights ahead. In June, 1986 he brought more joy, laughter, and satisfaction to his fans and country when he placated them with a T.K.O. of the big reputation Dominican boxer Danilo Cabrera, in Puerto Rico.

On December 13, Azumah Nelson, who for a long time had not fought on Ghanaian turf, gave his fans a home show, which turned out as another gift

¹²⁹Some of the famous boxers who kept a secret life of drug use, chemical and alcohol abuse during their days as occupational boxers were Wilfredo Gomez, John(ny) Lee Tapia, and Pernell Whitaker.

to them. He kayoed his fellow Ghanaian boxer Aaron Duribe in Accra in round six, to close his chapter of impressive victories for 1986.

The winning side of Azumah Nelson started the boxing year of 1987 successfully. The Don King-Ringcraft-Azumah Nelson triad journeyed again, in the U.S.A, in search of fights of glory. In the U.S.A. the anticipated rematch between the incumbent champion and Villasana still occupied a major place within the discussions of boxing followers and enthusiasts. The main mission for Azumah Nelson now was to prepare to fight, again, the “kid” from Mexico. Slowness on the part of the two camps in their arrangement and preparation to reach an agreement and a date for the contest, delayed such a fight. In the interim a fight was arranged between the champion and Mauro “Betillo” Gutierrez, from Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico, at the Hilton Hotel, in Las Vegas. The fight took place on March 7. Gutierrez was kayoed in round six in that contest, which was refereed by Davey Pearl and judged by Marty Sammon, Keith MacDonald, and Tony Perez.

By early August, it seemed that the re-match for the champion and Villasana would take place shortly. Villasana had had a hard time in accepting his loss of face because of his defeat in 1986. Because of that he committed himself to preparing well for the envisaged fight. His training gave him an impressively good physical appearance. He looked well-conditioned and seemed to be so ready for a fight. The champion trained hard. Taking a cue from the past allegations of his use of dope – a reminder from history, he garnered his strength and honed his skills to beat the challenger and prove to the world that he had the natural power to, as many times as he wanted, defeat

Villasana.¹³⁰ He promised his fans that he would repeat his victory over Villasana and added that “this time with more devastating consequences.”¹³¹ Villasana who wanted revenge, wanted it badly. He was ready to “hurt” the champion from Ga-Mashie who humiliated and embarrassed him, in their first epic encounter, at the Forum, in Inglewood, California on February 25, 1986.

For a second time, Villasana was disappointed. Although he went the full twelve rounds, his old nemesis beat him at the Olympic Auditorium, Los Angeles, California, by a unanimous decision, in the fight which took place on August 29, 1997 and was refereed by John Thomas. The scores from the judges Harry Gibbs, Chuck Hassett, and Rudy Ortega were 117-111, 118-108, and 117-110 respectively. Significantly, Azumah Nelson’s victory proved his unseen critics, who had accused him of dope use, wrong. He muffled and, in fact, muted such critics. This time no allegation of drug use was made against him. When all evidence is reviewed, scrutinised, and analysed, the only logical conclusion that can safely be reached is that Villasana, who was an excellent fighter with a drive and aggressive rough-tough style, was on two occasions a victim of Azumah Nelson’s fistic prowess, natural stamina, experience, and maybe luck.

It was after this triumph that he, as underscored, decided to move up into a different weight category. Having indubitably established himself as the best in the division, apparently with no one around to beat, the champion prepared to graduate to the super-featherweight level. His handlers gave him the nod. “They were confident in me. They and I wanted to take the title in

¹³⁰Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

¹³¹“Azumah in Action,” *P.D.G.*, August 29, 1987, p. 7.

1988.”¹³² Yes they were confident in him, but they also obviously knew “that the higher boxers went in weight division as champions, the more money they received and the “bigger their pockets became.” The managers naturally hoped for Azumah Nelson to quickly capture the title. With such optimistic thought the managers and handlers of the champion ushered the Ghanaian boxer into the class of the super-featherweights. Within a short time their campaign for him to have a contest for the vacant title yielded positive results. In November of 1987, he was all set to move up. Al Braverman,¹³³ Don King’s director of boxing, said in an interview with *Boxing News*, that such a move had become necessary “because there was just no one left to give Azumah a fight at featherweight.”¹³⁴ Saying that if given the opportunity the featherweight champion would seize the super-featherweight title, he also added and predicted that if that happened, Azumah Nelson “could go up to lightweight and “lick” the winner out of Chávez¹³⁵ and Rosario.”¹³⁶

¹³²Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

¹³³He was a citizen of the U.S.A. and originated from Bronx, New York. He was a former boxer, who became a fight manager, and trainer. For about two decades he worked as an aide to the promoter Don King. He started working for King in 1975 as director of boxing and negotiating contracts for King-promoted fights. As Don King's assistant he also managed his New York office. He trained Carlos Ortiz and managed Carmen Basilio. He also managed and trained Johnny Boudreaux, José Roman, Jimmy DuPree, Frankie DePaula, Bill Bossio and Azumah Nelson. He died in 1997, aged 78, of complications from diabetes.

¹³⁴Eugene Thompson, “Azumah Set to Move up,” *P.D.G.*, November 12, 1987, p. 7.

¹³⁵In a career that spanned over twenty-five years, Julio César Chávez, a Mexican professional boxer won six world titles in three weight divisions: W.B.C. super-featherweight in 1984, W.B.A. lightweight in 1987, W.B.C. lightweight in 1988, W.B.C. super-lightweight in 1989, I.B.F. light-welterweight in 1990, and W.B.C. super-lightweight in 1994. Chávez was known for his outstanding punching power, devastating body attack, and the relentless stalking of his opponents. For several years, he was considered the best pound-for-pound boxer in the world.

¹³⁶Edwin "El Chapo" Rosario was from Puerto Rico. He was the W.B.C. world lightweight champion from 1983-84 and W.B.A. world champion in 1986-87. Chávez defeated him on November 11, 1987, to take the W.B.A. title. Rosario became champion again in 1989-90.

Confident in Azumah Nelson's capabilities and genius Braverman praised him and affirmed his confidence in the champion. His respect for the Ghanaian boxer was so strong that he even referred to the historic legend Sandy Saddler, the featherweight champion from 1948-49 and 1950-57, as someone that Azumah Nelson, who "is a throwback to the old days," could have beaten if they had been contemporaries.¹³⁷ Azumah Nelson did not wait for a long time before he had a super-featherweight title contest. Luckily for him, Don King proposed a doubleheader to the Home Box Office (H.B.O.) Television network in the U.S.A. in which Azumah Nelson was billed to fight for the vacant super-featherweight title. On the same bill, according to the *New York Times*, was Julio César Chávez, who was to defend his W.B.A. lightweight title. It is enlightening to note that Chávez advanced from the super-featherweight level to capture the W.B.A. lightweight crown from Edwin Rosario in 1987. Although March or April seemed the possible times for the fight, the fervour and interest for the fight, among fans, were factors that brought the fight to February 29. In anticipation of a possible match and encounter between himself and Australia's Lester Ellis, the number one contender to the super-featherweight title which Chávez had vacated, Azumah Nelson took an early departure on January 22, to the U.S.A. to train.¹³⁸

Azumah Nelson Graduates to the Super-Featherweight Level

Meanwhile as Azumah Nelson, who had attracted the attention and envy of other respectable boxers, prepared for the super-featherweight competition, the W.B.C. bantamweight champion Jeff Fenech of Australia,

After moving up to the junior-welterweight class, he became the W.B.A. world champion once more, holding the title from 1991 to 1992.

¹³⁷Eugene Thompson, "Azumah Set to Move up," *op.cit.*

¹³⁸"Azumah," *G.T.*, January 23, 1988, p. 7.

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¹³⁷Eugene Thompson, "Azumah Set to Move up," *op. cit.*

¹³⁸"Azumah," *G.T.*, January 23, 1988, p. 7.

challenged him to a fight. Fenech who was hoping to annex the W.B.C. featherweight title for Australian fans in 1988, which, incidentally, was the bicentennial year of European settlement in Australia,¹³⁹ continued to express his insistence to challenge Azumah Nelson.¹⁴⁰ Fenech was tough, fast, and cast in the mould of a rough street fighter. He had become notable fighter in the super-bantamweight division. With his confidence boosted after he had kayoed Osmar Alfredo Avila, in 56 seconds, in a non-title fight on December 11, 1987, he stated that Azumah Nelson was his main target. As an indication of notice, an immediate fight between the two would have been a first class show. Unfortunately, that did not happen since, as at January 1988, at a time when Fenech had fully grown into a featherweight, Azumah Nelson was moving up.¹⁴¹ With Azumah Nelson gearing for a higher division, his managerial group, Ringcraft, which was honourably voted as the “Boxing Managers of the Year (1987)”¹⁴² in Ghana, by the Sports Writers Association of Ghana (S.W.A.G.), was not ready to reverse the forward progression of their ward. Fenech had to be patient and wait.

It is remarkable to note that the year of 1987, in the estimation of Oko Kwatekwei and Ringcraft, had been “a good year for Ghana boxing.”¹⁴³ Their ward Azumah Nelson had done marvellously well. So had their other

¹³⁹ Permanent European settlement in Australia goes back to January 26, 1788, when eleven ships of Captain Arthur Philip’s First Fleet arrived from Britain and gathered in Port Jackson to found the colony of New South Wales. See Australia, Australian Bureau of Statistics. Australian Bicentennial Authority, “Australia Prepares for its Bicentenary,” June 18, 2009, online posting, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/featurearticlesbytitle/46EAD83E7FF09E21CA2569DE001F32DF?OpenDocument> (Information was retrieved on November 18, 2010).

¹⁴⁰“Azumah Fights Ellis in March,” *Graphic Sports* (hereafter *G.S.*), January 18, 1988, p. 4.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴²“Azumah off to Fight for New Title,” *Ghanaian Voice* (hereafter *T.G.V.*), January 26-31, 1988, p. 1.

¹⁴³“Ringcraft: Good Year for Ghana Boxing,” *P.D.G.*, December 30, 1987, p. 7.

responsibility, “the Marvellous” Nana Yaw Konadu, performed creditably and made Ghana proud. Nana Yaw Konadu who, in 1987, was the recognised incumbent A.B.U. flyweight champion, snatched the vacant Commonwealth flyweight title on October 10, 1987, at the expense of Zambia’s Albert Musankabala. He defeated the Zambian through a K.O. in round six, in Accra. The proud handlers, of Azumah Nelson and Nana Yaw Konadu, therefore, looked into 1988 with high hopes for more laurels.¹⁴⁴

In such a situation where Azumah Nelson’s camp was searching for higher standards and bigger laurels, particularly, the super-featherweight and lightweight titles, any anticipated fight between the champion and Fenech was bound to happen later. Because it was not an immediate priority, in other words, a non-starter for the champion’s camp, an Azumah Nelson-Jeff Fenech fight seemed bound for the future. In fact the champion’s camp, which wanted Azumah Nelson to have one of his fighting engagements in Ghana, consigned any notions of an immediate fight between their boxer and Fenech to the background. Ringcraft, in December 1987, had promised Azumah Nelson’s fans in Ghana that it was arranging to enable them to see their champion defending his title in Ghana in the forthcoming year. They were, however, quick to add that that would depend on the availability of foreign exchange to cater for the purse of his opponent.¹⁴⁵ Azumah Nelson and Ringcraft would fulfil this mission by bringing a title defence bout to Ghanaians in Accra, in December 1988. However, it would not be a defence against a challenge from Fenech. A fight between Azumah Nelson and Jeff Fenech, by the way, would

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

happen, but it certainly did not happen during the 1980s. Fenech would have his first encounter with the champion from Ghana in 1991.

The step up of the Ghanaian boxer had its technical implications and consequences for his position at the featherweight level. It meant that in the event of a win over any challenger, which would give him the super-featherweight title, he would be required to relinquish his featherweight title. This was because the W.B.C. did not allow one boxer to, simultaneously, hold two of the W.B.C. titles. The camp of the champion knew this implication, but it was still determined to push the boxer to compete for the vacant title. According to the boxer's managers, Azumah Nelson's attempt at the vacant title was surely an opportunity for him to prove himself as great, and it was a mission that he had to treat with all seriousness and an opportunity that he could not afford to miss.¹⁴⁶

Meanwhile as the Ghanaian boxer prepared, the W.B.C., in acknowledgement of the boxer's progressiveness, selected and rated him high in its latest rankings. Four other African boxers were also rated by the W.B.C. in its latest ranking, which took place in Mexico City, Mexico. With Mike Tyson, the heavyweight champion of the world, being named as boxer of the month of January, Patrick Lumumba of Kenya was named fourth contender for the cruiserweight title held by Carlos De Leon of Puerto Rico. Joe Lasisi of Nigeria was rated fifth contender for the light-heavyweight title held by Don Lalonde of Canada, and John Mugabi of Uganda became the number one

¹⁴⁶ "Azumah off to Fight for New Title," *op.cit.*

contender for the super-welterweight title, which was held by the Italian Gianfranco Rosi.¹⁴⁷

In the U.S.A. Azumah Nelson trained intensely and put himself in good shape at Don King's gymnasium in Cleveland, Ohio. Meanwhile his handlers had managed to get the W.B.C. to finally sanction February 25 as the date for the fight between the Ghanaian and the Australian Lester Ellis. The fabulous Great Western Forum in Inglewood, California was chosen as the venue.

As Azumah Nelson geared up to meet Ellis, hopeful of becoming the first Ghanaian world title holder to move up to a heavier division to possess that division's title, he and his managers, in their preparation, were greeted by a very disappointing news in the early part of February of 1988. Ellis was not going to fight. He was pulling out. Why was he pulling out at the last hour? He had injured himself and for personal reasons did not feel well conditioned to fight. Well as the maxim goes that "when one door closes, another opens," the demise of Ellis became a chance for another boxer. It was that lacuna, which gave Mario Martinez, the chance to contest Azumah Nelson. This was because the handlers of Martinez, who was a former challenger of Julio César Chávez, quickly campaigned for their ward to stand in for Ellis. Fortunately, the W.B.C. authorised an Azumah Nelson-Mario Martinez bout alongside another twelve round title bout. The W.B.C. sanctioned that the two bouts should be held at the same venue and on the same day. The other bout, which was a fight for the W.B.C. super-bantamweight crown, was to be between a pair of former W.B.C. bantamweight champions from Mexico – Carlos Zarate and Daniel Zaragoza.

¹⁴⁷"Azumah Rated," *G.T.*, February 2, 1988, p. 7.

At the Great Western Forum, which was filled to the rafters with boxing fans, Azumah Nelson as usual beamed with confidence and hope as he stood in the ring. The Ghanaian, who did not underrate his contender managed to display speed of legs and fastness of hands. In the presence of the cheering crowd, a continuous fistic warfare went on between the Ghanaian boxer and the Mexican. A large Hispanic population, which had been attracted by two bouts of the evening involving three Mexicans, was there. Leaning anxiously forward in their seats in anticipation of a good evening of boxing and standing up and cheering, the spectators had what they wanted and had paid for – a good fight. It was a punch-for-punch contest. The cacophonous screams that emanated from the Hispanic crowd, whenever their idol made some good moves, were inhuman. However, with experience and the employment of some good and point winning jabs, the title was, ultimately, given to Azumah Nelson. This came through a split decision from the judges, after the two good boxers, who were in their prime, completed the epic battle after twelve rounds. Judges Rudy Ortega, Terry Smith, and Marty Sammon scored the fight 115-113, 115-113 and 113-114 respectively. For many Hispanic sports commentators and newspapers in the U.S.A., the title should have gone to Martinez for fighting valiantly. Maybe he did, but Azumah Nelson also fought well. Perhaps, the Mexican was a victim of Azumah Nelson's superior punches and/or his luck. In the final analysis, it was the better fighter, in the view of the judges, who won. Nelson returned to his home in Ghana as a proud holder of the world title for the super-featherweight division. The fame that came with it was invigorating. The financial reward was good for him and his handlers too. More significantly the achievement and accomplishment of

his dreams and ambition to be the champion was satisfying. Obligatorily, he then abandoned the W.B.C. world featherweight title. However, the handlers of Martinez, who were dissatisfied with the defeat of the Mexican, called for a rematch. Because the first fight had been a closely fought one, many boxing pundits felt that a request for a rematch was a fair call. That petition in fact did not shake or scare the new champion out of his wits. He disclosed that:

“I was not scared. I respected Martinez and was ready to accept his challenge and give him what he wanted – a fight and another defeat. I knew that I would win so when the boxing commentators, pundits and Mexican fans called for a fight I knew that I would give it to them soon.”¹⁴⁸

Meanwhile other qualified contenders had waited and were lobbying to get a place to fight the champion. Azumah Nelson’s handlers avoided an immediate clash with Martinez, who to all intents and purposes was a tough fighter and a potential shocker. They decided to give those contenders, who they might have sized as “easy to be managed” by the champion, a chance. The first to challenge the champion was a former world champion, the southpaw¹⁴⁹ Lupe Suarez of Corpus Christi, Texas, U.S.A. Lupe Suarez, another great fighter, became the first victim of Azumah Nelson, when he became the *rex* of the super-featherweight category.

The continuation of his boxing career and reign as champion at the super-featherweight level, an exploration of the inner contours of some major challenges which he suffered at that level, a discussion of his victories and defeats in the ring, and his ultimate retirement from the sport are some key

¹⁴⁸Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

¹⁴⁹Southpaws are left-handed fighters (unorthodox). They put their right foot forward, jab with their right hand and throw power punches with their left hand (rear hand). To a “normal” right-handed fighter a southpaw’s punches are coming from the wrong side. When a right-handed and a left-handed boxer fight, each other’s lead foot is almost on top of the other persons. Southpaws are not always born left-handed some are converted southpaws.

issues that would be addressed in the next chapter. Furthermore, the next chapter would feature a theoretical dissection of the inner logic about why he had a successful career and a long reign as a champion, and how he became the most celebrated and well known Ghanaian boxer of the twentieth century.



CHAPTER SIX

REX OF THE SUPER-FEATHERWEIGHTS: THE AZUMAH

LEGEND CONTINUES

[Azumah Nelson] The Best Boxer Nobody Knows. . . .

Timothy W. Smith¹

Introduction

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Azumah Nelson, as the W.B.C. super-featherweight titlist, had his first defense fight against Lupe Suarez. In the early part of the bout, which took place on June 25, 1988, at the Trump Plaza Hotel, in Atlantic City, New Jersey, U.S.A., the champion was tripped to the canvas. This happened when he lost his balance because the challenger accidentally stepped on his foot. Nevertheless, in front of a mammoth crowd, Suarez ultimately suffered a K.O. in the round nine of that match. Azumah Nelson whose tale-of-the-tape revealed that he had only lost once and won twenty-eight fights out of which twenty were K.Os., caught Suarez, who had two losses and twenty-five winnings to his credit, with a right hand which was followed by a flurry of rapid punches that put the challenger on the canvas. Suarez got up, but referee Tony Perez stopped the fight 27 seconds into the round.² Because he had some good punches and he was a southpaw whose unorthodox stance initially made it difficult

¹ Timothy Smith is a boxing writer for the *New York Times*. See Timothy W. Smith, "The Best Boxer Nobody Knows; After 19 Years, the Career of a Ghanaian Legend Nears an End," *New York Times*, July 11, 1998, <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/07/11/sports/boxing-best-boxer-nobody-knows-after-19-years-career-ghanaian-legend-nears-end.html>. (Information was retrieved on August 16, 2010).

² *Los Angeles Times*, Article Collections, Newswire, June 26, 1988, http://articles.latimes.com/1988-06-26/sports/sp-8408_1_challenger-lupe-suarez (Information was retrieved on September 3, 2010).

for the champion to get his targets right Azumah Nelson, described him as the toughest he had met as at that time. This was because the victory did not come easy for the champion. He felt awkward fighting Suarez and even tripped in the process. When a right-handed and left-handed boxer fight each other their lead foot is almost on top of the other persons, and that can lead to the fall or tripping of any of the boxers. It is just a difficult task to fight southpaws if one's orientation is the opposite. To an orthodox right-handed boxer southpaw's punches come from the opposite direction than what they are trained to expect. It just feels wrong. It takes a lot of tact and caution to fight them if one's orientation is orthodox. Judging from how Suarez in the early part of the bout displaced the fighting plan of Azumah Nelson, because of his southpaw stance, it seemed that the champion had a problem with left-pawed boxers. Incidentally, most orthodox boxers do find it difficult to get their orientations to yield effective results when they fight southpaws. That is why the expression "Southpaws Should be Drowned at Birth," is popular among orthodox boxers. This old boxing idiom, which purportedly came from boxers with the orthodox style and orientation, must have evolved to represent the dislike of southpaws by right-handed boxers because of the ever present frustration, which the left-handers gave to the right-handers. Although, he was not "drowned" at birth and he valiantly fought Azumah Nelson, Suarez, the southpaw from Corpus Christi, was unable to stay "afloat" in the ring when he combatted the champion, for the latter unleashed a "flood" of punches that "sank" Suarez to the canvas in round nine.

Azumah Nelson managed to survive this southpaw. However, would

he be able to do that again against another in the future? Could any other engagement in the future with a southpaw pose a more frustrating threat to him? Time was to tell.

After this fight, the speculation of an Azumah Nelson-Barry McGuigan clash continued among boxing pundits and British and Irish newspapers. Because such a fight promised great financial rewards the international handlers of Azumah Nelson became interested. Meanwhile the handlers of Martinez, critics of the Ghanaian boxer, and Mexican sport newspapers, through seductive articles and debates on radio networks, intensified their call for a rematch. Such interested parties from Mexico were definitely not happy about a potential McGuigan engagement before a possible contest for Martinez.

Azumah Nelson and the H.I.V. Saga, 1988

Because of a conditional promise, which they gave in 1987 to Ghanaian fans to stage a title defense fight in Ghana, the champion and his handlers, whose globetrotting had brought them loads of international victories and paid more in foreign currency to their purse, managed and fulfilled their promise late in the year of 1988. Better late than never, the defense bout, incidentally, helped to cheer up Ghanaians, and especially, it showed and convinced them that their champion and boxing star, contrary to rumour that he was weak because he had contracted the Human Immune Virus (H.I.V.), was very strong and not H.I.V. positive.

Stardom, apparently, has its negative price tags to it, which every star must be ready to pay. These include scandals, false accusations, set ups and invasion of private life by paparazzi. These unfortunate developments

and frustrating dangers accompany stardom. For a second time Azumah Nelson's name and person were dragged in the mud again and scandalised. First, was his alleged use of illicit drugs, then, for the second time, it was alleged that he had acquired the deadly H.I.V.

In August 1988, Ghanaians and Azumah Nelson were challenged by a rumour that the champion was a carrier of H.I.V. and had the deadly disease AIDS. While some Ghanaians were naturally shocked and uncertain about the veracity or otherwise of the story, it was clear that a general feeling of anger and outrage had gripped many Ghanaian fans of the champion. This was because of the story, which many of such fans described as a deliberately orchestrated smear campaign against national and African hero. The telephone lines of Ghana-based radio stations, the G.B.C. T.V. and radio station, and newspaper offices were jammed by a chain of calls from angry callers who basically expressed their disgust over their latest blatant attempt to destroy the image and weaken the self-esteem of the world champion. The fans condemned that rumour as a threatening and malicious tale. It came out that it was a sinister tale started by a Mexican T.V. network and picked up by other western newspapers.³ Oko Kwatekwei later confirmed that it was orchestrated by a Mexico City T.V. network.⁴ By the way, why would a Mexican T.V. do such a thing? Why would it associate the person of Azumah Nelson with a disease, which

³ "Azumah Fans Express Anger," *People's Daily Graphic* (hereafter *P.D.G.*), August 5, 1988, p. 1.

⁴ Bernard Fernandez, "Whitaker's Opponent Overcomes Scandalous Medical Rumors False Aids Claim Behind W.B.C. Champion Nelson," (Knight-Ridder Newspapers), *Daily Press*, May 18, 1990, http://articles.dailypress.com/1990-05-18/sports/9005170380_1_azumah-nelson-wbc-champion-nelson-al-braverman (Information was retrieved on October 15, 2010).

carried so much stigmatization? AIDS was and is a disease, which in the view of many persons commonly implied death to an “immoral” life, which was led in sexual promiscuity and/or drugs. Was the scandalmonger trying to avenge Martinez in a different way after Azumah Nelson showed his fistic supremacy over him? Was it trying to demoralize and/or disturb the champion psychologically and emotionally so that he would not be focused in the field which he had excelled, and thereby quicken a defeat of him in a possible rematch with Martinez? Maybe the scandalmonger of a Mexican T.V., and its allies were trying to do all of the above.

Apparently this news, which had been circulating internationally, since July, only to reach the Ghanaian masses in August, appalled many Ghanaian fans. One of them, Nana Fitz, a friend of the champion, showed his disdain for the story and called it “nonsense.”⁵ Adding that the champion who was planning to move up from the super-featherweight was strong and, contrary to what normally happened to people with AIDS, not emaciating, Nana Fitz dismissed the story and called it false.⁶ Insightfully, he was quick to add that AIDS was fast becoming a “weapon” used in international boxing circles against African boxers. He recalled the case of a boxer of Nigerian descent as an example to substantiate his claim. According to him, Michael Olajide, a Nigerian contender to the world middleweight title was accused of having the deadly disease.⁷ Moreover, from the report, Nana Fitz, an ardent boxing fan, disclosed that Azumah Nelson was not the first boxer from Ghana to be subjected to such an attack

⁵ “Azumah Fans Express Anger,” *P.D.G.*, *op.cit.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

of character assassination and stigmatisation. He revealed that:

It also happened to Ghana's middleweight champion, Umaru Sanda, who was subjected to an AIDS test nine hours before his recent Commonwealth title fight against Nigel Benn of Britain. It was not a wonder he was knocked out in the first round. He had been beaten psychologically before the fight.⁸

Like other disgusted fans Nana Fitz appealed to the local media to be circumspect about stories they pick, which are derogatory to African "heroes," especially when they are intended to damage their reputation. In the midst of all this rumour and public uproar, Azumah Nelson kept his cool equanimity and did not make any public pronouncement about the story. That surely must have been a wise thing to do since a statement from him could have easily been misconstrued, and/or misrepresented by whoever was out there to tarnish his image by implicating him with other false allegations. Confident in their champion, it appeared that his fans generally did not accept the allegations as true. The consensus among them, it appeared, was that the story was a malicious lie and a bunch of media and boxing mafia balderdash intended to wreck the respectable image that the champion possessed both within the ring and outside it.

In the meantime, it was reported that a story titled "Nelson OK," which purportedly appeared in the July issue of the *London Daily Mirror*, dismissed the story as rumour and "plain unadulterated rubbish" and quoted Al Braverman, of Don King Promotions, as saying that as planned an Azumah-McGuigan engagement was to take off.⁹

Meanwhile it came to the notice of the boxing world that serious

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Ibid.*

negotiations were going on in the background for a multi-million engagement between the world champion from Ghana and McGuigan. Consequently, that arrangement, it seemed to some sources, was a reason why some Mexican elements, particularly a Mexican T.V., who wanted Azumah to fight their countryman Martinez in a rematch, started the smear campaign,¹⁰ against the champion because it appeared that he, in search of a fight, was looking in the wrong direction instead of the direction of Martinez.

Unfortunately, the match talked about match between the champion and the Irish boxer did not manifest. This was because the handlers of the two did not reach a meaningful and solid deal. Still focused and unperturbed by the rumour and the fiasco of the envisaged match with the Irish, and ready to go to the top on his illustrious career journey, the champion decided to defend his title once more.

What is worth noting is that as fast as it came, the rumour died out fast. It could not gain credibility and currency among the world of boxing fans because it was not true. In addition, it was, reasonably, the profound trust that Ghanaians had in their hero and the assurance from Al Braverman, which contributed to the demise of the rumour.

Did the rumour have any psychological effect on the champion? Well, as underscored he kept quiet and went about with his training. However, as Al Braverman later revealed in 1990, the champion was "only human" and, as such, was affected by the controversy, however brief its duration. Al Braverman added that "He (Azumah Nelson) knew he wasn't

¹⁰*Ibid.*

sick, but he was sick at heart, [because of the lie].”¹¹

By the way, Al Braverman further conjectured and added another possible factor which led to the creation of that smear campaign against the boxer. Saying that “There's a million dirty tricks in this business, but this one [AIDS story against Azumah Nelson] had to be the dirtiest ever,” he believed that “a couple of jealous guys” in Mexico who wanted to steal Julio César Chávez from Don King engineered the rumor in an attempt to discredit the promoter. Angered by the rush with which the Mexican T.V., and news agencies in the U.S.A. reported the story, Al Braverman stated that: “It was the epitome of irresponsible journalism.” He disclosed that: “Somebody wanted to hurt Don [King] by hurting one of his fighters, and I guess they figured Azumah was an easy target.” Infuriated by the fact that it was a smear on an innocent boxer, he added that:

The thing that (bleeped) me off is that anyone who knows Azumah could have told you it was a lie. He doesn't do drugs, he's straight as an arrow, he's a good family man who doesn't fool around. But I guess people are going to believe anything that's printed, even if it's on toilet paper.¹²

Incidentally, since the HIV that causes AIDS can be transmitted through cuts, past and would-be opponents of Azumah Nelson feared that they had been or would be put at risk. It was reported that a series of physical examinations, were conducted on the champion, on three continents, shortly after the report came out.¹³ Although these examinations gave Azumah Nelson a clean bill of health, it seemed that not everyone was immediately convinced that he was not H.I.V. positive. Nevertheless, the

¹¹ Bernard Fernandez, “Whitaker's Opponent Overcomes Scandalous Medical Rumors False Aids Claim Behind W.B.C. Champion Nelson,” *op.cit.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

W.B.C. accepted the results of the tests and did not ban him from fight, which could have cost him his title and ruined his profession. Fortunately, the W.B.C. gave him a clean bill of health and allowed him to continue with his professional fights. The fears of his fans were allayed.

He is Still the Champ: Azumah Defends His Title and Prepares to Move to the Lightweight Division

Consequently, Azumah Nelson gave his fans, especially Ghanaians, who had supported him through those turbulent months of allegations and rumours, a treat and make them smile after the anxiety they endured with him through the AIDS saga. He and his handlers brought a fight to Accra on December 10, 1988. Defending the title in the fight, Azumah Nelson, again, made that day a happy one for his fans and Ghanaians in general. He gave a good performance to both fans who stayed home and watched the fight on television and those who were at the ringside. He kayoed the Brazilian challenger Sidnei Dal Rovere in the round three of that match which was refereed by Rudy Ortega and judged by Rolando Barrovecchio and Kamel Youssef.

Having given Ghanaians their “Christmas gift” in the fight in Accra, Azumah Nelson looked in the direction of Mexico and focused his attention on its hero Mario Martinez. A possible encounter between the Ghanaian and McGuigan had become impossible due to faulty deals between the handlers of the two boxers. Meanwhile, the camp of Martinez, his country and world critics of Azumah Nelson uninterruptedly called for an Azumah Nelson-Mario Martinez rematch. The champion and his administrators accepted the challenge, which had lingered since the day the two first

boxed each other. He said to his local managers, “Liston,” when they asked him if he wanted the challenge, and continued “Kaa worry (Do not worry) I am gonna fight Martinez.” When the administrators asked him to go ahead and win, he assured them in Ga that: “Mayi le. Martinez e brag o too much.” This literally meant, “I will beat him. Martinez brags too much.”¹⁴

The W.B.C. sanctioned the rematch for it to take place on February 25, 1989. The images and memories of the humiliation he endured, because of the AIDS saga, were fresh in the mind of the champion. In a way, that humiliation, which came from the country of Martinez, was a ramification of his first fight with Martinez. This perception and the bragging from the Mexican challenger, made the champion to resolve to mercilessly unleash his fury on Martinez in the rematch, and also beat him to settle finally the looming controversy about who among the two was the best in their division. He promised to teach the challenger a lesson in boxing.

On the evening of the fight the ringside in the Hilton Hotel in Las Vegas was filled with many spectators, especially Mexican fans who flocked in with the hope of seeing their hero ultimately crowned as champion. The Ghanaian boxer received some boos when he entered the arena. He kept a calm composure and acknowledged cheers from his fans. He recounted that he did not want to hurt the “guy,” but, he had to

beat him well, because I was annoyed because he bragged that he would beat me, and I was very upset because of the pains I privately went through because of the desire of some people in his country to bring shame to my image. I was determined to teach him and his fans “a lesson” in boxing.¹⁵

¹⁴ Azumah “The Professor” Nelson, alias Samuel Azumah Nelson (hereafter Azumah Nelson), 52 years old, personal interview, office at Central Accra, October 5, 2010.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

The fight, from round one to about ten, was a hard fought one. Unable to hit Martinez with effective jabs, which controls a fight, because it takes an opponent out his game plan, the champion adjusted. Consequently, he was able to dictate the pace and tempo of the fight. The fighters slugged one another in a punch-for-punch interaction. They started to develop hematomas (blood blisters). Noticeably, the champion started to whittle down Martinez with shattering hooks to his hip joints to unleash blood there. The consequence of blood gushing in and amassing in the hip joint is together sorely tormenting and debilitating. Martinez was having his “tyres shot.” By the start of round twelve, the valiant Martinez was showing clear signs of weakness. In fact both men were tired, because the fast pace of the fight had started to tell on them. During the last round, Martinez wore a face that had been contorted by abrasions, hematomas, and contusions. Saliva slobbered from is inflamed lips and he breathed in puffs. Finally the fight, which was refereed by Carlos Padilla and judged by Miguel Donate, Dave Moretti, and Ladislao Sanchez, came to an end with a T.K.O. when it became apparent that the challenger could not go on. Azumah Nelson had had a victory but it had been hard won one. He recounted that: “That, man (Martinez) surely could take punches. He also had hard punches. He was a strong fighter, full of power, but I managed to take the “petrol” out of his tank.”¹⁶ Clearly the victory addressed the controversy about who was the better fighter of the two boxers. It entered another section – “Azumah Nelson is the best in the “who is who category” in his division,” into his resume.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

The champion's handlers accepted a challenge from the British contender Jim "the Pride of London" McDonnell. They completed the paper work for the fight, and because the fight was scheduled to take place on the challenger's "home turf" it promised to attract a huge crowd of British fans. Regardless of the home crowd advantage that the venue for the fight potentially could give to the challenger, the champion decided to travel to England. He hoped to win and attract some useful financial rewards to himself and his handlers. Azumah Nelson, "the Lion of Africa,"¹⁷ was not new to travelling around the world to fight. He had won his first title by travelling and was used to travelling and used to winning. He was sure that he would win regardless of the home crowd. As he would mention later in a pre-fight interview before his encounter with Jeff Fenech in 1992, the crowd never bothered him. His assertion that: "I am going to the ring with the guy. The fans do not go there," revealed his state of mind when he fought. Revealingly, it seemed that he had been winning because he believed that the fans, according to him, did not do the fighting. They only cheered. In his mind, it was two boxers who went into the ring, and for him as a fighter it was against the challenger that he had to fight and work hard to defeat. This perception was a major useful psychological weapon which he depended on for his fights against opponents in their backyards. Naturally, he relied on it in the fight against McDonnell, which took place on November 2, 1989.

Financially, the deal was a lucrative one for him, because it was

¹⁷ "The Lion of Africa" was the appellation and accolade that Azumah Nelson carried for the fight with Jim McDonnell in London.

reported that his side was expected to take home in Great British Pounds (Sterling), (G.B.P. £), a fat pay check worth about G.B.P. £500,000 while McDonnell, was to take about G.B.P. £100,000 for the night's work.¹⁸ Albert Hall¹⁹ in Kensington, London was chosen as the venue for the bout. In his last fight in England, the champion had an unpleasant experience with the reception he received in Birmingham. Hooliganism and acts of hostility against his camp upset him and so when his handlers asked him to fight McDonnell in England, he was a bit skeptical. Having experienced such acts of antagonism in Birmingham, he was not sure about how the situation would be in London. He however narrated that: "I however had to go because my handlers had already agreed and accepted the venue. I, however, was determined to not leave the title there in London."²⁰ Moreover, he agreed to go because he wanted to consolidate his position as the best in his division, promote his image in European boxing rings, and reap the financial package that came with the arrangement.

The challenger was determined to defeat the champion. His promoter, Barry Hearn, announced the fight to the English public and press on September 12, 1989, which was McDonnell's birthday,²¹ and many of them accepted it as one of the best crackers for the year. Soon after the announcement, McDonnell disclosed to the press and fans that "I know I am the underdog like in the fight with McGuigan but watch out for another

¹⁸ "Azumah to Earn £500,000," *Sportsbeat* (hereafter *S.B.*), Accra, October 3-9, 1989, p. 4.

¹⁹ "Azumah Fights McDonald [sic] (McDonnell)," *Spectator* (hereafter *T.S.*), September 16, 1989, p. 16.

²⁰ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

²¹ "Azumah Fights McDonald [sic] (McDonnell)," *op.cit.*

upset.”²² The world of British sports scribes and boxing fans generally anticipated a defeat of the champion by their hero. They were confident in their idol whom they were celebrating for cutting short the boxing hopes and career of the Irish idol McGuigan on May 31, 1989.

Jim McDonnell was an “unknown” super-featherweight boxer, who was rated 11th by the W.B.C. His main fight of substance, before meeting McGuigan, was against South African born Brian Mitchel, the W.B.A. super-featherweight champion. However, he became a favourite of England, when he defeated McGuigan. He “poleaxed” the Irish with thunderous blows and, with a deadly left hook, opened a cut over his right eye-brow, which took six stitches. The seriousness of the injury forced the referee to stop the bout in round four. This fight, which was meant to condition the Irish for a possible bout with Azumah Nelson, was the one which ended his brilliant career. Evidently, McDonnell had a strong punching power, which he used to defeat McGuigan. The Irish testified to that power and its devastating effect that: “When a McDonnell looping hook rips you open, you ain’t have no time to last.”²³ Clearly, one of such hooks ripped McGuigan open and, lo and behold, he did not last in the ring. Neither did he last in active boxing because after that torture from McDonnell his career ended.

Although he stunned the international fans of boxing into disbelief, by his T.K.O. of the Irish star, was McDonnell proficient enough to defeat the more experienced Azumah Nelson? Did his punches prove heavier,

²² “Azumah’s Trainer in Town,” *Ghanaian Times* (hereafter *G.T.*), September 26, 1989, p. 7.

²³ “Meet McDonnell The Man Azumah Clashes with Next!” *Africa Sports* (hereafter *A.S.*), October 2-9, 1989, p.3.

effective and damaging on the champion? Was he capable of avenging the British fans and Pat Cowdell? Was he capable of matching the champion's lethal seriousness in the ring, which inflicted a round one K.O. on Cowdell? Did he, "the Pride of London," succeed in making Londoners proud by taming "the Lion of Africa"? Was he dexterous enough to match the champion's splendid footwork and his cast-like punches and avoid the devastation "boxing paws" of "the Lion of Africa"?

The champion went to England with tremendous seriousness to win. He made up his mind to avoid complacency, lest it cost him the title and make his old English contenders happy. Before he trekked to England, for a second time, he knew that the memory of the defeat of Cowdell would still be fresh on the minds of English fans and that McDonnell, unlikely that he would push such a thought aside, would be incensed by it and try to snatch a possible revenge. It was with such a perception, that the champion and his handlers immediately went to work to put the boxer in shape through training sessions, mainly in his ultra-modern gymnasium, in his residence in Accra. He intermittently also trained at the Accra Sports Stadium. Such sessions usually attracted the spectatorship, inquisitiveness, and admiration of many journalists from Accra, and admirers and fans, especially from Jamestown and Ussher Town.

Before the fight, McDonnell bragged to the British media that he would defeat the champion. When the champion heard about the news he resolved to teach the young Briton, "a lesson" and prove again to the English fans of boxing and the world of boxing spectators that his victory

over Cowdell was not fluke.²⁴ Before the fight took place in November, the international trainer of the champion, the celebrated Spanish coach José “Buffalo” Martinez, arrived in Accra in September. This coach who was also famous for helping the renowned Julio César Chávez with training and victories came to assist the champion to train and prepare well for the bout against the self-confident McDonnell. The Spaniard, who had worked the champion’s corner for more than five years, aided the champion in his recent victories over Del Rovere and Mario Martinez. Because Martinez was sure of a splendid victory for Azumah Nelson, he predicted in Ghana, that “the British challenger would be given such a beating in the first four rounds that he would be forced to admit that he has been in a fight.”²⁵ When some sports scribes in Ghana reminded him about the punching power of the Briton, the Spaniard, it was reported, waved a dismissing hand and said that: “I am aware he is the sensation of the British rings at the moment but he [apart from his bragging] respects Azumah Nelson and that is a good advantage.”²⁶

Prior to the fight McDonnell, who beamed with confidence said to the British and international media that: “I know this one is going to be very hard but I am prepared to go through hell to take the title from him (Azumah Nelson).”²⁷ Assuring the British fans of victory, it was reported that he said that “I wasn’t exactly a big favourite before the McGuigan fight either. Nelson has been a brilliant champion and I have every respect for

²⁴ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

²⁵ “Azumah’s Trainer in,” *Graphic Sports (G.S.)*, September 26-October 2, 1989, p. 2.

²⁶ “Azumah’s Trainer in Town,” *op.cit.*

²⁷ A. O’Gara, “Azumah, this is your Chance,” *Sporting Events* (hereafter *S.E.*), October 2-9, 1989, p. 3.

him. But I am going to provide another major upset.”²⁸

What could the challenger have up his sleeves? Had McDonnell and his handlers possibly found the “Achilles Heel” of Azumah Nelson, and if they had was Azumah Nelson going to keep it open? Ghanaian fans naturally became apprehensive and uncomfortable about the audacious comments from the challenger. Nevertheless they generally, kept their faith in the abilities of the champion. Many of the champion’s supporters outside Ghana were also confident in him. For example, Ishola Akay of All Stars Boxing Club,²⁹ who was a strong supporter of the champion showed his support by offering, without a fee, his gym in London to the champion to use to train. Moreover, in October 1989, this strong fan, exhibiting a spirit of confidence in and support for the boxer declared that: “I am prepared to mobilize a whole lot of support for Azumah to enhance his chances of success.”³⁰

Incidentally, some sports connoisseurs in England, outwardly, even doubted a victory for McDonnell. Mickey Carney³¹ and Ron Boddy, a mainstay of the London boxing scene, did not think that the challenger

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Sir Ishola Akay may not be very well known among many continental and Africa Diaspora Africans. However, he is well known by many internationally acclaimed professional boxers and England’s boxing world. At least 25 world champions, including Mike Tyson, have trained in his West London gym. Born, bred, and raised in Ghana by Nigerian parents, he moved to England in the 1970s and has contributed immensely to boxing in England. His contribution to English boxing earned him the award of Member of the Order of the British Empire (M.B.E.) in 2000. His gym is a household name in the boxing circles of England. (See Tunde Oyedoyin, “Sir Ishola Akay – The Story of a boxing legend,” *Nigeriaworld*, News Headline, October 1, 2002, <http://nigeriaworld.com/feature/publication/oyedoyin/100102p.html> (Information retrieved on September 18, 2010).

³⁰ “Azumah to Earn £500,000,” *op.cit.*

³¹ *Ibid.* (Carney was an esteemed boxing trainer in England).

would pose a problem to the holder of the title.³² Furthermore, it was reported that in a special article titled “Dazzling Azumah could be Africa’s Greatest,” which was carried in *Boxing News*, an international boxing magazine which was popular in the U.K., the champion was tipped to win and to join the growing list of world champions who had held three world titles. Commenting on the champion’s skills, and possibly sending an encoded message of warning to McDonnell, it described Azumah Nelson as “a brilliant fighter, a supreme craftsman who can dazzle his opponents with his speed, skill and at the same time, has the punch to take them out with one shot.”³³ Meanwhile, as the champion prepared to battle in England, news circulated that he would follow up his engagement in England with a build-up match in West Germany, in December,³⁴ against an anonymous contender. The fight, it was believed, was to be used by the Ghanaian to showcase and further enhance his image in Europe, and also to prepare him to move up to compete for a title at the lightweight division. The prestigious lightweight title had become vacant because of Julio César Chávez’s (the previous holder) rapid hurdling from one title to the other and his ambitious progression towards the junior (light) welterweight division. Azumah Nelson, who would have wanted to fight Chávez but not for the latter’s advancements, considered a possible engagement with the lightweight boxer Pernell “Sweet Pea” Whitaker.

A fight between the “Sweet Pea” and Azumah Nelson for the I.B.F. lightweight title, which the former snatched from Greg Haugen on February

³² *Ibid.*

³³ “Dazzling Azumah could be Africa’s Greatest,” *Boxing News*, as quoted in, “McDonnell won’t go past R3 – Azumah,” *G.S.*, October 10-16, 1989, p. 4.

³⁴ “Azumah’s Big Deal,” *Super Sports* (hereafter *S.S.*), October 15, 1989, p 1.

28, 1989, seemed possible. Both boxers respected and wanted to fight each other. In the meantime, a defeat of McDonnell remained the immediate priority of Azumah Nelson. It was generally speculated in the boxing world that a possible fight would ensue between Whitaker and Azumah Nelson in February or March 1990. This however, would not occur.

Boxing pundits generally believed that any future contest between the two would be very challenging for the two proud boxers. Whitaker was proud and very protective of position as champion. Admirably, he accumulated two titles within a short time in the year of 1989. By September 1989, he was the holder of the I.B.F. and W.B.C. lightweight titles. How did he accomplish that feat?

His journey to that glorious position had been an arduous one. He made an attempt on March 12, 1988, to get the W.B.C. title in Levallois, France, but he was defeated by José Luis Ramirez. Even though the defeat, which was his first in his professional career, was taken lightly in many boxing circles because the controversial split decision which awarded it was hotly disputed, Ramirez was the only boxer to have defeated him in his brilliant professional bouts. Only seven opponents had been able to go the distance with the "Sweet Pea," and so Ramirez's victory shocked many pundits who had believed that Whitaker was going to win the match. It was after this defeat that a much-improved Whitaker, the southpaw from Norfolk, Hampton, in Virginia, proceeded and clinched the I.B.F. lightweight title. Moreover, it was in a second contest with Ramirez for the vacant W.B.C. lightweight title that the "Sweet Pea" avenged his defeat. Before the bout, pundits were right in their view that Ramirez who as at the

time had lost twice to Chávez would not be a problem for Whitaker. By the time that Whitaker defeated Ramirez, Azumah Nelson was gearing for his bout with McDonnell. Confident that he would beat McDonnell, Azumah Nelson also psyched himself for an eventual clash with Whitaker, who had a reputation as a protective and fast boxer. Could Azumah Nelson, who was total boxer and had all the tricks to dazzle opponents, stand against the fury of this fast and hard-styled boxer of a southpaw? Could Whitaker's southpaw stance, like Lupe Suarez's, pose a problem and make him a "hard nut to crack"? Well, the world of international professional boxing waited and hoped to have answers to such questions, in a clash of the two in the future.

As the Azumah Nelson-Jim McDonnell contest drew nigh, it was reported that the enthusiasm of British fans in England, which had waned considerably following the thrashing of McGuigan, was rising for the contest.³⁵ In Ghana, the enthusiasm and expectation of Ghanaians were also high. Before he departed for England, the champion trained at the Accra Sports Stadium. The Sports Hall in that stadium, where he and Nana Yaw Konadu, who was also preparing for a major international engagement, trained, became a centre of attraction for fans and admirers. Such hordes frequented the training sessions of the boxers and cheered them up and also boosted their own confidence in their heroes, as they observed them train. Azumah Nelson knew that the zeal and expectation of the fans were high. Thus employing psychology and drama, he used his training and interviews, as symbolic acts to boost the confidence of his fans. For

³⁵ *Ibid.*

trainings, particularly those in the afternoon, which turned the venue into a beehive of fans, Azumah Nelson and Nana Yaw Konadu skipped endlessly. Next, they mounted the ring and shadow boxed to get soaked from head to toe in their sweat. Furthermore, to the admiration of their fans, journalists, and handlers, they engaged different sparring partners in duels and, after that, launched an offensive, of power-backed barrage of punches, on the punching bags, whilst their ripping muscles flexed and their bodies glittered with beads of sweat.³⁶ Such showmanship and athletic acts always drew cheers and songs of inspiration from the fans who seemed to be satisfied with the training, skills, and muscle power that the boxers exhibited. Azumah Nelson also did some confident talks to increase the confidence of his fans. Sustaining the tradition of bragging, which Muhammad Ali, using his “Louisville Lip,” perfected in boxing, he also “gave” them his “Ga-Mashie Lip.” For example when he was asked in October by sports scribes in Accra how long he thought McDonnell would last, his swift and witty response, which was similar to that of “the Louisville Lip,” was that: “I have trained for only three rounds, a K.O. can even come early. [I] would have wanted to go many more rounds but my fans at home want it fast and early!”³⁷ Asked if he was not being complacent, the champion divulged that: “I am not underrating McDonnell but he will go early. I regard him as tougher than Barry McGuigan whom he stopped recently but McDonnell can’t stand my bomb.” Explaining why he wanted to end the fight prematurely, he declared that: “I want McDonnell to go early also to prove

³⁶ “McDonnell won’t go past R3 – Azumah,” *op.cit.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

a point that I've not lost my punching power as some Britons think. They should ask McDonnell how he felt in the ring with me when it's all over."³⁸

The champion who had been rated by the W.B.A. and W.B.C., as the number one contender to the lightweight titles, considered the showdown against McDonnell as an easy payday to one of his highest, if not the highest, pays. He also deemed it as an important preparatory engagement on his way and quest for the W.B.C. lightweight title, which he had his eyes on.

Inevitably the two boxers met in the ring on the night of November 5 and in the packed-to-the-rafters Royal Albert Hall, in far off London, the Ghanaian boxer finally clashed with the Briton, Jim McDonnell. Was holder of the title going to repeat the early K.O. saga or was he going to lose his title through fireworks from Jim McDonnell?

The champion proved to the world that although the favourite of the British was a powerful puncher and stubborn fighter, he after all had a soft chin like Pat Cowdell. McDonnell was no match for the *enfant terrible* from Ghana. He suffered some knockdowns before the fight was stopped in round twelve by referee Joe Cortez.

How did the champion deal with the challenger? Calm and with his stare strongly fixed on Jim, the titlist went straight into action after the Ghanaian and British national anthems were played. True to the prediction of boxing pundits, the competition, which was cracking, was also vigorous. Although the challenger went down a few times before the end of the fight, he proved that he was not going to be just a walk over, contrary to what the

³⁸ *Ibid.*

champion had thought. According to Azumah Nelson, McDonnell “proved strong and stubborn.”³⁹

Because the champion predicted a quick victory, he wanted to get rid of Jim McDonnell early. With the Ghanaian crowd cheering, he charged at Jim, as a bull will at a matador, with wild abandon, missing with huge wild left hooks. They were very good shots that could have done great damage if they had landed. In round, the champion stalked the challenger who would not stand but kept circling. The Ghanaian caught him with some bone crunching body shots, which might have appeared too painful for many British spectators to watch, but delightful for many Ghanaian fans. McDonnell dominated the most part of round three as he fought back with strong body shots, although Azumah Nelson unleashed a wicked left, which caught him. The challenger survived the third round. The champion’s prediction had failed to come to pass.

What was in store for Azumah Nelson? Did he have enough stamina and punching power to go extra rounds with a challenger whom, according to the champion, he trained to beat in the first three rounds? Round four was also dominated by the challenger. He unleashed some beautiful combinations, which complemented with some upper cuts perforated the high guard of the champion. It appeared that this good show from Jim McDonnell would continue in round five, but all of a sudden the question: “What happened?” resonated among parts of the crowd as the challenger went down. A huge left hook caught him. That was what happened! The referee started to count but the challenger beat the count. He battled on very

³⁹ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

of abdicating his glorious reign as *rex* of the featherweights and starting a new one as a triumphant champion in the lightweight division? Openly, on May 19, 1990, he tried to join the exclusive group of champions who had held titles in three divisions by challenging the world lightweight champion Pernell Whitaker, whose unique unorthodox fighting style had made him the W.B.C. champion.⁴²

The general feeling about the boxer's decision among Ghanaian fans, prior to May 19, had been one of ambivalence. Some welcomed the idea because they were confident in the Ghanaian challenger and thought that another world title would improve his international image and reputation as a great boxer. Others were of the view that it was too soon for him to make a move up the grades. They felt that Whitaker was dangerous and had a lot of experience in that division. Stubborn and determined as he had always been, Azumah Nelson held on to his conviction to proceed against Whitaker. The handlers of the boxers signed the contract for the "battle between," according to the *KO Magazine*, "two of the top pound-for-pound boxers."⁴³ With assurances coming through a cable message from José Sulaiman and Don King, who was promoter of the fight, to Ringcraft and Seth Asah, that Azumah Nelson would still keep his super-featherweight title in case he failed to win the lightweight title,⁴⁴ the confidence of the champion and his fans boosted. The fear of most fans was for his forfeiture of the super-featherweight title in case of a defeat from

⁴² In 2002, *The Ring* ranked Pernell Whitaker as the 10th greatest fighter of the last 80 years.

⁴³ Brian Robertson, "Will Rise in Weight Affect Azumah Nelson," *Statesman*, May 10, 1990, p. 20. Note: The *Statesman* is a student-run newspaper at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, U.S.A.

⁴⁴ "Azumah's Title will be Intact," *P.D.G.*, May 3, 1990, p. 15.

Whitaker. Seth Asah indicated that in the case of a victory for the challenger, he, by the directives of the W.B.C., would have seven days to decide which of the two titles to keep. Contrary to rumour that because he intended to fight a lightweight boxer, he had been stripped of his super-featherweight title, the information from Seth Asah was very educative and helpful because it assured the concerned fans that Azumah Nelson still had his title and would keep it even if he failed to defeat Whitaker.⁴⁵ Co-promoted by Don King Promotions and Main Events Inc., the fight was scheduled to take place at the Caesars Palace, in Las Vegas.⁴⁶

His outstanding defensive skills had helped garner Whitaker's international acclaim as one of the top pound-for-pound fighters during his prime. He had a very "strange" style of boxing. This method, he exhibited throughout his career. He had a style that was expansive, not plausible, and could not be defined with a single definition.⁴⁷ With moves, which, as Bert Randolph Sugar puts it, were "pure poetry in motion, or more correctly, pure poetry in many motions,"⁴⁸ he exuded a style, which was a mixture of sportsmanship and showmanship. He used his style to easily bemuse contenders and entertain spectators. He could "dance," "contort," and "disappear" during fights. Was his boxing a form of boxing break dancing? Was the boxing of this boxer who once said that: "I don't care who I'm fighting. I don't care if it's God. If I don't want God to hit me, He's not

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Brian Robertson, "Will Rise in Weight Affect Azumah Nelson," *op.cit.*

⁴⁷ For some insight into Pernell Whitaker's career and fighting style see Bert Randolph Sugar, *Boxing's Greatest Fighters*, Guilford, Connecticut: Lyon Press (The Globe Pequot Press), 2006, pp. 163-166.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p. 164.

going to hit me,”⁴⁹ a now-you-see-him-now-you-don’t style? His style of fighting was unique. One minute the tall and lanky boxer would be in front of his opponent. In a split of a second he would be behind, and give the boxer a tap on the back of the head. He could throw his arm out and if the contender flinched, he probably would not throw a punch. But if the opponent did not he might throw a punch. He could slip a punch, dip down low in the crouch-like style of a member of the feline family, and quickly step around an opponent to hit him on his back. He could even with highest dexterity use his gloves to pull down an opponent’s trunks, as he did to Roger Mayweather, in their N.A.B.F.⁵⁰ lightweight encounter in 1987. Even with all these qualities his trainer Lou Duva did not expect the fight to be a “cakewalk.” In a telephone interview with the *Statesman*, Duva was reported to have said that: “I don’t underestimate Nelson. He’s a very tough fighter . . . but Pernell has prepared well and I expect him to win a hard fought unanimous decision.”⁵¹ It was reported that the odds-makers agreed with Duva and made Whitaker as much as a 4-1 favorite over Nelson.⁵² Unhappy with the position of the odds-makers and the concern expressed among some critics in the boxing world that Azumah Nelson would be sluggish in the fight because of the extra weight that he had gained as a lightweight fighter, Al Braverman warned that: “The odds-makers are making a big mistake. Azumah has been training hard for this fight and the jump in weight will only make him stronger.”⁵³

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.163.

⁵⁰ North American Boxing Federation

⁵¹ Brian Robertson, “Will Rise in Weight Affect Azumah Nelson,” *op.cit.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

Evidently, Whitaker won most of his fights in his career partly because his magician-dancer-contortionist boxing techniques made great demands on his opponents and easily distracted them from their fighting plans, thereby opening them up and making them vulnerable to Whitakers fighting plans. That was the caliber of the man Azumah Nelson was going to compete as an underdog in a fight, which many pundits believed was “a make or break effort” by Azumah Nelson to gain super stardom, a big purse of U.S. \$500,000, which was half of what Whitaker was to take, and big money fights ahead.⁵⁴ The contest was not exactly the pot of gold that the Ghanaian had been looking for but he thought that it would lurch him to bigger games, which would bring him the millions he had been yearning for.⁵⁵

Just a day before fight, Azumah Nelson reiterated what he had uninterruptedly told the sports scribes since he arrived in the gambling city. He confidently prophesied, to the writers, that he would steamroll the 26 years old Whitaker. He repeatedly told the writers, many of whom looked at the “aged” 31 years old challenger from Ghana as having past his peak, that: “The men I really want are Julio César Chávez (the W.B.C. super-lightweight (light-welterweight) champion) and Mark Breland, the W.B.C. welterweight champion.”⁵⁶

Although some boxing critics and commentators perceived the wide age disparity between the boxers as a disadvantage to the challenger, they however conceded that Azumah Nelson’s experience and big punch could

⁵⁴ Joe Aggrey, “Azumah Takes it Easy,” *P.D.G.*, May 18, 1990, p. 15.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

I am going to walk right through his (Whitaker's) punches as if they weren't there at all and when he tastes the power in mine, he will try to hide. But there won't be any place for him to hide even though he would attempt it, he can run but can't hide.⁵⁹

Moreover he said that:

When I was already a world champion, Pernell was just coming out of boxing school, an Olympic amateur titlist. Now I'm a professor of boxing and I'm going to take this young man through a few lessons on Saturday.⁶⁰

He was very confident in himself that he called himself a "professor" and implied that Whitaker was at the level of a "student" in boxing. As a point of interest, this appears to be the beginning of Azumah Nelson's use of the word "professor" as a title and an alias for himself. However, its use and popularity would not come to the attention of the world and grow to become his main sobriquet, until he clashed with Jeff Fenech in the future. Nevertheless, Whitaker, whom Azumah Nelson considered a "student," unfortunately, taught "the Professor," who had taught many boxers lessons in the ring by beating them, "a lesson." Most boxing fans in Ghana took great interest in the fight, which the Ghana Ministry of Information announced to transmit live on the G.B.C. T.V network, at 2:00 am G.M.T. on Sunday, May 20.⁶¹ It was rated by Azumah Nelson as the most important in his career.

Dispelling some popular notions that age was catching up with him, the challenger said, prior to the fight that: "Old age is a state of mind and right now, I feel stronger than ever before and Pernell will testify to this on

⁵⁹ Joe Aggrey, "I'll Walk through Whitaker's Punches – Azumah," *P.D.G.*, May 19, 1990, p. 1. For the full story see pp. 1, 8, 9, and 15.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ "Azumah's Fight on T.V.," *P.D.G.*, May 19, 1990, p. 1.

Saturday night.”⁶² However, behind all his bragging and show of confidence the challenger was nurturing a secret problem that was weighing him down psychologically. It was an issue, which was pushing him close to a nervous breakdown. However, assurances, from his relatives and social contacts in Ghana, that everything was under control kept him to keep his focus on the impending fight. Such assurances and his own stubbornness, made him to keep a quasi-focus, in fact a divided attention, on his fight with Whitaker. However, what was the issue that was troubling him? Beatrice Tandoh, his beloved wife, was critically ill and the information that reached the boxer persistently indicated that her condition was a near fatal one. Recounting his personal conditions at the time Azumah Nelson disclosed that:

I could not think properly and, for some time, I thought of abandoning the fight and going back to Ghana to see her. I however decided to go on with the fight and be the professional that I am. I had strong hope in God and believed that she will be well. It was not easy for me, but I managed to stay in the U.S.A. to finish with what I went there to do.⁶³

On behalf of Azumah Nelson, Don King, who tried to boost the confidence of the challenger and attract more attention to his fighter, also did lots of the talking to the media. He articulated among other opinions that: “The score is already 1-0 in our favour (a reference to Julio César Chávez’s recent defeat of Meldrick Taylor). On Saturday, we’ll surely make it 2-0.”⁶⁴ Don King tried to put some fear into the camp of Whitaker and his manager, Dan Duva. It was reported that King introduced Oko

⁶² “I’ll Walk through Whitaker’s Punches – Azumah,” *op.cit.*

⁶³ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

⁶⁴ “I’ll Walk through Whitaker’s Punches – Azumah,” *op.cit.*

Kwatekwei as Azumah Nelson's juju⁶⁵ man who would be at the challenger's corner to support him with magical and spiritual powers and cast a spell on Whitaker. This, it seems, was apparently intended to remind Dan Duva of what had happened some few years back when Don King managed Livingstone Bramble to demolish Ray "Boom Boom" Mancini, alias Raymond Michael Mancini. In that encounter King and Bramble, it was reported, had somebody dressed in the "apparel" of a juju man. The model was attached to Bramble's corner to send the notion to the superstitious that the supposed juju man was backing Bramble with benevolent magical powers to be victorious.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, if Whitaker was superstitious and was affected and perturbed by King's reference to the relationship between juju and magic and the victory of Bramble, he did not readily show it. He, however, in the spirit of sportsmanship said that he had respect for Azumah Nelson. Referencing the age disparity between the two boxers, Whitaker, apparently glad that he was younger and perhaps advantaged, added quickly that: "I must say, however, that the sport belongs to the young and the old champ will realise on Saturday that he's well past his peak and that he has made a bad mistake challenging me for

⁶⁵ This word, which describes a concept, practice, and objects that originally evolved from West Africa, probably came from "joujou," which is French for toy. Juju is an aura, supernatural power or other magical property, usually having to do with spirits or luck, which is attached to a physical object. It can also refer to the object(s), or the craft of their use as charms, amulets, or means of protection, or the system of observances and rituals associated with such objects. The "juju" concept, practices, and objects were carried by enslaved Africans into the African Diaspora, especially the Americas, and still remain there especially among the different groups of people of African descent who have tended to preserve their African traditions. "Juju" can only be made and invoked by specialists for different purposes. Benign "juju" can cure ailments of mind and body and bring good luck. Malevolent "juju" is normally used for vengeance and to cause misfortune.

⁶⁶ "I'll Walk through Whitaker's Punches – Azumah," *op.cit.*

my title.”⁶⁷ True to his word, Whitaker exhibited some great boxing tactics and skills during his fight with Azumah Nelson, who, although with power in both hands, appeared to have slow reflexes. Before the fight, the government of Ghana and the G.B.A. sent messages of good wishes to the Ghanaian boxer to assure him of the nation’s support. In addition, Nii Quaye Mensah, the Vice Chairman of the G.B.A. left Ghana for the U.S.A. to support him at the ringside. Furthermore, good wishes were conveyed to the challenger from some renowned businesspersons and famous personalities in Ghana. These messages, which also urged the challenger to win convincingly, came from people like Mr. Sam Akuamoah Toyota, the Managing Director of Ansabaks Enterprise Limited and a close associate of Azumah Nelson, and Mr. Kweku Aidoo, who once managed Nana Yaw Konadu.

Furthermore, Amarkai Amateifio’s message to the challenger was that: “Remember to cut the ring into half and demolish this young man at the right time and let the ‘Sweet Pea’ swallow a bitter pill.”⁶⁸ Reiterating that the fight was a national assignment for Azumah Nelson, the G.B.A. stated that “As Azumah mounts the ring to defend the flag of Ghana, Ghanaians will pray that he brings honour to the nation once again.” It continued, in that message, which was signed by one of the top officials of the G.B.A., Mr. John Allotei Cofie, that “we do not doubt your capabilities to snatch the title from the American as you did in 1984 in faraway San

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ “Ringcraft Appeals for Moral Support . . . As Azumah Fights Whitaker in Las Vegas Tonight,” *P.D.G.*, May 19, 1990, p. 15.

Juan, Puerto Rico, against the once fearful Wilfredo Gomez.”⁶⁹

Regardless of Ringcraft’s appeals in the print media to solicit national support,⁷⁰ and its assurance to Ghanaians that Azumah Nelson, the first African to attempt to win three different titles, was fit and ready to demolish the champion, Whitaker, at the end of twelve rounds of boxing won by a unanimous decision. The fight was refereed by Mills Lane and was judged by Harry Gibbs, Sid Nathan and Dalby Shirley. Even though points were deducted from him in the last round for a foul, Whitaker retained his I.B.F. and W.B.C. lightweight titles.⁷¹

Irrespective of the strong fighting efforts shown by the challenger and the foul that Whitaker committed, it was clear in the contest that the champion was a master in his division. Whitaker’s fight plan, it appeared, was to establish his jabs right from the beginning to control the fight and use his speed, both in hands and feet, and body movement to stay out of trouble from the “grenade” punches of the challenger. It worked well, almost to perfection, as the challenger, who had said that he would “walk through Whitaker’s punches,” in his search for a K.O., did “walk” through them. Painfully did he walk through them and painfully did he fail to unleash any damaging punches on Whitaker. By “walking” through the American’s barrage of punches and jabs, he “swallowed” almost every

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Whitaker was a great fighter. After taken the I.B.F. and W.B.C. lightweight titles, he moved on to annex others. After defeating Azumah Nelson, he, on August 11, 1990, kayoed Juan Nazario in one round to add the W.B.A. title and become the first undisputed lightweight champion since Roberto Duran. In 1992, he started his rise in weight. On that trajectory he won the I.B.F. junior welterweight title from the Colombian puncher Rafael Pineda on July 18. On March 6, 1993, he defeated James “Buddy” McGirt to become the linear and W.B.C. welterweight champion. He retired in 2001, with an official professional record of 40-4-1 (17 K.Os.). Since then Whitaker has intermittently been prosecuted for possessing cocaine, which has cost him a lot of the dollars he earned from his fights.

missile thrown by Whitaker. That was a disadvantage to the challenger, because it put Whitaker ahead of him on the scorecards of the judges.

Employing elusive moves similar to suave Michael Jordan-like basketball moves, Whitaker kept moving from side to side, and slipped good punches from Azumah Nelson. He succeeded in unleashing some on-the-target jabs to the face of the ever-advancing contender with two, three and four jabs every time he came into range and, intermittently going into his famous squat-crouch positions, he escaped damage from some of the thunderous hooks from the *enfant terrible* from Ghana. Whitaker's right jabs worked well like a well-oiled piston as it struck the head and face of the stalking and K.O.-searching Azumah Nelson.

Through the course of the bout, Whitaker managed, using his long reach, jabs, bigger body, and his "sleight" left hand, to control the Ghanaian and stay away from him. If the challenger came too close, Whitaker made it difficult for him to launch good straight punches. Whitaker would grab the back of the head of the challenger, pull him close to himself, thus closing the gap between them, and smother him. There were times that he, using his sneaky style, even grabbed the thigh of the challenger and nearly forced him to fall down. He even did some low punching, that was below the belt, into the groin of the challenger, which, for example in the second round, forced referee Mills Lane to warn him. Whitaker, basically frustrated Azumah Nelson and, in a way, "killed" the challenger's animal intensity and his old punching fire. The punches and hooks from the challenger were not landing effectively. Why were they not landing well?

Whitaker was a creative creator of gaps and a sealer of gaps. Apart

from jabbing to create gaps, the wily Whitaker also held and grabbed persistently to make it difficult for the challenger to throw free, fast and direct-to-target punches. For example in round eleven, Whitaker held on to the challenger,

tightly like a lover, afraid to let go of a wayward boy-friend who was likely to slip out of her life any minute. To free himself from the embrace, [which had made it difficult for the challenger to punch Whitaker] Azumah Nelson [in an attempt to create space] virtually had to wheel Whitaker down.⁷²

In addition, Whitaker also carried the day and out-gunned the challenger because he managed to mesmerize Azumah Nelson with the ineluctable illusions which his ambiguous boxing style and bodily motions exuded.

Azumah Nelson later attributed his loss to some personal problems including a hand injury.⁷³ He explained that he, at a point in time, could not throw his left, which he had injured in training three weeks earlier. Furthermore, his right hand was also aching during the fight. He added in a post-fight interview that: "I don't want to give any excuses for losing to a great champion. But that's the truth and that is why my trainer (José "Buffalo" Martinez) is so mad with me out there. He advised me to get the fight postponed but I didn't listen."⁷⁴ Moreover, he stated that: "We finished the fight on points and . . . he won the fight and I know he won the fight, because I don't do anything."⁷⁵

However, did Azumah Nelson make a mistake to join that group of

⁷² Joe Aggrey, "Azumah Loses to Whitaker . . . He is Still W.B.C. Super-featherweight Champ," *P.D.G.*, May 21, 1990, p. 1, 15.

⁷³ "Azumah Demolishes Fenech," *G.T.*, March 2, 1992, p. 1, 3.

⁷⁴ "Azumah Loses to Whitaker... He is still W.B.C. Super featherweight Champ," *op.cit.*

⁷⁵ See interview of Azumah Nelson in, *Zoom Zoom – The Professor: The career of Azumah Nelson*, D.V.D., *op.cit.*

lightweights? Perhaps yes, he made a mistake. Perhaps, he was, physically, not cut in the frame of a lightweight boxer. He was small and the contender he faced was much bigger and crafty in his division, a division and terrain where he had been for a long period before Azumah Nelson tried to enter. Generally, Ghanaian fans were disappointed by the loss, but they were not devastated. Azumah Nelson was still their champion. He was still the holder of the super-featherweight title. It was obvious that the super-featherweight had learnt a boxing lesson from the lightweight.

Acknowledging his defeat and soothing the pain of his fans, he explained his failure with a statement, which was laced with honesty and philosophical truism. He said that:

. . . I must say again, I'm not looking for excuses. Once a while things don't go well for even the greatest boxers. It happened to even Muhammad Ali. The important thing is the ability to put such a misfortune behind you and come back winning again. For me, that is the mark of a great champion.⁷⁶

Apparently, the fight was a difficult one for the challenger and the defeat was painful. Nevertheless, he decided to come back to winning again, within his familiar division of super-featherweight.

For Whitaker, the victory was a sweet one because it improved his image as a champion in the world of boxing. He confessed, at a post-match press conference, that, with many boxers having attempted and failed to beat a champion as great as Azumah Nelson, he was happy to have met and beaten him. In the view of Whitaker, it was a big accomplishment and a

⁷⁶ "Azumah Loses to Whitaker. . . He is still W.B.C. Super-featherweight Champ," *op.cit.*

standard and mark of boxing genius, which he hoped would make the world to distinguish him as a creditable lightweight champion. It was reported that Whitaker disclosed that:

He (Azumah Nelson) brought out the best in me since my Olympic gold medal-winning performance. When Azumah was world champion, I was still an amateur. He called me a junior high school kid but after this match with “the professor” (Azumah Nelson) I believe I can call myself a senior high school boy now. . . . I am still learning and this fight with a champion like Azumah has taught me a few more lessons.⁷⁷

Moreover, he admirably stated during the in-the-ring post-match interview that: “Azumah Nelson was a great fighter . . . who brought the best out of me and out of himself.”⁷⁸ Hoping that there would not be a plan for an immediate rematch, his immediate plan was to take the W.B.A. lightweight belt to fulfil his dream of becoming the undisputed and the best lightweight champion of the world. For his successful defeat of Azumah Nelson, the W.B.C. honoured Whitaker by declaring him as the “Boxer of the Month (May).”⁷⁹

Azumah Returns to Rule the Super-Featherweights: 1990

Incidentally, Azumah Nelson realised his mistake for venturing into the lightweight division. Hence he reverted to his more familiar territory to continue his winnings. So, on balance, maybe he should have remained where his coach believed he exhibited greatness. But it was his ambition of annexing another title that pushed him into Whitaker’s category.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Pernell Whitaker | Azumah Nelson 5/5*, YouTube, (2:41 minutes), uploaded by MichaelMoorer1992, April 16, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7AylBFwYqGs&feature=related> (Information was retrieved on October 15, 2010).

⁷⁹ “Azumah Retains Top Spot,” *P.D.G.*, May 28, 1990, p. 15.

Additionally, his managers believed in his amazing record, fiery fighting power, and confidence, which aided his rise from featherweight to super-featherweight. They, therefore, thought that he could annex another title in another higher division, hence their accompanying him into the “dangerous” terrain of lightweight boxers. Moreover, it was the cupidity of Azumah Nelson and his camp for the big prize money, and bigger games and fame involved and associated with that higher division that pushed them to their peril in the lightweight division. When he reversed to the super-featherweight division and maintained his greatness and fame as a good boxer, it became apparent that the lower ranks were his place.

His and Chávez’s trainer, “Buffalo” Martinez, believed that his territory was in the lower category. In fact, a few weeks even before he fought McDonnell, Azumah Nelson was described by his trainer as the greatest fighter of all time in the lower division.⁸⁰ The famous and experienced coach knew a good boxer from a bad one. He knew a great boxer from the not so great boxer. He had handled Julio César Chávez, alias J.C Superstar, and aided him to build a good and enviable fighting record.

Chávez was a boxer reputed to have revived the near-forgotten art of in-fighting, doing it so immaculately and expertly that he left opponents gasping for breath anytime he applied it. As a great fighter, he had a stupendous record of going through about sixty-three fights without tasting defeat. After achieving that record, he went further to win a super-featherweight title, which he relinquished when he won the W.B.C.

⁸⁰ Sam Doku, “‘Azumah is the Greatest’ says Martinez,” *Sports Star* (hereafter *T.S.S.*), October 11-17, 1989, p. 1.

lightweight title. He also defeated Roger Mayweather to win the W.B.A. lightweight title. Such was the accomplishments of one of the great boxers that “Buffalo” Martinez helped to develop.

Until the advent of Azumah Nelson and Chávez, Roberto Duran, who once fought as a lightweight, was considered the best fighter in the lower division. However, as at 1990, Azumah Nelson, with his ring artistry, ingenuity and long impressive career record of amazing exploits, had become, for many boxing connoisseurs, the greatest in the lower division. In the ring, he, as Doku noted, manifested a farrago of Ruben Olivares’ poleaxing method. He, possessed the granite-like jaw of Carlos Monzon, projected the cast-like and spear-like punches of D.K. Poison in his heyday, and unleashed the intimidating aggression of Joe Frazier. Even though he was not fast and loquacious as Muhammad Ali, he possessed a cute physique and boyish looks as well as seraphic smile, which usually gave his opponents a false sense of hope. However, these features, which dispensed false hope, many a time, misled opponents and got them in trouble. It was only in the ring, after he had worn his visage of seriousness and started his business of “no mercy” with them that most opponents became fully aware that they were not up against a boy, but a boxing genius and a fighting man. It was there and then that they saw that they were facing a serious “mean” man and not a kind seraph. This was the man and boxer whom Buffalo Martinez, one of the celebrated coaches of the twentieth century, described as the greatest.⁸¹

After the encounter with Whitaker, Azumah Nelson quickly

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

returned to support his ailing wife.⁸² Within the context of the personal and private life of the super-featherweight champion, the health of Beatrice became the main concern for the boxer. He desired and cared to see her recovery. Meanwhile rumour circulated that she had died after being in intensive care at the Korle Bu Teaching Hospital in Accra. To “kill” the rumour, the authorities of the Korle-Bu Teaching Hospital, issued a press statement, which described as untrue, the rumour circulating in Accra and parts of the country that Madam Beatrice Tandoh, the wife of Azumah Nelson, the national hero, was dead.⁸³ She was alive and she started to recover under the watchful eyes of her husband. Subsequently, Azumah Nelson, whose managers, John Kermah and Oko Kwatekwei, and the W.B.C., and camp of Juan La Porte, had done the necessary paper work in the U.S.A. for a mandatory defence fight for him,⁸⁴ reverted to his professional responsibility by accepting a challenge. With professional duty calling, he accepted the obligatory fight against the former featherweight champion Juan La Porte. Although the challenge came at a trying time in his life, when he was supporting his wife to recover, it was also an opportunity for him to show his fans that he was not a coward and was still on top the super-featherweight division. According to the latest boxing rankings published by the W.B.C. in Mexico City, for the super-featherweight division, he was rated as the title holder whiles Jeff Fenech and Juan La Porte were rated as the top two contenders to the title.⁸⁵

Determined to win the fight to placate his fans for his loss to

⁸² “Azumah Back Home,” *P.D.G.*, May 26, 1990, p. 15.

⁸³ “Azumah’s Wife is Alive,” *P.D.G.*, May 22, 1990, p. 15.

⁸⁴ “Azumah Back Home,” *op.cit.*

⁸⁵ “Azumah Retains Top Spot,” *op.cit.*

Whitaker he trained hard for the bout. He, on October 13, 1990, fought Juan La Porte⁸⁶ at the Entertainment Centre, in Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. They boxed for twelve rounds and the fight was refereed by Malcolm Bulner. The judges, Eddie Francis, Gus Mercurio, and Herbert Minn, unanimously declared Azumah Nelson as winner of the contest. Hence he occupied the top position of the super-featherweight list of fighters. Although he could not stop La Porte, his victory, which came at a difficult period in his personal life, showed that he was a skilful, powerful, and determined boxing force to reckon with. Truly, if Muhammad Ali contributed largely in bringing exuberance and ring originality into boxing, then Azumah Nelson helped to sustain that brilliance and legacy in the ring with his splendid and sparkling footwork at the super-featherweight division. He demonstrated great flair in the fight. Still reigning supreme at the super-featherweight level he easily and truly could be deemed as “the number one on the list of the Who’s Who of the great international featherweights of the time.” Marcos Villasana and Mario Martinez (who were both defeated twice), and Danilo Cabrera and Lupe Suarez are just a couple of the big names and renowned fighters who succumbed to Azumah Nelson, who was now campaigning at the super-featherweight category.

Azumah Nelson fought only two bouts in 1991. In faraway Spain he engaged Daniel Mustapha in a non-title, but a financially rewarding and warm up, fight on March 16. Moreover, the fight entertained boxing fans in

⁸⁶ He fought in 1982, at the Madison Square Garden, when the W.B.C. matched him against Mario Miranda for the vacant world title. La Porte dropped Miranda in round eight and Miranda quit on his stool before the start of round eleven. La Porte was champion from September 15, 1982 to March 31 1984. It was Wilfredo Gomez that unseated him as champion.

the country of his coach Martinez. Furthermore, it was organized to build him up for an envisaged bout with the fierce Australia fighter, Jeff Fenech, who disclosed, as early as 1988, that Azumah Nelson was his main target.⁸⁷

Azumah Nelson defeated Mustapha through a round four K.O. at the Polideportivo Principal Felipe, in Zaragoza, Aragón, Spain. Incidentally, his envisaged fight with Fenech attracted tremendous attention from the world of professional boxing. The general perception among boxing fans and pundits was that the bout, although long overdue, would be a keenly contested one – “a fight of the ages” involving the champion and a challenger, who was a former super-bantamweight and featherweight champion.⁸⁸ Fenech was a household name and a national hero and treasure in Australia, and the fight was his debut in the U.S.A. He considered it an important one for the growth of his career and recognition in the U.S.A.

Unlike the globetrotting and “road warrior” Azumah Nelson, the challenger, from Down Under,⁸⁹ whose tale of the tape stood at 25-0, was virtually unknown to most of the U.S.A. fans. He had only boxed once outside Australia. However, the famous Australian promoter, Bill Mordey, who prior to the fight stated that: “After Friday night, America would know who we are,” was confident that his protégé would be victorious and become popular in the U.S.A. Apparently, Mordey and Australians believed

⁸⁷ See “Azumah Fights Ellis in March,” *op. cit.*

⁸⁸ He was a world champion in three weight classes. They were the I.B.F. bantamweight, the W.B.C. super-bantamweight, and the W.B.C. featherweight.

⁸⁹ “Down Under” is a colloquial term which is variously interpreted either to refer to Australia and New Zealand, or Australia alone. In the context of its usage in this study, it refers to Australia. The term comes from the fact that these countries are located in the Southern Hemisphere, “below” many other countries on the globe.

that the fight would bring Fenech a title in a fourth weight class⁹⁰ and a new level of recognition and box-office influence.

At the boxing arena Fenech was cheered on by about 300 flag-waving and banner-carrying Aussies who has flown to the U.S.A. to support their hero. However, did their hero invite the wrong date (Azumah Nelson) to his “out-dooring” and debut party in the U.S.A.? The fight, which was refereed by Joe Cortez, took place at the Mirage Hotel and Casino, in Las Vegas, Nevada. Ultimately, it was declared a draw to the disappointment of the challenger. How did the fight go?

From the opening bell, the champion met the challenger’s onrushing punches with his own ripping jabs and hooks and won the first two rounds, after succeeding in making the challenger to miss a number of chances to do real damage.

In round three, Fenech clearly made the fight on his terms. He “bulled” the champion into the ropes and “chiselled away” with both hands into any space he could hit. Many of his punches were blocked by the champion’s arms and shoulders, but, undaunted, he kept on throwing. The Ghanaian fought back furiously – at one point, he landed four consecutive left uppercuts on the Australian’s chin – but the challenger refused to take as much as a single backward step. By the end of the round, however, the challenger’s face was a bloody mess.

The next three rounds saw the champion fighting with his back to the ropes in a neutral corner, with the challenger digging in and firing away

⁹⁰ This was a feat which boxing greats like Sugar Ray Leonard, Thomas Hearns and Roberto Duran had accomplished.

but failing to make any clean landings. “I love the ropes,” said the champion, after the bout.⁹¹ The champion bobbed, weaved and reciprocated with uppercuts and hooks, while resting his legs. During the course of round six, he abandoned the corners and did a lot of circling and jabbing. Fenech chased and pressurized him. The strategy started to wear down the champion. Noting that he was tired in round ten, his corner-men “stole” some important rest for him by applying an old trick in boxing. They kept searching for his mouth-guard which they appeared to have misplaced. Such an antic kept the next round from resuming on time, thus allowing the champion to get some rest. It is interesting to note that for most part of the fight, the champion surprisingly fought with his back to the ropes in the corners. Why? Aware that Fenech was a good boxer “with abundant stamina” and “punched faster than any boxer in the world,”⁹² the champion later confessed that he developed that tactic to help him to neutralize the fighting verve of the challenger. He explained, in simple terms, the relevance of the strategy he used in that fight, to a group of orphans and their teachers in Accra, who visited to donate money and other essentials. Disclosing, among other things, his tactics to his audience, he divulged that: “. . . Therefore, when fighting such a boxer [Fenech], [“with abundant stamina” and fast punches] one has to devise a strategy to counteract that prowess, and [so] anytime we went into the corner, it was to wear him down.”⁹³

⁹¹ See *Jeff Fenech vs. Azumah Nelson 1 [6/6]*, YouTube, (8: 01 minutes), uploaded by Ibhof 2, January 3, 2010, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=omhxIC_QO_w&feature=related (Information was retrieved on December 27, 2010).

⁹² Frank Mensah, “Azumah, the Modern Hero,” *G.S.*, March 24-30, 1992, p. 3.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

The final twenty seconds in the final round saw Fenech labelling the tired champion with an avalanche of punches that nearly crumpled the champion's knees as the fight proceeded to the final bell. Fenech continued to swarm strongly, and Azumah Nelson had to do all he could just to stay on his feet until the bell was tolled for the end of the fight. Ferdie Pacheco,⁹⁴ commentating for American T.V., summed up the wild and sensational exchanges from the two boxers during the final twenty seconds to the end of the fight best: "Azumah is fighting for memory – but it is now history!"⁹⁵

This impressive finish in the final round saved Fenech from the first loss in his career as it earned him the final round, 10-9, on the scorecards of all the three judges. Azumah, debatably won, but it was mightily close. It is worth noting that his wife died in the middle of his preparatory exercises to fight Fenech and, over the years, he has been honest to admit that that incident took his mind elsewhere as he fought. He was devastated by the loss, and naturally was psychologically unstable and not focused. Moreover, he, after the fight, offered a unique excuse of his lack of stamina and strength in the fight. He disclosed that among other difficulties, such as an aching elbow, he had also been sick with malaria up until just ten days before the fight, and that accounted for his lack of vigour and endurance throughout the match. What was commendable was that he managed to

⁹⁴ Ferdie Pacheco was a doctor, boxing television analyst, writer, screenwriter, novelist, and painter. He was the corner-man for multiple boxing champions, the most famous being Muhammad Ali, for whom he was also a personal physician. Beginning in the late 1970s, Pacheco was a T.V. boxing analyst for several networks in the U.S.A. He was also known as "The Fight Doctor."

⁹⁵ See *Jeff Fenech vs. Azumah Nelson I [6/6]*, YouTube, (8: 01 minutes), uploaded by Ibhof 2, January 3, 2010, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=omhxIC_QO_w&feature=related (Information was retrieved on December 27, 2010).

fight Fenech through the whole twelve rounds to retain the title, in that keenly contested bout, which was judged by Jerry Roth, Dave Moretti and Miguel Donate.

The judgment of a draw attracted a refrain of boos from the Aussie crowd. Fenech showed his disdain, right in the ring, for the verdict by verbally lamenting his displeasure and throwing his arms in the air to symbolise his lack of trust for the judges.⁹⁶ Apparently moved by the tears of Fenech and in his bid to console him, Don King stated in the ring, when Ferdie Pacheco interviewed Fenech, that there was no loser in the fight and that there should be a return match.⁹⁷

Apparently one of the judges scored the bout 115-113 in Fenech's favour. However, another judge scored the fight for Nelson by a margin of 116-112, while the third judge had it at 114-114, hence the draw. The Ghanaian retained the title and denied the Australian the possibility of becoming a four-division champion. For many disappointed Australians, it was probably the most controversial boxing decision of that year.

Returning to his residence at the Sheffield Inn Hotel in Las Vegas, his bruised face was painful but that did not hurt more than the thought that he did not win the fight in the afternoon. Watching a video of the fight, his emotional pain exacerbated as he thought that he had been robbed in that fight. He, believing some chicanery had gone on, lamented on the morrow of the fight that: "What more do they (judges) want me to do?" Reasonably,

⁹⁶ See Jeff "Marrickville Mauler" Fenech vs Azumah "The Professor" Nelson" 1 (part 6), YouTube, (6:41 minutes), uploaded by mhagler91491, June 18, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NaEalvvU-k&feature=related> (Information was retrieved on December 27, 2010).

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

he believed that some “underhandedness” had taken place among the judges.

Incidentally, with many boxing aficionados advocating for an immediate rematch, Fenech also, at a press conference, boldly declared that: “Fight Azumah tomorrow, I will.” He disclosed that he wished to go to Australia “to think about what I want to do,” and with alacrity, he succinctly stated his ultimate dream that he “definitely want to get Azumah Nelson’s stardom [in a rematch].”

Although, the fight was closely fought throughout, with neither of the fighters ever truly being in control, it seemed that a general agreement among most Aussies and some boxing observers was that Fenech should have won. Others, including the fight’s commentator Pacheco, thought that Fenech was in the lead by a wide margin, and Don King, it was reported, believed that Fenech had been in the lead in the fight in Las Vegas.⁹⁸

Meanwhile as Azumah Nelson nursed his injured elbow, in the months that followed the Las Vegas episode, Fenech, whose fame as a valiant fighter was growing in the world of professional boxing in the U.S.A., repeatedly lamented on Australian T.V. about the verdict of the judges, and implied that the champion’s promoter fixed the match. While some of the media applauded him and showered him with praise, worthy of an all-time great, others suggested that Azumah Nelson should consider retirement. It was reported that such allegations of chicanery and the prescription of retirement to the Ghanaian boxer, vexed the Ghanaian

⁹⁸ “Family Member Reveals the Secret behind Azumah’s Victory,” *Gossip* (hereafter *T.G.*), March 4-10, 1992, p. 1, 3.

boxer⁹⁹ and made him resolve that in a rematch, which he had already agreed to, he would discipline Fenech. His handlers formally accepted a rematch and signed the contract for the fight, which, it was reported, promised to give Azumah Nelson about one million dollars.¹⁰⁰ The bout was set for March 1, 1992.

A Father and Son Affair: Azumah Nelson Defeats Jeff Fenech - 1992

By the way, there was a most surprising aspect of the deal, which made many Ghanaian fans to question the intentions of Azumah Nelson. Surprisingly, as if to grant every potential advantage to the challenger, the champion agreed that the rematch should manifest in the neighbourhood of Fenech's home. Naturally, many Ghanaian fans "had their hearts in their mouths," when Melbourne, Australia was chosen as the venue for the fight. Many must have thought about and questioned the inner rationale in the champion's decision to take the title to Melbourne in the hope of defending it in the backyard of that avowed opponent of his. Was it about the attractiveness of the prize money involved or was he going there to allow himself to be beaten to substantiate a rumoured behind-the-scene arrangement between the "bosses" of the two boxers? On the balance it seemed to most concerned fans that Melbourne was a dangerous terrain for him to go and fight. Consequently, the *Graphic Sports* newspaper reported, that "genuine concern was expressed in hundreds of letters" that inundated its offices in Ghana, "warning Azumah not to dare fight in Australia."¹⁰¹ However, what was the self-confident champion doing or thinking when he

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ See Samuel Kissiedu, "Azumah – A Professor Indeed!" *G.S.*, March 3-9, 1992, p. 1 and 5.

decided to fight in Australia? What was his game plan? It appeared that he knew what he was doing and had a game plan. Azumah Nelson recounted that:

I wanted the world to know that I was the best. I knew that Fenech could not beat me. I was not fit the first time. I had emotional problems and could hardly concentrate. My elbow was sore and could not hit my target properly and effectively but even with such problems, I managed to go the full twelve rounds with him. By the time we agreed to fight again, I was okay and had become focused. I was ready¹⁰²

Moreover,

I wanted to beat him this time round in his own country. For this second fight I wanted to avoid any arguments. I wanted to be my own judge. You know I was carrying my own judges – my fist and punches – to Melbourne. I was determined to K.O. him to cut short any twelve rounds lap, which could possibly make another hotly [debated and] disputed decision.¹⁰³

The concern of his Ghanaian fans that he was risking his title was so strong that, according to the champion, Rawlings, even called him to the presidential residence and, showing concern, asked him if he was sure of what he was doing. To this enquiry, the champion replied that he wanted to go, not because of any money involved, but to K.O. Fenech to prove his greatness.¹⁰⁴ He, confidently, promised the Head of State that he would defeat the challenger. Confident in the boxer, the politician encouraged him to go to Australia and defend the title.¹⁰⁵

Before going to Australia, the champion spent some time in Spain to train, psyche himself well, and put himself in good shape. The fight was

¹⁰² Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ See interview of Azumah Nelson in, *Zoom Zoom – The Professor: The career of Azumah Nelson, D.V.D., op.cit.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

very important to him and the premium he placed on his preparation for the fight thus made him to cancel all merriments for his Christmas holidays of 1991.¹⁰⁶ “My coach and my managers suggested that I should go to Spain, because I liked it there when I fought Mustapha, to prepare.”¹⁰⁷ He also undertook a surgical operation there on January 7. The surgical operation, which drained a pool of fluid, which had accumulated in the joint of his elbow and had caused him much pain in his first fight with Fenech, strengthened his arm.

Leaving Ghana, even in spite of Christmas, was apparently therapeutically and tactically good for him and his preparation. This was because Spain kept him away from extraneous distractions in his home country, and shielded him from familiar images that could remind him of the agony of the loss of his wife in Ghana. The retreat therefore enabled the champion to keep a sharp mental focus of his training and the task ahead and also to physically recuperate well.

Prior to the fight the challenger made audacious and outrageous declarations like: “The only way they’re going to take [Nelson] home to Ghana is in a body bag.”¹⁰⁸ The champion who had trained hard, reoriented himself emotionally and psychologically, and was generally in top shape confidently responded: “Tell Fenech he is playing with fire, and it will burn him.”¹⁰⁹ Ultimately, the champion defeated the challenger in the second

¹⁰⁶ “Family Member Reveals the Secret behind Azumah’s Victory,” *op.cit.*

¹⁰⁷ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

¹⁰⁸ James B. Roberts and Alexander G. Skutt, *The Boxing Register: International Boxing Hall of Fame Official Record Book*, 4th edition (revised), Ithaca, New York, U.S.A: McBooks Press Incorporated, 2006, p. 377.

¹⁰⁹ Tom Duffy, “Nelson-Fenech Revisited,” *Fight Beat*, boxing forum online posting, n.d. htt

encounter. How did the fight go?

Azumah Nelson, who was determined to erase the ghosts of the match in Las Vegas, set out to do just that in Fenech's country. He arrived at the Tullamarine Airport in Melbourne, with a small entourage. After receiving a modest welcome from his fans at the airport, he quickly settled in and committed himself to some warm up training for the fight. His training sessions attracted many of Fenech's fans, but the fans that routinely came to watch his training did not intimidate him. "I want to prove to the whole world that I won the fight [in Las Vegas]. That is why I came for the rematch . . . I mean let me tell you, I am professor of boxing. What I can do Fenech cannot do half, that is why I am back to prove to you [Australian fans] I am the best," was one of the ways in which he verbalised his purpose for being in Australia to the sports scribes and media. Declaring that: "I am gonna knock him out 'cos my punches are heavier than his punches . . . first fight I did not feel his punches" Moreover, he promised the boxing fans in Australia that although he was giving Fenech "another chance," the fight would not go beyond round seven.¹¹⁰

Incidentally, the history of rematches after draws in international boxing was a very special and interesting one. Noticeably, the history of Championship Rematch fights, on the eve of the rematch for Azumah Nelson and Jeff Fenech, revealed that challengers had won eight of fifteen times after a draw. Only twice, after a draw had a rematch resulted in a

[p://www.fightbeat.com/article_detail.php?AT=197](http://www.fightbeat.com/article_detail.php?AT=197) (Information was retrieved on December 31, 2010).

¹¹⁰ *Nelson vs Fenech Highlights II*, YouTube, (3:21 minutes), uploaded by Throwinthetowel, July 18, 2008, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V74Zjq40_Yc (Information was retrieved on December, 31, 2010).

second draw. The first happened when Jimmy Barry fought Casper Leon for the world bantamweight title on May 30, 1898 and December 29, 1898. Both ended in twenty round draws. The second happened when Harry Lewis fought Willie Lewis for the world welterweight title on February 19, 1910 and April 23, 1910. Both twenty-five round bouts ended in draws.

Was Fenech going to repeat these historic events, and make history by drawing again with Azumah Nelson? Well the odds for a draw in Fenech's engagement were 33-1. Considering how prepared both fighters were for victory – victory that they sought to use to erase the ghost from Las Vegas – a draw was highly unlikely.

The fight, which took place at the Princes Park Football Ground, in Melbourne, Victoria, had Arthur Mercante as the referee. Harry Gibbs, Tom Kaczmarek, and Rudy Ortega were the judges. Before the fight Fenech, who in interviews had repeatedly said “draws doesn't [sic] mean anything” and “no pressure on me” promised his fans that: “I am fighting for the whole country; I will get the job done.”

Conversely, the champion dominated the fight. He put Fenech down twice in the first and second rounds. He again floored him with a flurry of punches in round eight. Urged on by a cheering crowd of more than 30,000 Fenech tried to climb to his feet but the referee decided to save him from further punishment and possibly prevent any irreversible bodily damage to the Aussie. “I decided to give him a chance to recover but he could not, he couldn't take any more [beating]” referee Mercante recalled.¹¹¹ Fenech was thus stopped, completely and totally, in round eight.

¹¹¹ See “Azumah stops Fenech . . . in Round 8,” *P.D.G.*, March 2, 1992, pp. 1, 8.

This spectacular stoppage, which made the scoring work of the judges an easy one, was surprisingly referred to by *The Ring* as “Upset of the Year 1992.” It however, beats logical comprehension how such a well-executed victory from an accomplished boxer and a champion could be described as an upset. It was not as if Azumah Nelson, who had an impressive resume of victories, did not say that he would stop Fenech. He said it and he did it completely. Noticeably, the victory devastated and left Fenech with bodily pains and a battered face, and rendered his fans heartbroken.¹¹² It actually and literally made Mrs. Fenech, who watched the fight from the ringside, to shed tears and weep beside her ego-shattered husband to symbolise their pain and anguish.¹¹³ Azumah Nelson was an ace fighter and so his victory should not have come as a surprise to *The Ring*. Well it proves that many boxing pundits and Aussies thought that the champion would lose to Fenech. However, the champion proved them wrong and shocked his critics and doubters. “The Australians laughed at me,” said the champion, “but I showed them,” he charged.

Estimated to have been viewed by 120 million viewers in the U.S.A., Britain, France, Spain, Thailand, the whole of South America, and the Scandinavian countries,¹¹⁴ the fight, which was also watched by thousands in Africa and Oceania, commenced in horrible weather conditions. Call it “Rumble in the Pond,” it took place on rain-hit canvas. Fenech who was 27 years old was the younger of the two contestants. Wearing black trunks, black shoes and black socks his entry into the arena

¹¹² Felix Abayateye, “Azumah – All Time Great,” *P.D.G.*, March 3, 1992, p. 15.

¹¹³ Samuel Kissiedu, “Azumah-A Professor Indeed!” *op.cit.*, p. 1.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 5.

was heralded by a tumultuous noise of welcome from his home crowd. He had no smile on his face and barely acknowledged the wild cheers that heralded his entry. Contrarily, the entry of the champion was greeted with boos from Australians, which continued when the ring announcer Ray Connelly, formally introduced him to the spectators. However, as this episode unfolded, the few dancing and rain-drenched Ghanaian fans around cheered him.

Approximately 34 years old the champion looked very trimmed and confident. He had in fact marched assertively to enter the ring to an audible Christian gospel song, of the Ghanaian duo called Tago Sisters, which played in the background on the loud speakers of a public address system. Noticeably wearing an all-white robe, he walked majestically to the cool tempo of the song, which had inspirational lyrical lines like, “*Amen, Amen, I am not moved by what I see, Hallalujah. I am not moved by what I feel, Hallalujah... Amen. . .*” He wore on his head a typical Ghanaian-styled crown, studded with pieces of golden buttons, of an indigenous chief.¹¹⁵ His shorts had the national colours – Red, Yellow, Green and Black, in it. He silently recited some words to himself.¹¹⁶ Considering his Christian orientation and faith in God, the recitation was possibly a prayer, (the Lord’s Prayer or Psalm 23 maybe) or words of affirmation to invigorate his psyche. Whether they were prayers or words of affirmation, the boxer’s proverbial excellence in boxing, and the success that ultimately crowned his efforts in that engagement with Fenech were, without a doubt, products

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

of long years of sustained self-sacrifice, discipline, and devotion to his chosen career. These are what make legends.

It must have surprised spectators to see him wearing a beautiful crown which was studded with star-shaped buttons of gold. Clearly that ornament was a West Africa-derived indigenous symbol of political authority, and in Ghana, such adornments were customarily worn by some chiefs within some of the indigenous polities. So what was he signifying? Was he possibly telling the world, Fenech, and Australia that he was the chief or king or mantse or *ohene*¹¹⁷ of boxing? It is possible that he was sending a symbolic message to the world that he was truly the Boxing-*hene*¹¹⁸ (Chief of Boxing), another title by which he was known in Ghana by his numerous fans. Incidentally, that title was conferred on him, by S.W.A.G., in 1989.¹¹⁹

Rain was pouring over the canvas from the top of a gazebo-like structure set over the ring, which was pitched in the middle of the football field, for the fight. Between the rounds of the fight, a group of assistants went and mopped the canvas. The big Aussie crowd which was hopeful of a victory for its homeboy, defied the strong March rain, and stood in the cold Australian torrents under “brollies” and in ponchos and anoraks. The few Ghanaian fans were also there in the rain. Many Ghanaians in Ghana remained “glued” to their television either in their cozy rooms and homes or outside in the streets and cinema houses.

The rain in Melbourne just would not stop, and the second knock

¹¹⁷ *Ohene* is an Akan word which means an indigenous chief.

¹¹⁸ *Hene* is the short form of *Ohene*.

¹¹⁹ Frank Mensah, “Azumah – A Real King of the Ring,” *G.S.*, March 3-9, 1992, p. 4.

down of Fenech seemed partly the result of the slippery surface.¹²⁰ In round one the two boxers “sized” themselves up. They met at the centre of the ring and Fenech was the first to attack. It was a left, which was aimed at the mid-section of the champion. However, it did not land. They traded in body punches and went into a clinch. Midway the champion dominated with crisp, powerful left jabs and right hooks. The boxers went into a clinch again. Fenech lowered his guard and his opponent pumped three left jabs and a booming right to the Aussie’s head. It sent him to the canvas, which was followed by the mandatory count. Fenech recovered and attacked, but his opponent gained the upper hand with some good left and right combinations. Fenech clinched and the bell tolled to end round one.

In round two the champion sent some dictating and telling punches into the body of Fenech, which made the challenger to lower his guard to fight back. The challenger also landed some good shots, and went into a clinch with his opponent. The early part of the round proved to be “a give-and-take affair.” Fenech, at a point, ducked low to avoid punishment. The boxers went into a neutral corner and exchanged wild punches. Although Azumah Nelson missed on many occasions with a strong right, he managed to bring a swell to the left eye of Fenech. Approximately twenty-six seconds to the end of round two, Fenech, who must have been feeling dizzy by an early powerful right punch and multiple combinations, easily slipped on the puddle on the canvas and fell. But he got up. The second and third rounds, which were full of punishment for Fenech, were the

¹²⁰ The video replay of the incident indicates that the second fall was more of a slip than from a punch.

champion's. They did most of the fighting of round three in the corner, with the champion's back in it. He frustrated the "brawling" challenger with his high guard and prevented him from landing good point giving shots. Intense was the frustration in that round that Fenech in frustration put his knee, in karate-style, into the lower abdomen of his opponent when the bell tolled to end the round

In rounds four, five, and six Fenech's fighting tenacity received thunderous cheers from the crowd when the champion slowed down his fighting pace to, perhaps, tactically conserve energy. Fenech suffered from a barrage of K.O.-searching punches from his opponent in the last seconds of round six but the bell was tolled before his opponent could do any damage to him. After having a loose hand bandage tightened, Azumah Nelson resumed strong fighting with Fenech in round seven. Manipulating and directing his energy, or *chi*¹²¹ into the flurry of punches he unleashed, the sound of the champion's breathing and respiration: "hi, hi, hi . . ." could be audibly heard. Fenech's, which backed his punches, retorted with the sound: "who, who, who . . ." As if the boxers intended to create a melodic rhythm with their breath, an interesting rhythm: hi, who, hi, who . . . became audible as the two traded punches and battled for glory. After landing some early powerful shots, Fenech, won the round seven.

The champion attacked ferociously in round eight. He threw some wicked combinations, as he cornered Fenech. Fenech finally freed himself and cleverly put his opponent in the corner. The bout reached a crucial

¹²¹ In Chinese medicine and philosophy, *chi*, or (*qi*) is the energy or life force of the universe, believed to flow round the body and to be present in all living things. The manipulation of chi is the basis of acupuncture and Chinese martial arts.

stage when Fenech became dazed by the punches from his contender. He started to throw a series of desperate “search-and-destroy” lefts. Fenech started to drool and like the flash of lightning and power of a thunderbolt a wicked right from Azumah Nelson dropped Fenech. The referee stepped in. Fenech said that he could continue after the mandatory count. The fighting resumed and Azumah Nelson quickly unleashed multiple left, right, left, right punches which landed beautifully on target. To save Fenech from further punishment and damage, the referee stepped in and stopped the fight.

After the fight, the champion, who had fulfilled his prophecy to stop Fenech, was still full of excitement when Ferdie Pacheco interviewed him in the ring. “The Professor took the student to school,” Pacheco said. The champion responded that: “That’s right. I told . . . them I will teach him. . . . Now that I knock him out, like I said before “I will beat the guy and then after I beat him, I will show him his mistakes”.” Pacheco mentioned that the champion’s “left jab was a thing of beauty and in control of the fight.” With his confidence boosted, the champion, in the post-match interview, which was monitored on the G.B.C. T.V., said that: “That’s right. You know that is why I [am] call[ed] Professor. You can’t . . . nobody can name you Professor without nothing. They know the reason why they name me Professor.” Having projected himself as a boxer cum “educationist,” by describing himself as “the Professor,”¹²² an accolade, which thence gained international popularity, and adding that: “Now that I have beaten him, I

¹²² Felix Abayateye, “Azumah – All Time Great,” *op.cit.*

[the Professor] will teach him [the student] his mistakes,”¹²³ the champion dared Whitaker to fight him again. Azumah Nelson, who, like Fenech, earned more than U.S. \$750,000, said that: “I want to prove to Whitaker that I am the best.”¹²⁴ He mentioned to the Australia press that he was ready to fight Whitaker in a rematch for his W.B.C. and I.B.F. lightweight titles.¹²⁵ Apart from raising these concerns, the super-featherweight champion praised Fenech for his courage and said that if he relinquished the title, he was sure that the Aussie would become the next holder.

Comparing his victory over Fenech to a “father” imparting his experience to a “son” the fighter from Ga-Mashie declared that: “I know better than the guy . . . Like I told you before, the fight is (was) like a father and son [act].” Insinuating that Fenech had, prior to the fight, been arrogant and pompous, which had cost him, he mentioned that: “When your son is fond of misbehaving you have to check him.”¹²⁶ When Pacheco, during the in-ring post-match interview, told the “game loser” Fenech that the fight was “almost like a professor teaching a student today because his left jab was so educated,” Fenech replied: “I have never underestimated him . . . he is a great champion and he proved it.”

In a spirit of sportsmanship, the champion said some comforting and encouraging words to Fenech. Saying that he was his friend and he loved him, but had to beat him “because it was business,” the champion suavely and diplomatically advised Fenech not to retire from boxing. He told him that: “Don’t stop boxing because I am going to move up to take

¹²³ “Azumah Nelson Demolishes Fenech,” *op.cit.*

¹²⁴ “Azumah stops Fenech,” *op.cit.*

¹²⁵ Azumah Nelson Demolishes Fenech,” *op.cit.*

¹²⁶ Felix Abayateye, “Azumah – All Time Great,” *op.cit.*

Pernell Whitaker's title and after that the super-featherweight division will be yours. No one can beat you in that division."¹²⁷ Feeling better and soothed by the guidance from the "legend" and "professor" of boxing, Fenech nodded in agreement to that observation.

Assuming that prior to the fight Fenech envisaged a walkover and thought that he would have a victory against a "rusty" and old boxer, who, perhaps, was looking for a big pension cheque, then, naturally, he must have felt, after he suffered a defeat, that he was lured into the fight by a false sense of security and advantage of age. He must have regretfully thought to himself "I thought wrong after all," because at the age of about 34 years, the champion was able to exude against the challenger, the same effective power he radiated against Wilfredo Gomez when he fought him at the age of 26 years.

Unlike their first engagement in Las Vegas, the champion dominated the second fight even in mix-ups, which was an area that Fenech was known to be dreadful. Was the champion not growing old? Perhaps he was not. Having glorified his legendary status with a great victory over Fenech, was he not now ready for retirement? No, he was not. Having disclosed to the world of professional boxing that he wanted to fight Whitaker, Azumah Nelson, obviously, felt he was not.

The victory inspired wide jubilation in Ghana. At Bukom and Gashie in general, fans took to the streets with drums, whistles and rattles, singing kolomashi and *djama* songs in praise of their idol,¹²⁸ "homeboy,"

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ "Azumah Nelson Demolishes Fenech," *op.cit.*

tabilo, and hero. There were loud cheers at Adedemkpo and Timber Market as the community of men, women and children sung and kept vigil with huge bonfires to celebrate his victory.

As highlighted, the indigenous setting of Ga-Mashie was one which was famous for composing songs to praise its warriors and boxing heroes. We noted how songs were composed for Roy Ankrah, Attuquaye (Atukwei) Clottey, and D.K. Poison. Consequently, for his praise, songs were composed for Azumah Nelson, when he became a professional world boxing champion. To celebrate his victory over Fenech, the existing fan clubs of the boxer in Accra, namely the Adedemkpo Azumah Nelson Fan Club, and the *Kaanye mo bi*¹²⁹ Zoom Zoom Fan Club, sung their songs of praise to celebrate their hero. These included the famous one in *kolomashi*, which went this wise:

Azumah baayi le (2x)
Bo fee bo ni ebaafee
Azumah baayi le jogbann

Translates as:

Azumah will beat him (name of the contender) (2x)
Whatever he will do
Azumah will beat him very well [severely].

Incidentally, this song, which became a common song in the boxing circles of Ga-Mashie, was commonly sung by members and non-members of his support base to boost his morale before he fought. It was also used in an affectionate way by his admirers to praise him when he won fights,

¹²⁹ *Kaanye mo bi* is a Ga phrase. Literally it translates as “Do not hate someone.”

and/or visited his old neighbourhoods in Ga-Mashie.¹³⁰

Many of his fans at Mamprobi, kept vigil at the popular “Methodist Park,” and the well-known beer pub called “The Hawk,” to watch his fight, which was shown on the national T.V. network. They joyously celebrated his victory. Some joined other fans from parts of Accra, to proudly sing and patriotically wave the Ghanaian flag in street carnivals and processions on different major streets in Accra.¹³¹ A feeling of patriotism generally engulfed most of the masses. Additionally, the feeling of jubilation was a general one among the people. As it was explained by one Mr. Charles Nkansah Oware, in an interview with the *Ghanaian Times* on that Sunday, jubilation and celebration was imperative because the boxer kept the flag of Ghana still flying high.¹³² This observation of the fan was correct, because from the arena of boxing, it was evident that the champion was contributing in projecting the popularity and strengthening the position of Ghana on the international diplomatic scene. The fan proudly added that: “After the match a lot of Australians will purchase a globe or an atlas to locate where Ghana is, something they will never do under normal circumstances or if Fenech had won.”¹³³

The ecstatic demonstrations of joy by Ghanaians in their thousands, across the country, to celebrate the victory, were testaments that Ghanaians, in general, enjoyed the boxer and cherished his accomplishments. Undoubtedly, his victories naturally gave happiness and satisfaction to his

¹³⁰ Kwaku Dua Bannerman, alias Franko Nero, 47 years old, a friend of Azumah Nelson since his childhood days, personal interview at Timber Market, Accra, March 14, 2009.

¹³¹ “Azumah Nelson Demolishes Fenech,” *op.cit.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*

fans, who apparently craved for more. Incidentally, the victory also gladdened the heart of some non-Ghanaian residents in Ghana. It was reported that some Liberian refugees, numbering about hundred and more, who, as a result of a civil war in Liberia, were domiciled in Ghana, at the Buduburam camp, in the Central Region, kept vigil to support the boxer. Making use of a 16-inches "black and white" T.V., which was powered by a car battery, because of a general cut in electricity supply to the camp, they cheered the champion during the fight. Shouting slogans like "Kill him Azumah," "Finish Him Off," "we Ghanaians are the very best,"¹³⁴ the boxing excellence of the fighter made them to feel proud to be in Ghana, and honoured to be part of the cheering Ghanaian community. Tapping into the democratised spirit of "Ghanaianess," they celebrated with other Ghanaians after the bout. Indubitably, the champion's victory made them to feel proud as Africans, and "honorary" citizens of Ghana.

The jubilation and satisfaction that the victory bequeathed to Ghanaian and non-Ghanaians proved that a legendary position for Azumah Nelson, within the boxing and social histories of Ghana was assured. Whether or not he, like Thomas "Hitman" Hearns, Sugar Ray Leonard, and Roberto Duran, would advance and succeed in clinching, a fourth title, there was no doubt that his fistic abilities in the featherweight and super-featherweight divisions, was going to be venerated worldwide.

His fight with Fenech, similar to the early ones, elicited the Ghana government's support. It showed interest in it and consequently

¹³⁴ Emmanuel Geeza Williams, "Refugees were behind Azumah," *G.S.*, March 3-9, 1992, p. 5.

congratulated the champion for “winning again for Ghana.” It was politically imperative and wise for the government to show support to his fights and previous victories, it did same for his contest and victory in Australia. This was because his victories had the potential to serve, and had, apparently, provided certain conditions in the country, which were necessary and important for socio-economic growth and the running of the country by the government. The conditions which his victories provided included spontaneous periods of general jubilation and we-feeling among Ghanaians. They also engineered a sense of unity among the people as they collectively rejoiced in his winnings as Ghanaians. Serving as recreational outlets, his fights also provided relaxation and invigoration to stressed minds and bodies in Ghana. Such invigoration was necessary for the production of a healthy working force for productive labour in the country. Aware of the political importance of the boxer’s image as a national icon and treasure to the nation, and the socio-economic benefits and relevance of his victories to nation building, the government, which had wished him success before the fight, sent him a congratulatory message for his victory.

In addition, Amarkai Amarteifio, the former Secretary for Youth and Sports, “doffing off his hat” for him, wrote, “Congratulations, Mighty Warrior. You have not only taken us back to San Juan, Puerto Rico, you have avenged the robbery of Attuquaye Clottey in Australia many years ago. Well done.”¹³⁵ But how and why did a vengeance of a robbery associated with the name of Clottey emerge in the goodwill message? Incidentally, the victory was interpreted, by some boxing fans, like

¹³⁵ “Congrats Azumah,” *P.D.G.*, March 2, 1992, p. 15.

Amarteifio, as a significant national victory, because in another interesting context, it wiped away a robbery that was visited on the professional boxing career of the former trainer of Azumah Nelson and Ghanaian professional boxing in the 1950s. So, did the champion, by his victory, avenge his former trainer? To some minds like Amarteifio, he did that. In explaining how these incidents relate to each other, the former secretary recalled an incident in the history of Ghana professional boxing, which puts the victory, fittingly, in the context of vengeance for the nation. Apparently, the incident was unknown to many young enthusiasts of boxing in 1992. However, for those, like Amarteifio, who had followed Ghana boxing since the 1940s and 1950s, it was an incident that they could remember. In the late 1950s Attuquaye Clottey, according to the story from Amarteifio, fought John [sic] (George) Barnes in Australia, three times¹³⁶ for a welterweight Commonwealth title,¹³⁷ but, according to Amarteifio, was robbed on each occasion.¹³⁸ This alleged robbery of a Ghanaian boxer, was a painful incident, which, in the estimation of Amarteifio, the victory over Fenech avenged.

Business firms and companies and other corporate entities in the country, such as the big and plush Labadi Beach Hotel in Accra¹³⁹ also sent the champion congratulatory messages. Some of such messages, which

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ From records (See: Fighting record of Attu[quaye] Clottey, *BoxRec Boxing Encyclodaedia*, on http://boxrec.com/list_bouts.php?human_id=32299&cat=boxer) it appears that Attuquaye Clottey and John Barnes met twice to compete for the Commonwealth welterweight title. The first fight took place at the Sydney Stadium, Sydney on November 28, 1955. Clottey lost on points in that 15 rounds bout which was refereed by Vic Patrick. The second one took place at Sydney Stadium, on August 12, 1957. Again in that 15 rounds match that was refereed by Vic Patrick, Clottey lost by points.

¹³⁸ "Congrats Azumah," *op.cit.*

¹³⁹ "Congratulations," *G.T.*, March 2, 1992, p. 7.

associated those groups with national interest in boxing and the boxing idol conspicuously published in Ghanaian newspapers. By creating and forging an association with the iconic image of the champion, through the newspapers, such commercial entities, were in a diplomatic way advertising their image to the public and promoting their commercial interests, through the “congratulatory” cum business advertisement messages in the newspapers. Interestingly, some of the numerous admirers and well-wishers of the champion suggested, in the newspapers, to the government to honour him with the Order of the Volta or any of the distinguished state awards for excellence and merit.¹⁴⁰

Meanwhile, some unsatisfied Australian fans and promoters wanted and requested for a second rematch before the end of 1992. Incidentally, the champion, who had become famous in Australia, on the contrary, was more interested in a lightweight contest and so an immediate match with Jeff Fenech definitely did not attract him. Estimating that a possible Azumah Nelson-Pernell Whitaker lightweight contest, in Melbourne could rake in a lot of cash, some Australian promoters immediately started to bait Azumah Nelson with prize money of about five million dollars. It was reported that one Australian promoter, who spoke to the B.B.C., revealed that each of the two fighters received over one million dollars from their fight in March, 1992. However, the promoter believed that Azumah Nelson “will earn more (than what he expects to earn) when he fights Pernell Sweet Pea Whitaker.”¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ *Christian Chronicle*, Vol. 3, No 8, 1992, p. 4.

¹⁴¹ Kwabina Menya, “I want to be a Priest,” *Weekend*, March 5-12, 1992, p. 1.

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¹⁴⁰ *Christian Chronicle*, Vol. 3, No 8, 1992, p. 4.

¹⁴¹ Kwabina Menya, “I want to be a Priest,” *Weekend*, March 5-12, 1992, p. 1.

Moreover, it was subsequently reported that Carl King and the Sydney promoter Bill Mordey had already had preliminary discussions about a possible Azumah Nelson fight in a world title doubleheader in Melbourne in the latter part of 1992 or early 1993.¹⁴² It was envisaged that he would fight for the W.B.C. lightweight title while Jeff Fenech fought for the super-featherweight title. The commerce-oriented Kings had an interest in staging another Azumah Nelson fight in Melbourne. After seeing a massive crowd of about 35,000 rain-drenched spectators watch the Azumah Nelson-Jeff Fenech fight, they naturally must have realised that there was an opportunity for making more money in the future in Melbourne especially in a doubleheader,¹⁴³ which involved the two fighters. However, it was apparent that any clash between Azumah Nelson and Whitaker could and might happen if only the latter did not vacate the lightweight title. Otherwise, Azumah Nelson would have to contest another contender, possibly Darryl Tyson from U.S.A. for the lightweight title. On the other hand it seemed that the opponent of Jeff Fenech in such an envisaged doubleheader could be either Juan "John" Molina from Puerto Rico or Gabriel Ruelas from Mexico.¹⁴⁴

Adieu My Friend! Azumah Nelson and Don King Part Ways

Although Azumah Nelson clearly showed interest in a possible immediate lightweight contest, which was proposed by the Kings, it seemed that he was also contemplating the idea of whether he should or should not maintain his professional relationship with his promoters in the

¹⁴² See "Azumah, Fenech in Melbourne Again," *G.S.*, March 3-9, 1992, pp. 1, 8.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

future. It appeared that he was and had been thinking of re-arranging his relationship with the Kings and was considering whether or not he, in the event of a fight with Whitaker, should fight under the management of the Kings. As he had told the press, immediately after defeating Fenech, he wished to fight the lightweight titlist. Hence, he nurtured a very strong desire to fight and defeat Whitaker. In fact, weeks after his fight with Fenech, he told a group of orphans that he visited at the Osu Children's Home and Tema S.O.S. Village in Ghana that: "Wherever Whitaker goes, I'll chase him, even if I hear he is at the Achimota forest [in Ghana] presently, I'll fight him there."¹⁴⁵ It sounded hilarious but the truth in it was that he meant, and was determined, to meet Whitaker. He recalled that:

Yes I needed him "badly." I wanted to beat him. [However] we never met. Formal arrangements and agreements in my camp could not be reached and therefore a subsequent contract for the fight could not go through. We have now retired. He was a great fighter. One of the best and I learnt a lot from him.¹⁴⁶

Concerning the proposed fight in Melbourne, Azumah Nelson disclosed that he would be interested in the plan by the Kings and the Sydney promoter only at the right price.¹⁴⁷ Why did he, audaciously, say that he would be interested in it only at the right price? Well, it seemed that behind all the rejoicing and euphoria which the victory over Fenech brought to the camp of Azumah Nelson, cordiality between the boxer and his administrators was not very sound. A management-oriented issue, which was likely to be resolved by judicial arbitrator, was brewing tension

¹⁴⁵ Frank Mensah, "Azumah, the Modern Hero," *op.cit.*

¹⁴⁶ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

¹⁴⁷ "Azumah, Fenech in Melbourne Again," *op.cit.*

between the boxer and Don King, even when he fought in Melbourne and so any cordial relationship that must have existed between the boxer and supervisor was disintegrating. It was reported that whilst in Melbourne for the fight with Fenech, Azumah Nelson revealed that he was considering legal action against his promoter and manager Don King.¹⁴⁸ Consequently, after the fight, the boxer left Australia for New York to litigate to and settle his legal problems with his “boss.”¹⁴⁹ The underlying factor or reason was that the boxer wanted quits – he wanted to part ways with the empire of Don King. The two had come a long way – from 1982 to 1992. Incidentally, it was reported that according to the *Daily Telegraph* of February 26, 1992, Azumah Nelson claimed that Mr. King took one third of all his winnings.¹⁵⁰ Was the boxer unhappy with his financial rewards from the promoter, or was he feeling matured to oversee his own promotions? Perhaps, Azumah Nelson, who was maturing in the world and showbiz of boxing, reasoned that he deserved more and could be given more money for his work. Nevertheless, whether or not there was grief and some dissatisfaction on the part of the boxer because of the monetary rewards he obtained from his “boss,” it was apparent that he, by March 1992, wanted out of the formal contract that had for about a decade legally enjoined their professional relationship.

In 1992, Azumah Nelson, decided to journey on his own, for he must have felt that he was capable of handling the arrangement of his own fights. It was not a bad decision after all. Growth and independence are

¹⁴⁸ “Azumah to Sue Don King?” *T.S.*, March 7, 1992, p. 16.

¹⁴⁹ Kwabina Menya, “I want to be a Priest,” *op.cit.*

¹⁵⁰ “Azumah to Sue Don King?” *op.cit.*

products of nature. Children must grow and apprentices must subsequently become masters. Regardless of grievances, it was only a likely result that Azumah Nelson, after ten years as a mentee, should feel or felt the urge to become his own “master.” After all he had passed through the stages, with different mentors and promoters, of a student, white collar, amateur, and professional boxer and had, by 1992, become matured and a “professor,” – don in his own right. And because “a don should not be under another don,” it was time for “the Professor” – Don Azumah Nelson, to be on his own from Don King and be free to take his own decisions.

Azumah Nelson – a fighter who was not afraid to risk his title and, in search of good paydays, had globetrotted and beaten opponents in their backyards – had been a key generator of funds for the promoter. Naturally, Don King must have been unhappy about his decision to become autonomous, for the boxer was an asset to whoever was promoting his fights.

The detour to New York, led the boxer to record perhaps another spectacular victory, this time in the business side of his career, over another powerful contestant – Don King – who had technically been his ally for about ten years. From 1982, Don King, assisted by Carl King and Ringcraft, remained the ultimate foreign promoter and overall boss of the boxer. Muffled animosity and discontent threw the boxer and the flamboyant African-American entrepreneur into litigation in 1992. Consequently, their professional relationship, which was described by the *Graphic Sports*, as “the 10-years old “master-slave” promotional

relation”¹⁵¹ was legally terminated, in the U.S.A., after tough negotiations. The boxer was an asset, and the promoter must have found it difficult to let him go, hence the hard nature of the negotiations. Although the negotiations were strong, the boxer maneuvered to break his relationship with the Kings and their alliance with Ringcraft. The implication of the deal was that the boxer was made “free” to assume control of his destiny in terms of managing and promoting his boxing career. In an interview with the *Graphic Sports* at his residence in Achimota, the boxer confirmed the abrogation of the contract and, reportedly, produced a letter signed by himself, Don King and a New York-based lawyer Yolanda Marlow to evidence his claim.¹⁵² The letter, it was reported, stated *inter alia* that “all promotional rights existing between Azumah [Nelson] and Don King are abrogated with effect from March 4, 1992.”¹⁵³ However, the boxer, who knew that he was still in the world of boxing and would still have other deals with Don King mentioned that he would decide whether the former managers would be still entitled to thirty-three percent of his purse.¹⁵⁴

What did this termination of the contract signify? Was the boxer trying to make a statement about his personality and career? The “parting of ways” with the Kings was an important development – a *rite de passage* – for the personal and career advancement of Azumah Nelson whose genesis in boxing had humbly started in the ghettos of Ga-Mashie. He remained in the “trenches of obscurity” of amateur and professional boxing for some time and toughened himself. For about ten years in his

¹⁵¹ Samuel Kissiedu, “Don King Frees Azumah,” G.S., March 10-16, 1992, p. 1.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

professional career as a champion boxer, he demonstrated remarkable strength in his fights, and showed devoted sacrifice and dedication to his managers. Through observation and experience he over the years studied, learnt and understood the rudiments, and workings of the boxing administration business. Subsequently, he, in 1992, believed that he had become familiar with the work of promoters, and the dynamics, shadiness, and illusions, and actualities in the business world of international professional boxing. The disengagement with the Kings, therefore, signalled the coming of age – the maturing – of Azumah Nelson as a “businessman,” who felt confident to have a strong voice in the management and direction of his boxing business and financial affairs. Additionally, his reliance on his age-old self-confidence and longstanding can-do-spirit, also gave him the verve to delink himself from a contract, which was designated as “a master-slave relationship, and ultimately end that agreement, which had existed since 1982¹⁵⁵

Grievances and personal convictions, led the one time allies to dissolve their alliance. Nevertheless, Azumah Nelson continued to see the other side as important social contacts and associates in the boxing industry. He therefore continued to maintain an amicable professional relationship with his former managers. He kept a strong respect for Don King, whom, sometime in 2008, he referred to “as a good person.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ Interview of Azumah Nelson, in Melbourne, Australia, by Peter Maniatis, former amateur boxing champion, and award winning TV host and boxing promoter. *Channel 31 KO Boxing Show*, Host: Peter Maniatis, Channel 31, Melbourne, 2008. See “Peter Maniatis interviews Azuma[h] Nelson Channel 31 KO Boxing Show” on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7jLrzuH2PI> (Information was obtained on September 23, 2010).

Whilst he was negotiating with Don King in the U.S.A., Azumah Nelson thought of quickly returning to Ghana on time to inspire another Ghanaian boxing hero, Ike "Machine Gun"¹⁵⁷ Quartey. Ike Quartey was billed to fight for the W.B.C. international light-welterweight crown, in Accra on March 7, 1992 and Azumah Nelson wanted to be around to inspire him to win. Consequently he returned to Ghana to watch the fight. He met a tumultuous and rousing welcome at the national airport. Government representatives, including Mr. E.T. Mensah, the Deputy Secretary for Youth and Sports, and Allotey (Allotei) Cofie, the Chairman of G.B.A., were at the airport to welcome him.¹⁵⁸ They praised him for his successful defence and thanked him for bringing joy and national pride to the government and people of Ghana and Africa. His family, including three of his children, members of his fan clubs, and admirers from different parts of Ghana were also at the airport, in the cool evening of Accra, to give him a resounding welcome for his gallantry.¹⁵⁹

He went ahead to have a meeting with the government officials and personnel of the media. He later went in a convoy which had the protection of state-backed dispatch motor bike rider, through the city and displayed his title to some cheering and Ghana flag-totting fans that stood by the side of some of the principal streets in the city.

Azumah Defends Title against Calvin Grove and Gabriel Ruelas, 1992-1993

Before he embarked on the tour, the champion disclosed at his

¹⁵⁷ His accolade will later change to Bazooka.

¹⁵⁸ "Azumah Back Home," *G.T.*, March 7, 1992, p. 7.

¹⁵⁹ "'Professor' Azumah is back," *T.S.*, March 7, 1992, p. 16.

meeting with the official and media personnel that he departed Ghana early to prepare for the fight against Fenech because, knowing that he would win, he felt exasperated by the popular comments, from some of his fans, that he risked losing his title in a fight in Melbourne. Like Muhammad Ali who considered himself “great,” and easily bragged in public and shouted in the ring that: “I am the Greatest” and “I am beautiful,” Azumah Nelson, who felt self-assured and considered himself a good boxer, declared that: “What can’t I do? When I was leaving . . . I told you [Ghanaians] I was going and would come back with my title; I have kept faith with you.”¹⁶⁰ He confirmed that he knew his promise was received by most Ghanaians with some doubt. When the media asked him why he had carried such a conviction he replied: “I had not been impressive since I fought that British in London called McDonnell[I] and my performance since then gave the impression I was going down.”¹⁶¹ That was the impression that Azumah Nelson thought most Ghanaians had about him before his fight in Melbourne. It was apparent that after fighting McDonnell, Azumah Nelson had an unsuccessful duel with Whitaker, a stretch with Juan La Porte, and a draw with Fenech in Las Vegas. These performances, in the estimation of many boxing fans, must have appeared as signs of and/or suggested a possible decline in the power of Azumah Nelson. The champion, however, admitted in Accra that he knew the reasons – some problems – that accounted for his low performances and so, before he fought Fenech again, he worked hard to overcome them. Asked whether he was considering

¹⁶⁰ Kwei Mensah, “The Two Dreams of Azumah,” *Ghanaian Voice* (hereafter *T.G.V.*), March 9-16, 1992, p. 12.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

retiring or not, he stated that he eventually would retire but before the retirement, he hoped and wished to see two things happening in the world of boxing. Before this question of the issue of retirement came up, in Accra, it was reported that the same enquiry, on a different trajectory of reasoning and circumstances of inquisition, emerged when he was interviewed abroad.¹⁶² In that interview with the B.B.C., on the night of the Monday that followed the day he fought Fenech, it was reported that Azumah Nelson, interestingly, mentioned that he would like to ultimately don the cassock and become a Christian priest after retiring from boxing.¹⁶³ Was that a way to atone for his “sins” for unleashing pain to contestants in the ring? No. That was not the case, because he did not perceive fighting, in the context of boxing, as sinful. It was a sport and a profession. Noticeably, within the history of boxing, his decision was not outlandish. It was similar to that of Muhammad Ali who “reaffirmed his intention to return one day to the role of minister,”¹⁶⁴ to propagate the “message of Islam in the ghettos of America.”¹⁶⁵ Moreover, it was also similar to that of the former heavyweight world champion, George Foreman, who actually became a Christian evangelist after he retired from boxing. Azumah Nelson wanted to become a priest and use that position to contribute to “fight against the injustices, immorality in the world and help curb the influence which Satan seems to be enjoying now.”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² Kwabina Menya, “I want to be a Priest,” *op.cit.*, p. 1.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ Ali A. Mazrui, “Boxer Muhammad Ali and Soldier Idi Amin as International Political Symbols: The Bioeconomics of Sport and War,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Apr., 1977), p. 195.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ Kwabina Menya, “I want to be a Priest,” *op.cit.*

But what two things did he want to see happen in boxing before he retired? He disclosed that he wanted to fight Hector “Macho” Camacho or Julio César Chávez, to see who the best was, and secondly, he wanted to see the rise of another champion from Ghana to inherit him.¹⁶⁷ However, an engagement with Camacho or Chávez never occurred before he retired. Nevertheless, Ghana apparently produced other world champions, although in comparison to Azumah Nelson, they unfortunately had shorter reigns. Hopefully, more champions who would have enduring reigns would be produced in Ghana, through the passage of time.

Significantly, the month of March in 1992, again witnessed Ghana boxing, clinching another international boxing laurel for national glory. Joy came to sports fans and the general population when Ike Quartey defeated his Filipino opponent, Dindo Canoy by a T.K.O. in round one at the Accra Sports Stadium, to clinch the vacant W.B.C. international light-welterweight (junior-welterweight or super-lightweight) title.¹⁶⁸

The victories of Azumah Nelson and Ike Quartey¹⁶⁹ gave Ghanaians, especially sports fans, a reason to smile and celebrate even though many had been “mourning” over the inability of the nation’s football team, the Black Stars, to clinch the trophy at the African Cup of Nations Tournament in Senegal in January 1992.

The intensification of the fame, national acclaim, and legendary status of Azumah Nelson by his feat in Melbourne in March was popularly

¹⁶⁷ Kwei Mensah, “The Two Dreams of Azumah,” *op.cit.*

¹⁶⁸ “W.B.C. votes Azumah Boxer of the Month,” *G.T.*, March 20, 1992, p. 7.

¹⁶⁹ After capturing the W.B.C./International title Ike Quartey defended it twice before relinquishing the title in an attempt to seize another world title. On June 4, 1994, in Levallois, France, Ike Quartey seized the W.B.A. welterweight championship by defeating the undefeated Crisanto Espana in a round eleven K.O.

celebrated. In praise of the boxer's heroism and discipline, and in acknowledgement of his excellent role, within the milieu of sports, as a national ambassador who was contributing to Ghana's diplomatic persuasions, and quest for solidarity on the international scene, J.J. Rawlings dined with him. The President invited and fêted the boxer at his official residence and office at the Christiansborg Castle, on Independence Day, March 6, 1992.¹⁷⁰

Other admirers composed songs to celebrate the boxer. Certainly, remarkable an accomplishment, the youth with no regal antecedent from Ga-Mashie, had through dedication and hard work, grown up to claim a regal and legendary position. He was now dining with "kings" and sharing jokes with "presidents." How wonderful, could one's excellence in boxing be? Having received popular acclaim and praise from political leaders, literary works like poetry, written as standing poetic ovation and for the celebration of Azumah Nelson – the Mighty Warrior – also flooded some newspapers.¹⁷¹ Produced by grateful hearts whose pride in and respect for the champion, was well beyond doubt, one of such poems, inspired by the boxer's greatness, which venerated and confirmed his person and legend said a big *Ayekoo*¹⁷² to Azumah Nelson. Written by Nana Yaw Oppong, a student of the University of Cape Coast, another poem, which featured in the *Graphic Sports* attracted an impressive readership from sports loving Ghanaians. It summed up Ghana's pride in Azumah Nelson, his excellence

¹⁷⁰ See *G.S.*, March 10-16, 1992, p. 2. See the inserted picture of Flt. Lt. J.J. Rawlings handshaking Azumah Nelson and sharing a joke with him as he congratulated him for a job well done. This was when "the Professor" met the Head of State at an Independence Day reception at the Castle, Osu, Accra.

¹⁷¹ See for example "Mighty Azumah Nelson!" *G.S.*, March 10-16, 1992, p. 2.

¹⁷² *Ayekoo* is an Akan term which stands for congratulation(s).

in boxing, victory over Fenech and his indubitable position as a legend.¹⁷³

Azumah Nelson's victory glorified the Ghana sports scene. Moreover, Ghana boxing received some other good credits and international acknowledgement in March. The W.B.C. retained their top ratings on four other Ghanaian boxers. They were the Ghana and West African bantamweight champion, Rocky Commey, the African Boxing Council (A.B.C.) featherweight champion Percy Oblitei Commey, the U.S.A.-based Commonwealth flyweight champion Alfred Kotey and former W.B.C. super-flyweight champion, Nana Yaw Konadu.¹⁷⁴

Furthermore, on the international scene, the W.B.C. also recognised the Azumah Nelson's victory as an important marker in his career and contribution to the making of his legend. The sterling boxing and superb success which came from the champion in that internationally acclaimed

¹⁷³ See *G.S.*, March 10-16, 1992. One of the poems read like this: Azumah 'Zoom Zoom' Nelson / Mighty Warrior, the Terrible Terror / You've done it, right again / In grandier [sic] style, without dispute / Your authority over FENECH / You have established unequivocally / Silencing, once and for all / His intolerable, nagging affronts: / You handed out to that raw guy / The bitterest, unforgettable lesson / Of all his boxing career - / That Boxing, at its lovely best / Is won with brain and brawn / Never on the crest of racial bigotry [sic] (bigotry) / Azumah, even in the lion's den / In down under Melbourne, Australia. / You're simply devastating. / You sent Fenech crashing down / At the very first stunning blow / With a repeat dose, in the second / 'T was a Foregone Conclusion / 'T was simply a fight, as it were / Between Master and Novice! / Yea, a fine history you recorded / In streaming Letters of Gold / AYEKOO, AZUMAH / Australia '92 ends, and / Fenech falls and falls well / Breaking equilibrium of history / Before his gods and people / Ayekoo, Zoom Zoom / Boxing Professor and Teacher / Terrible Terror and Hero / Warrior of MIGHTY FISTS / Fists that reverse one's age / Chopping a warrior of 27 / To just 7-month-old baby / Only to crawl for survival / Fists that bully and force / Noble man to kiss earth, / Happy population to cry / Confident continent to wonder / Fists that assemble millions / To tell the secret story - "Fenech the Son, Azumah the Father" / Yes, doubtless and convincing / Kind and merciful Father / Knowing the son's strength / Predicts right load to carry; / Basket of 8 rounds punches - Enough / Perhaps to Fenech, a curse / To Australia, mirage / To the world, a master piece / To Ghana, a national VICTORY / Ghana thanks you Warrior / In seconds you did it / Turning our Senegal sorrows (Because of the inability of Black Stars to win the African Cup of Nation Tournament in Senegal in January 1992) / To JOY in far away [sic] Australia / Ayekoo, well done, Professor; / Creating bluffing Jeff a dump / To paint SIKAMAN (Land of Gold i.e. Ghana) brighter / And brightest we pray to see.

¹⁷⁴ "W.B.C. votes Azumah Boxer of the Month," *op.cit.*

fight led the W.B.C. to vote him, in its ratings, as the boxer for the month of March. The ratings, which were released in Mexico, stated that the honourable award was in recognition of the champion's excellent performance against Jeff Fenech on March 1, 1992 in Melbourne, Australia.¹⁷⁵ By the way, Azumah Nelson had fought and won different bouts. Some of his winnings came through incredible knockouts including a round one K.O. However, it was his second fight with Fenech, which, having allowed the champion to "sign, seal, and deliver," his legendary position in professional boxing, received the greatest of world attentions. Hence the W.B.C's. dedication of a month to honour him and his legend.

Proudly possessing the super-featherweight title, he was generally, recognized, in Ghana, as a national treasure and legend. However, the fate of the seeming durability of the fame, pride, and health of that distinguished citizen of Ghana elicited some concerns from many of his fans in Ghana. Some opined that the champion did not have age on his side as an ally. They therefore requested, through letters to newspapers, and discussed in informal conversations, for him to retire since he had distinguished himself in his career and become a legend in the featherweight and super-featherweight divisions. Conversely, others opposed that view and claimed that he should do what he liked to do best – fight. Moreover, others were of the view that he should be honoured by the nation with a high national award. The calls that revolved around the notions of conflicting views on retirement, and honour, which continued to

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

emanate from the many quarters of boxing fans and commentators, featured in discussions in general and sports newspapers in the country. Others manifested in sports programmes and news discussions on radio and television. As underscored popular calls to the government that “Azumah Nelson should be honoured with a high national order” became audible and visible. For example, K.A. Coleman-Paitoo, a past member of G.B.A., wrote an open letter in the *Graphic Sports* to congratulate Azumah Nelson for his victory in March 1992. The writer suggested in the missive that Ghana should give the champion a fitting national honour. That, he said, would demonstrate the nation’s appreciation, and inspire sportspersons to follow the glorious steps of Azumah Nelson. He remarked that the boxer had “single-handedly” worked so assiduously and consistently to achieve fame and honour for Ghana, his motherland. Moreover the writer claimed that Azumah Nelson “has raised high the flag of Ghana throughout the world and most people who did not know of our nation’s existence have now come to hear of our dear country, Ghana.”¹⁷⁶ The writer referenced H. Gibbs, a boxing referee and judge who, for his luminary role in the sport, was given the O.B.E. (Officer of the (Order of the) British Empire, in England. Additionally, he pointed out that within the realm of soccer, knighthood was conferred on personalities like Stanley Matthews and Stanley Rous. He, therefore, pleaded with the government of Ghana to confer a high national honour on Azumah Nelson.¹⁷⁷

Incidentally, first-rate national, continental, and international

¹⁷⁶ K.A. Coleman-Paitoo, “Yes, Azumah Deserves National Honour,” *G.S.*, March 17-23, 1992, p. 2.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

honours were conferred on the “fabled” boxer. That aspect of his life and career would be treated in the next chapter.

On the issue of retirement, some concerned fans and people, also, publicly, expressed their views. For example, in a letter to the *Graphic Sports*, a fan, who was sixty years old, literally “begged” him to retire and avoid being carried away by a “world,” which knew no satisfaction. Stating, *inter alia*, that: “This world will always call for the newest record immediately after receiving the greatest record with the hope of getting a still greater record that it has already got,”¹⁷⁸ Obrempon Ahun, the writer, implored Azumah Nelson to retire because he had succeeded in reaching an enviable height in professional boxing as a “living legend,” and “monarch of his natural divisions.” The fan, who stated in the missive that the champion could pass for his son, was also concerned about the boxer’s health, and invoked Joe Frazier and his career to illustrate his concern. He disclosed that Frazier called it quits at the height of his career. Stating that Frazier gave to the boxing world the riddle: “who is the greatest of the three, Frazier, Foreman or Muhammad Ali?” he explained that Frazier and Foreman called it quits early and were better off than their compatriot Ali who, lingering on for too long, had his health destroyed through unnecessary beatings. He, therefore, advised Azumah Nelson to take a lesson from that.¹⁷⁹ Such an admonition, being one of the numerous, clearly showed that people were worried about the future of Azumah Nelson, their legend. His life and health were of concern to many. Nonetheless, such

¹⁷⁸ Obrempon Ahun, “Retire Honourably, ‘Professor’ . . . Open letter to Azumah,” *G.S.*, March 24-30, 1992, p. 2.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

calls were unable to make him to take to an immediate retirement. Fortunately, the boxer did not stay on for a long time like Ali to suffer from Parkinson disease symptoms.

The champion, apparently, was not ready to retire in 1992. He therefore proceeded to do some fighting from 1992 onwards. He wanted new fights and competitions, He craved to clinch more titles and victories and he felt and resolved to pursue such goals. But he should have known, of course, that the energetic juvenile days and age were not going to be on his side forever. Incidentally, his performance in subsequent fights clearly showed signs that his verve was gradually but surely waning.

Staying in active professional boxing he fought eight other boxers before he retired. In general the outcome and level of impact that he made in those fights showed that the boxer was on “the slide.” Maybe he should have retired, after all the warnings, but he went on to fight.

While well past his brilliant best, he remained with his “never say die” attitude and resolve. He globetrotted in search of good paydays. He defeated good fighters like Calvin “Mr. Silky Smooth” Grove, Jesse James Leija, and Gabriel Ruelas. He recalled that:

I knew I had a short time of active boxing left. I was far advanced in my thirties and knew that my body would be pressing to me to retire soon, but in my mind I just felt that I had to go on. I just loved to box so I had to box. However, nothing lasts forever. As I advanced with more fights I knew that two things were possible: I would be able to win another title and hang my gloves or another boxer would take the title from me, after all no one can be a champion forever.¹⁸⁰

However, he felt that he had some “surprises” in his punches and “up his

¹⁸⁰ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

gloves.”

It was with such a mindset that he advanced into fights, and like an “Alexander the Great” of boxing, he was determined to conquer more. Nevertheless, his great skills were subtly eroding and his magnificent punching power was slowly falling apart. Noticeably advancing in age and his power seemingly winding down, it was clear that he was risking his title. But was he also risking his health? Was he, out of love for boxing, going to let his brain absorb unnecessary and needless punishment, and like Ali, get his brain injured? No, he did not. He decided to retire from active professional boxing in 1998. Incidentally, he “returned” in 2008 and engaged in an exhibition bout with his old “rival,” and fellow retiree Jeff Fenech. The reason why he boxed in 2008 will subsequently be discussed.

Apparently more younger and ambitious super-featherweight boxers, on the international scene, had their eyes on the ultimate title. Was Azumah Nelson, who was protective of his title, fit and strong to face these title-hungry boxers? Clearly, he had demonstrated that he could, at least, use experience, when the need arises, to defend his title and himself against some of the relatively younger boxers. His record showed that he had done that to the “younger” Jeff Fenech in March 1992.

On November 7, 1992, he did same to Calvin Grove, another ambitious boxer and a former world champion, in a bout, which took place at Caesars Tahoe, Stateline, Nevada, and was refereed by Richard Steele. After going through the full twelve rounds, the champion retained his title when the judges unanimously proclaimed him the winner.

Before the fight, the Ghana government sent goodwill messages to

the champion. The then P.N.D.C. high official overseeing affairs of the youth and sports, Lt. Gen. Arnold Quainoo, sent a message of goodwill and encouragement to the boxer in the U.S.A. He expressed the truism that the boxer's numerous victories, over the years, brought joy to Ghanaians. On behalf of Ghanaians, the government official stated that the nation had confidence in the boxer. Moreover, he added: "Our (Ghana's) confidence in your ability to conquer all foes has increased with every fight that you have faced in your career. . . ." ¹⁸¹

Calvin Grove hailed from the steel town of Coatesville, Pennsylvania. He was a tall and fast-footed boxer who was hard to hit because he always moved around and away from his opponents. Those qualities apparently protected him from being kayoed by Azumah Nelson. Throughout the fight, the latter kept "chasing" Grove for a K.O., but the challenger simply would not stand and/or engage the champion in a give and take showdown. A hook from the champion sent him to the canvas in the early part of the bout, ¹⁸² however, for the entire distance of the bout he "danced" and jabbed away from the champion. The champion tried from the beginning to press and wear Grove down, but by round six he did not think he could get him, because of Grove's dodging techniques. The champion then went to work to build points. ¹⁸³ The confidence of Grove progressed as he kept jabbing and dodging. In round eight he stepped back and pounded his chest, challenging the champion to come after him. ¹⁸⁴ It

¹⁸¹ "Arnold Quainoo Greets Azumah," *P.D.G.*, November 7, 1992, p. 15.

¹⁸² Reuter/Ghana News Agency (G.N.A.), "Azumah Retains Title," *P.D.G.*, November 9, 1992, p. 1.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

seemed that he was mocking the champion for being a bit slow. After winning enough respect from the champion with his “it-will-be-hard-for-you-to-hit-me” darting out of the corners, jabbing, and “dancing” around techniques of defence, Grove was immediately offered a rematch by the champion. “Nobody gave me a chance,” said Grove. “It was a great fight. Number two will even be better,”¹⁸⁵ he added. The envisaged second fight never materialised. However, his encounter with and ability to go the full twelve rounds with the hard hitting Azumah Nelson in 1992 was an accomplishment that Grove was proud of. Incidentally, for being able to go the full distance with the champion who was known for his knockouts, Grove, who was not declared the winner, felt that he was robbed. Hence, in 2008, he disclosed in an interview with Ken Hissner that: “He (Azumah) was pressing, but I hit him more and I felt I got robbed.”¹⁸⁶ The verdict from the judges held a different opinion. Dave Brown scored the fighters 115-112. Keith MacDonald scored them 114-113, and Doug Tucker’s verdict was 116-111. In the final analysis Azumah Nelson won by a narrow decision.

The next younger boxer to challenge the champion in a bout was the heavy punching Gabriel Ruelas, who was born on July 23, 1970 in Yerbabuena, Mexico, and turned professional in 1988. Azumah Nelson recounted that: “I had heard of him and watched his fight videos. I saw him to be a tough fighter and I knew he was determined to clinch the title from me. His managers and other boxing pundits were confident in him,

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ See “Calvin Grove: Mr. Silky Smooth!” Interview with Ken Hissner, *Doghouse Boxing Forum*, March 14, 2008, online posting, <http://www.doghouseboxing.com/Ken/Hissner031408.htm> (Information was retrieved on August 28, 2010).

probably because he was younger than me.”¹⁸⁷ The issue of age and ambition probably were good reasons why Ruelas was a favourite for many. However, he was also a very strong fighter who had a record for having raw deadly punches. In fact, his punches would literally produce fatal injuries in a boxer, Jimmy Garcia, who would later die from those injuries.

The contract for the fight was made and Azumah Nelson again committed himself to intense training to contend Ruelas in Mexico. It was reported that in an interview with the B.B.C., the champion allayed the fears of his fans who thought that he was old and ventured into the fight at his own peril. He assured his fans that he was in great shape and was going to win. The interviewer who was fascinated by the figure of the boxer, which was still firm and trim, asked the fighter how he managed to maintain that physique over the years. The champion who was about 35 years old disclosed that: “You should know what to do in the morning when you wake up, what to eat, don’t drink and don’t smoke.”¹⁸⁸ That, he said was the “secret.” When he was asked how long the fight would last he answered: “Ruelas is a younger man at 22, he’s a tough boxer who has trained well as I have done. He is [a] brawler with good uppercut and body punches but if he decides to stand toe to toe with me, then we will go home early.”¹⁸⁹ Remarkably, he, unlike his other fights, did not predict the particular round that he was going to stop Ruelas and end the fight. Perhaps, the older boxer was being cautious of over confidence and

¹⁸⁷ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

¹⁸⁸ “‘Greatest Boxing Show’ Tonight. Azumah Predicts Early Win, if . . . ,” *P.D.G.*, February 20, 1993, p. 14.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

complacency. By the way he did not find the fight an easy one. Ruelas came into the fight as a brawler, just the way the champion had described him.

The champion and Ruelas fought on February 20, 1993 in front of about “132,274 paid attendees,”¹⁹⁰ who had been attracted by one of Don King’s productions – the “Grand Slam of Boxing,” which King, reportedly, had described as the “greatest boxing show on earth.”¹⁹¹ It was recorded that according to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, the largest crowd that a fight had attracted in boxing history was about 120,757.¹⁹² This was the crowd, which attended the September 23, 1926 heavyweight title fight in Philadelphia between Gene Tunney and Jack Dempsey.¹⁹³

The Don King promoted event occurred at the open-air Estadio Azteca, in Distrito Federal, Mexico City. Many of the spectators who were there carried and waved the Mexican flag, were also eager to see the “major card” (principal bout) for the evening. The W.B.C. super-lightweight champion was defending his title against Greg Haugen. The pre-fight estimates were that another 400 million boxing fans were expected to watch, via television, the fights.

Incidentally, as Azumah Neslon later hinted, the organisers of his contest with Ruelas, initially appointed all the judges from Mexico.

¹⁹⁰ Gwr_carlos (Carlos Martinez), “Largest Attendance at a Boxing Match,” *community.guinnessworldrecords.com*, November 5, 2010, online posting, community.guinnessworldrecords.com/_Largest-attendance-at-a-boxing-match/blog/2935223/7691.html (Information was retrieved on January 2, 2011).

¹⁹¹ “‘Greatest Boxing Show’ Tonight. Azumah Predicts Early Win, If . . .,” *op.cit.*

¹⁹² As quoted in *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ “‘Greatest Boxing Show Tonight. Azumah Predicts Early Win, If . . .,” *op.cit.*

However, they changed two of them, when the Ghanaian side protested.¹⁹⁴ Consequently, Tom Kaczmarek, José Medina Solares, and Dae-Eun Chung were the officials who judged the fight. José Guadalupe Garcia was the referee.

The champion was booed by many of the Mexican fans when the ring announcer introduced him to the crowd. Conversely, Ruelas was cheered. Apparently, the champion's support in Mexico City was minimal, but it was massive in Ghana, where vigils were kept by many of his fans to show their support. The General Secretary of the Azumah Nelson Keep Fit and Fan Club, Mr. E.C. Essien, published a statement, in the newspapers, to appeal to members of the club, nationwide, to support the champion with vigils and prayers.¹⁹⁵ Consequently, many club members and other fans, filled with patriotism and respect for their national hero obliged.

The home crowd cheered as Ruelas, who fought with abundant courage and determination to frustrate the "old" champion, unleashed an impressive array of punches against the titlist. However, the champion, shook off the effects of age, and effectively counter-punched. He led with rapid right hand jabs and landed effective left hooks to the contender's head and body. The challenger resorted to pushing the titlist to the ropes. As the fight progressed, the referee intermittently murmured in Spanish to Ruelas. The challenger resorted to frequent clinching and did not stop pushing the champion into the ropes. This frustrated the champion; however, it was the *tete-a-tete* in Spanish, a language that the champion did not understand,

¹⁹⁴ See "Azumah Nelson Retains Title," *P.D.G.*, February 22, 1993, p. 1 and 15.

¹⁹⁵ Kate Hudson, "Vigil for Azumah," *P.D.G.*, February 20, 1993, p. 14.

between the official and Ruelas that greatly disturbed the champion. He later complained about it and of the referee's complicity for not warning Ruelas for his continuous pushing and holding.¹⁹⁶ He also explained that the attitude of the referee affected his performance in a negative way. He stated that the frequent *tete-a-tete* "made me angry which led to my loss of concentration."¹⁹⁷ The referee who might have realised the implication and effect of his attitude went to the champion's dressing room and explained to the boxer that his conversations with Ruelas were warnings against his "rough' tactics."¹⁹⁸

During the fight the cheers from the crowd were superhuman as they watched that typical pound-for-pound combat. The champion won the first round, but the remaining rounds were closely fought. The champion came up again to ride home to victory in the last three rounds. Consequently, Ruelas went the full rounds with the champion. The latter sustained a cut at the back of his head from a butt from Ruelas, but he used his experience and superior stamina to win. Tom Kaczmarek scored the fighters 115-114. José Medina Solares rated the fighters 115-115, and Dae-Eun Chung scored them 115-113. Ruelas who thought he had won and had jumped about excitedly in the ring as the final bell was very disappointed in his loss. He unceremoniously stalked out of the ring, and the huge crowd booed as the verdict was read.¹⁹⁹

The fight and victory was witnessed by fans in Ghana because the bout was shown live on the G.B.C. T.V., by the sponsorship of state

¹⁹⁶ "Azumah Nelson Retains title," *op.cit.*

¹⁹⁷ "Azumah is Back," *P.D.G.*, February 26, 1993, p. 15.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ "Azumah Nelson Retains Title," *op.cit.*

institutions like the Social Security and National Insurance Trust (S.S.N.I.T.), Posts and Telecommunications Corporation (P&T), Ministry of Information, and Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning.²⁰⁰ The victory brought joy to Ghanaians, who had cheered their champion to win.

Customarily, the government and the G.B.A. immediately sent a congratulatory message to the “old” champion for defeating another title-hungry young “brawler-boxer.” The G.B.A.’s message, signed by its chairman Nii Cofie Ajenkwa III stated that: “you have once again demonstrated your greatness in the fistic sport to retain your crown.”²⁰¹ Moreover, it touched on the boxer’s discipline and excellence in his career, and how, as a mentor, he had continued to edify and inspire the youth of the country, particularly, within the context of Ghana boxing. The message added that: “Your achievement will no doubt continue to inspire young boxers [and by extension sports personalities] to win more laurels for our nation.”²⁰² The boxing-oriented River Park Promotions and Management Syndicate sent a message to congratulate the champion. Signed by Alhaji Muhammad Murtala, the president of the syndicate, the message stated *inter alia* that: “the boxing fraternity appreciates your performance in faraway Mexico.”²⁰³ Moreover the message stressed that the boxer’s high performance could only be attributed to his discipline. It, therefore, urged young boxers (and the youth in other fields of positive endeavours in Ghana) to emulate him.²⁰⁴

²⁰⁰ “Live on T.V.,” *P.D.G.*, February 20, 1993, p. 14.

²⁰¹ “G.B.A. Greets Azumah,” *P.D.G.*, February 24, 1993, p. 14.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

Azumah Battles Jesse J. Leija: A Contested Draw in 1993

Having completed twelve rounds of boxing with the champion, Ruelas felt that he deserved to win. Consequently, he asked for a rematch. A rematch was possible because the champion was also not completely satisfied with the nature of the scoring. Although he won, he was unhappy with the close scoring from the judges. He disclosed that he was not surprised at the way the judges scored the fight. Lamenting about the scoring, the experienced globetrotting champion boxer who had had fights in Mexico before asserted that:

Fighting a Mexican in Mexico City, you will have to thank God when you are declared winner. I could have won by half a point and it wouldn't have bothered me. The important thing is that I won, no matter how close it was made to look.²⁰⁵

He, however, added, as a way of praising and not belittling Ruelas that: "He was very tough, very strong and determined to beat the champion. But I proved that I was the Professor."²⁰⁶

The sentiments of dissatisfaction from the two boxers were enough to justify a possible rematch. In any case Azumah Nelson was interested in remaining in active boxing for some time, which made a rematch a high possibility. Incidentally, he stated in a post-match interview, that he would retire with his title after staying on for two to three years. The champion stressed: "I'll be around for the next two to three years. I feel very strong now and I'll only think of retiring when I feel tiredness in my body. As at

²⁰⁵ "Azumah: I'll Retire with Title," *P.D.G.*, February 24, 1993, p. 14.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

now, I think I can go on”²⁰⁷ He explained in an interview with the B.B.C., a day after the fight, why he had been fighting for so long the champion, by declaring that: “I love boxing that is why I won’t retire now and stage a comeback like some others who quit and realise later that they can’t stay away from the sport they love.”²⁰⁸ Consequently, he, after retirement, did not attempt a “crusade” for a title. His fight with Fenech, in 2008, was not for a title but was part of a fund-raiser to support a philanthropic foundation. This foundation – a project in his life, would be discussed in the next chapter of this study.

Many Mexican fans, newspapers, and boxing pundits were in general in support of an Azumah Nelson-Gabriel Ruelas rematch because of the close majority decision which deprived Ruelas of the title. Similar to what he did for Villasana and Fenech, the champion agreed to give Ruelas a rematch. “I knew I had to win again to show the world that I was still good.”²⁰⁹ The champion returned to Ghana on 24 February, 1993, to a glorious welcome reception from his fans and journalists in Accra. He stated to fans that he was proud and happy to have won, but he added that: “It was not an easy fight . . . Ruelas was tough and rough and he had prepared very well for the fight.”²¹⁰ Moreover, he confessed that he committed a lot of mistakes because, having suffered a flu attack the day before the fight, which affected his fitness, he was too cautious and did not want him (Ruelas) to hit him.²¹¹

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁹ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

²¹⁰ “Azumah is Back,” *op.cit.*

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

Foreseeing a possible Azumah Nelson-Gabriel Ruelas II he disclosed at a news conference in Ghana that he would “whip Ruelas like a baby” if the envisaged rematch manifested.²¹² He added that: “next time Ruelas won’t be able to use his rough tactics on me again – like holding my head and punching at the same time.”²¹³ Visualising a possible rematch, he committed himself to training. However, an envisaged immediate rematch did not take place. Instead the champion was confronted by another younger challenger, Jesse James “the Texas Tornado” Leija on September 10, 1993. This bout became the first of his four fight series with Leija, who was a Texan. In other words, the two boxers subsequently had three other exciting showdowns after the first one on September 10. According to Leija, those fights, which were very spectacular and intense, defined his career. He disclosed that:

Undoubtedly the four fights I had with Azumah are what I look back upon in recalling the greatest thrills of my career. . . . Anytime you have a chance to go forty-two rounds with one of the all-time greats in Nelson, you are bound to learn something [from the Professor].²¹⁴

Leija was a strong fighter. His professional debut took place on October 2, 1988, when he stopped Oscar Davis in a single round at the Freeman Coliseum, in San Antonio, Texas. In 1992, he defeated José Luis Martinez to win the N.A.B.F. featherweight crown. In March 1993, he defended his title for the first and only time, with a round twelve decision over another world champion Louie Espinoza. It was after that defence that

²¹² *Ibid.*

²¹³ *Ibid.*

²¹⁴ Jake Donovan “Jesse James Leija Has No Regrets,” *The Sweet Science*, February 21, 2005, boxing forum online posting, <http://www.thesweetscience.com/boxing-article/1714/jesse-james-leija-regrets/> (Information was retrieved on August 29, 2010).

he challenged the “older” Azumah Nelson for the W.B.C. super-featherweight title. The fight was staged in front of over 63,000 fans. It was an “undercard” of the Chávez-Whitaker pay-per-view (P.P.V.) bout which took place at the Alamodome, in San Antonio, Texas, United States.

The Chávez-Whitaker fight, it was estimated, was going to give Whitaker U.S. \$2.5 million and Chávez U.S. \$5 million.

Azumah Nelson’s, participation in the evening event at the Alamodome was motivated by the money that he was bound to receive, but more importantly by other causes – the quest for glory and enhancement of his fame. He wanted to revive in his fans greater confidence in his abilities as a winning champion. Secondly, he desired to retain his place as a notable boxer among the key performers for that night – Chávez and Whitaker, and thereby ensure his position in the Chávez-Whitaker-Azumah Nelson trio, which at the time had the reputation of “keeping boxing’s busiest divisions alive.”

What were the apparent strengths of Leija who wanted to become the second fighter from San Antonio in boxing history to capture a world title? The first boxer from San Antonio to become a world titlist was Robert Quiroga. Leija was young and had an aggressive style, good skills, and movement. At his best, he got into close range, kept a fast pace, and outworked his opponents. He was always well conditioned, tough and determined, and had a tremendous heart. That was Azumah Nelson’s history. The executive of the Azumah Nelson Fan Club appealed to fans to keep vigil and show their massive support and loyalty to the national hero. In anticipation of a victory from Azumah Nelson in a fight that many fans

thought would be the “champions last hurrah,”²¹⁵ many supporters responded well and joined the organized vigils that were kept in communities in parts of Accra and the country.

The G.B.A. sent a message to the boxer, which urged him to “ensure a total victory.”²¹⁶ Signed by the Chairman of G.B.A., Nii Quaye Mensah, the statement asked the champion to put his entire boxing prowess on show to retain the title. Moreover, in referencing the relevance of his fights and victories to national happiness and we-feeling, which were healthy for national peace, and socio-economic growth and productivity, it stated among other things that: “as you are aware, your victory which should be total and undisputed, would bring back smiles on the faces of Ghanaian sports fans and the entire country.”²¹⁷ It then added that: “The G.B.A. wishes you all the best and the whole nation is wholly behind you. We are sure that the national anthem and the sight of the national flag would ginger you into action and spur you to victory.”²¹⁸

Incidentally, such statements and messages, which always reached the boxer before his bouts proved to be helpful and contributed in inspiring him to many of his victories. In the light of that observation the boxer recalled that:

Throughout my professional career, such messages helped me in many ways. They tended to boost my morale, helped me to focus psychologically and made me to think that I was always fighting first for Ghana, before any other thing. They strengthened my confidence, because confidence is necessary in everything that we do. Also they made me think

²¹⁵ “Azumah to Pave Way for Big Fight,” *P.D.G.*, September 10, 1993, p. 15.

²¹⁶ “G.B.A. Message to Champ,” *P.D.G.*, September 10, 1993, p. 15.

²¹⁷ *Ibid*

²¹⁸ *Ibid*.

that the nation and government were solidly behind me. That made me to give all my best in the fights that I had in my professional career.²¹⁹

A handful of supporters from Ghana were at the Alamodome to chant and sing their *kolomashi* for the champion. The two fighters exhibited one of the best super-featherweight title fights in 1993, but unfortunately for Leija, a late rally allowed the champion to attain a disputed draw after twelve rounds of fighting.²²⁰

There were no knockdowns in the bout even though the fighters, for the most part of the contest, exchanged blows in a pound-for-pound fashion in the middle of the ring.²²¹ Leija wanted to end the champion's striking run of road victories – which he loved to chalk in the backyard of his opponents. However, Leija was disappointed in front of his own home fans in his “backyard” in Texas, where “the Professor” took his “road spectacle.” In fact, at the end of match, which was refereed by Jerry McKenzie, many spectators among the Texan-dominated crowd believed that Leija won. However, the judges, Laurence Cole from Texas, Keith Dadzie from Ghana, and Daniel Van de Wiele from Belgium, made the final verdict. The judges, as technocrats, perceived the fight differently. Incidentally, the verdict was, initially, announced, erroneously, by the droning ring announcer, Jimmy Lennon, Jr., as a win by a split decision (S.D.) for Azumah Nelson. Then as Leija was coming to grips with what had been announced as his first lost at the professional level, the ring announcer returned several minutes to announce that there had been a

²¹⁹ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

²²⁰ G.N.A., “Azumah Retains W.B.C. Crown,” *P.D.G.*, September 13, 1993, p.1.

²²¹ *Ibid.*

discrepancy in the scoring.²²² Many of the Texan fans and Leija were delighted by this turn on event since they thought it would turn the scores in their favour. Conversely, many Ghanaians must have experienced a bout of stomach wrenching as they thought about the ultimate fate of their champion. Contrary to the expectation of the Texan fans for victory, the judges met them half. They ruled the fight as a split decision draw. Judges Laurence Cole, Keith Dadzie, and Daniel Van de Wiele respectively scored the fighters as 113-115, 118-112, and 115-115.

The officials declared the fight a draw but Leija thought otherwise. Administering a pack of ice to a swollen and closing left eye, Leija, at a post-fight press conference said that: "Every fighter knows in his heart when he's won a fight. I know I won the fight."²²³ Incidentally, the major card for the night – the W.B.C. welterweight title bout – between Chávez and Whitaker, gruelling as it turned out for the boxers, also ended in a draw.²²⁴

When he returned to Ghana, some fans again requested and warned him to retire. However, the "stubborn" boxer did not grant their request. But why did he not heed to such warnings since it was apparent that his performance was diminishing. Three contenders, in a straight row, had gone

²²² Ken Hissner, "The Texas Tornado" – Jesse James Leija WBC & IBA Champion," *Doghouse Boxing Forum*, January 2, 2011, online posting, <http://www.doghouseboxing.com/Ken/Hissner010211.htm> (Information was retrieved on January 3, 2011).

²²³ Graham Houston, "When three fights aren't enough to settle the score," *ESPN Boxing*, March 26, 2008, boxing forum online posting, on <http://sports.espn.go.com/sports/boxing/news/story?id=3309743>. (Information was obtained on September 18, 2010). Note that ESPN is an American cable television network dedicated to broadcasting and producing sports-related programming 24 hours a day. It also has platforms on the internet where sports-oriented articles are published, and sports related documentaries and talk-shows are presented. *ESPN Boxing* is a platform, which presents *boxing* news, commentary, results, articles, and audio and video highlights from ESPN.com.

²²⁴ "Chavez, Whitaker Draw," *P.D.G.*, September 13, 1993, p. 14.

the full twelve rounds with him. Where was his punching power? Maybe, it was there but not very effective. Was the end near? Well, it appeared so and, shortly, it was so.

However, can Azumah Nelson be blamed squarely for staying on when it was apparent he was getting “rusty”? No. Often the more valuable a boxer is, the “myopic,” and, in a figurative sense, “blinder,” they, and particularly, their promoters and managers become to the fact that “valuable” and champion boxers are not invincible. Many promoters, managers, and “corner-men,” and some fans, of victory-bringing and cash-raking boxers often fall victim to the illusion that “valuable” boxers are indestructible. In such situations such groups are commonly tempted by selfishness to continue to push “valuable” boxers into more fights, which often yield mediocre or even poor results from the fighters. It seems that Azumah Nelson, his camp, and some of his fans became victims to this rule. This was because urged on by his stubbornness, his camp and some of his die-hard fans, he continued to box even at a time when there were signs that his boxing verve and performance were reducing.

Moreover, when some fans realised that he was ageing and advised him to retire, another temptation must have made him adamant to such admonishing. Similar to what happens to many fading movie stars who, after considering retirement and/or retiring, often hear the seductive yell of their fans and public: “you are young! Do not go now. No! Come back to us” and, unable to resist such blandishments, discard the thought of retirement and revert to their profession, the boxer also fell victim to such blandishments. Some of his fans in Ghana uninterruptedly advocated that

he should remain in the sport. They continued to sing his accolades, which connoted greatness, power and invincibility in the ring. That was tempting. In the face of such a temptation, the boxer, as a popular icon, was consciously or otherwise lured to remain in the sport and continue fighting even at a time when “the law of diminishing returns” was clearly operating against him in his fights. Apparently the benefits of the sport, “mad” love for it, feeling of invincibility, and the determination to make his fans happy were major factors which continued to keep him in the ring, especially after his first fight with Leija. He recounted that: “I felt that I had to make my fans happy, and as long as I was winning I knew that were happy. So I stayed on . . . ,”²²⁵ and consequently went into action with Leija, to whom he had earlier promised a rematch.

On May 7, 1994, Don King once again entertained the boxing world when he staged the fights, which he called “Revenge: The Rematches,” at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas. It was one of the largest boxing P.P.V. events ever staged, and was named the “Ring Magazine event of the year for 1994.” It was the first time that a quintet of world title fights was staged in one night. A quartet of rematch bouts for the night included Julio César Chávez vs. Frankie Randall, Azumah Nelson vs. Jesse James Leija, Gerald McClellan vs. Julian Jackson, Terry Norris vs. Simon Brown. The show also included a title bout between Kermin Guardia and Ricardo Lopez.

The Nelson and Leija Rematch: Leija Defeats the Champ

The Azumah Nelson-Jesse James Leija II encounter led the P.P.V. portion of the show. Azumah Nelson recounted that: “Leija seemed better

²²⁵ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

than the first time.” The performance of the titlist, in that fight, clearly showed that the “beginning of the end” of Azumah Nelson had come. The stem that he had been gnawing, like a beaver would do to a tree, finally broke. His skills were out-skilled by Leija’s. Luck also did not smile on him in that rematch.

In that mandated rematch the challenger left no doubt about his marked improvement and better condition over the super-featherweight champion. The hearts of Ghanaians missed a beat when the champion was knocked down in the round two. “We asked him to retire,” would have been what the fans who had admonished him to retire probably kept saying when he fell down, and ultimately when Leija was declared as the winner by a unanimous decision after the end of round twelve. Azumah Nelson recalled that: “It was without a doubt disappointing for me. I started to think of retiring right there, but when I returned home, I again changed my mind. I wanted to meet Leija again to take the title and maybe just retire.”²²⁶

By that victory Leija become and remained the only fighter ever to beat Azumah Nelson in a rematch. “Without a doubt, [it] was the pinnacle of my career,” was how Leija recalled the title winning effort.²²⁷

Azumah Nelson, who recounted that “Leija’s performance was good,” asked his friends and fans that painful as his loss was they needed not to worry so much because it was part of the sport. He disclosed that: “Winning and losing is part of boxing. That is the way it is. Leija beat me on that day: [Fair and square]. I tried to win but he was too tough on that

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

²²⁷ Jake Donovan, “Jesse James Leija Has No Regrets,” *op.cit.*

day. I knew that tomorrow [in the near future], if I did not retire before then, I would go out and whip him, but on that day in May, Leija was the better man.”²²⁸ By the way, Azumah Nelson, in an endearing trait of a good sportsman, always spoke well about his contenders and opponents, regardless of the outcome of his bouts with them.

Azumah Nelson and his entourage met a rousing welcome from fans in Ghana. It was apparent that he had lost his title to a fighter who fought better. Regardless of the loss, he was still legendary in the eyes of Ghanaian fans. In Ghana, he did not offer excuses for his loss and never in a verbal way did he and has he demeaned Leija’s victory. He accepted the loss and up till date makes the honest statement that: “Leija beat me.”

Leija received a toast in the boxing world, because he accomplished what many boxers had failed to do in many years. However, he was unable to protect his new found position as champion for a long time. The journey of his joy and status as champion were transient, because they were shortly truncated. About four months after he became champion, Leija was given a raw deal when he faced Gabriel Ruelas. As underscored, Ruelas’s defeat at the hands of Azumah Nelson displeased him because he felt that he was robbed in that bout. He therefore resolved that he would not lose the opportunity of becoming a world champion when he met Leija. Ruelas overcame a knock down and a point deduction, late in the fight against Leija, but he scored two knock downs of his own.

The first knock down, tragically made Leija to tear some ligaments

²²⁸ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

in his ankle. Leija who tried to defend his title showed great bravery as he fought on and won the admiration of many fans. However, the persistent punches from Ruelas and the excruciating pains from the torn ligament were too much for Leija to overcome, and these ultimately weakened Leija. Consequently, Ruelas took the opportunity to outpoint Leija to win the bout. That was the last time Leija entered or left the ring as a W.B.C. world champion. He however, fought Azumah Nelson in two other engagements in 1996 and 1998.

Incidentally, Azumah Nelson continued training in Ghana and rumours circulated that he was going to fight another contestant, but he did not engage in any other bout in 1994. As he remained outside the ring, his legend and position as a super power in the super-featherweight division was recognised by the W.B.C. At the 31st Convention of the W.B.C. which was opened on October 31, 1994 in Seville, Azumah Nelson and other W.B.C. boxing champions like D.K. Poison and Hogan Kid Bassey were honoured with awards for their accomplishments and luminary roles in boxing. Nii Cofie Ajenkwa (Agyenkwa) III, of Ghana, who was also the vice-president of the W.B.C., Dr. Joseph Fofe, of Cameroon, who was the president of the A.B.U., for most of 1970s and 1980s, and the late Chief Ralph Akin Ogunbufumi, of Nigeria, who was once the secretary treasurer of the A.B.C., were also honoured for their contribution to the growth of boxing in Africa.²²⁹

Incidentally, Nii Cofie Ajenkwa III submitted the names of Ghanaian boxers for ratings at the Convention. He lobbied so that Azumah

²²⁹ "D.K. goes for Honour," *Daily Graphic* (hereafter *D.G.*), November 1, 1994, p. 13.

Nelson, who had recently suffered a defeat, would be rated. After the defeat his top position in his division fell. He therefore, proactively, applied to the Council for it to re-instate him. Positively, the lobbying of Nii Cofie Ajenkwa III at the Convention, led to the boxer's re-instatement as number one contender to the super-featherweight title,²³⁰ a title, which had moved into the possession of Ruelas on September 17, 1994.

On his return to Ghana, the official of the W.B.C. stated that the re-instatement was approved by the board of governors by a majority decision. The Spain-based Nana Yaw Konadu, was also rated. He moved up to the second position, from the sixth, in the bantamweight class which was headed by Yasuei Yakushiji, of Japan. Alfred Ankamah, who was a Ghanaian boxer based in the U.S.A. was also mandated by the W.B.C. to fight the holder of the W.B.C. international crown, Graham Cheney from Australia.²³¹

The re-instatement of Azumah Nelson implied that he could easily get a match with Ruelas if he pressed for it. That was exactly what he did. However, in his restless quest for a title fight, it appeared that he had earlier accepted to challenge Oscar De La Hoya of the U.S.A., for his W.B.O. lightweight crown in Las Vegas. It was reported that in a Voice of America (V.O.A.) satellite interview, which was monitored in Accra on November 24, it came out that Azumah Nelson had already accepted the fight which was expected to take place in the second week of February 1995.²³² However, his re-instatement encouraged him to search for a fight with

²³⁰ "W.B.C. Rates Azumah No. 1," *D.G.*, November 10, 1994, p. 14.

²³¹ *Ibid.*

²³² "Azumah to Fight W.B.O. Champion," *D.G.*, November 28, 1994, p. 14.

Ruelas. Consequently, the envisaged fight with De La Hoya did not materialise. Azumah Nelson started a negotiation with Ruelas for a fight, to give him the chance to take the title or give Ruelas a chance to avenge the defeat he sustained from Azumah Nelson.

Ruelas who had beaten Leija who had beaten Azumah Nelson, swallowed the bait and accepted the challenge. Apparently, he was younger and so he was confident that he would beat the “older” boxer to avenge his defeat in Mexico City in 1993. The fight was scheduled to take place on December 1, 1995 at the Fantasy Springs Casino, Indio, California, U.S.A. The globetrotting boxer prepared his body and fists to go to California with the intention to steamroll Ruelas. However, Ruelas was also determined to do same to the challenger in that long overdue rematch. Incidentally, Ghanaian fans were eager to know the outcome of that rematch because, rematches for opponents of Azumah Nelson, as history revealed, normally spelt doom for them.

Azumah Nelson Grabs the Super-Featherweight Title From Gabriel Ruelas - 1995

The fight occurred and, as the challenger wanted, it ended as a disaster for the “young” Ruelas. Ruelas, who snatched the title from Leija and defended it twice, including a round eleven T.K.O. of Jimmy Garcia of Columbia who later died in hospital from the injuries he sustained from Ruelas, lost his title to Azumah Nelson in that rematch through a T.K.O. in round five. The Ghanaian boxer, who had not fought for nineteen months, promised his fans that he was going to beat Ruelas “like a baby” to become champion again. He knew that he could not fail his fans and the nation

because he had promised them the title as their Christmas present. He trained hard and committed himself to an austere lifestyle to toughen him for the contest. He did not indulge in the excesses of luxuries of hotel life and the distractions of the gambling halls in Las Vegas. On the night of the fight, which was held in December 1995, he pitched a little tent, which he used as a dressing room, in a parking lot next to the Indian casino, just down the road from Palm Springs. It was just about 10 feet away from that of Ruelas and his trainer Joe Goosen. The handful of Ghanaian fans and technical people in the parking lot were jubilant. They articulated *asafo* war chants and kolomashi songs, which were backed drum and bell beats. This demonstration of support continued to the end of the fight.

How did the fight go? The champion started by going straight at the challenger. He threw and winged wild punches like an amateur. He played right into the challenger's game plan. The challenger avoided such unguided wild schoolboy-like punches and, utilizing great tact and composure, guided his hooks and jabs to knock Ruelas down in round one. Ruelas came up to fight, but he continued to throw and miss. The challenger bided for the right time to go in for the *coup de grâce*. He took an opportunity to step in, when Ruelas opened his guard, to send a cracking punch into his stomach. That left punch, which flew into the liver of Ruelas, in the fourth round, brought him down on his knees and elbows. It was only by the refereeing grace of Marty Denkin that Ruelas was able to beat the count. By this time the boxers clearly knew that the fight was coming to an end. The challenger had found a weak spot and he was determined to hit there until Ruelas could stand no more. Ruelas admitted

later that he was sick and all that he wanted to do was to protect his stomach.²³³

In round five the challenger sought for a *fait accompli* victory, and pounded Ruelas into the ropes. He moved him into a neutral corner and continued the battering. It was noticeable that the punishment was too much. Referee Denkin stopped the fight at 1 minute and 20 seconds into the round when he saw that Ruelas was being wasted by the wicked punches of the challenger. The corner of Ruelas protested violently, but the experienced referee knew better. Clearly, he did not want Ruelas to end up like Jimmy Garcia, who died from injuries that he sustained from the blows of Ruelas.

By winning again Azumah Nelson, shocked and proved to the world that he was a legend. He assured Ghanaians that he would become champion again and lived up to that promise. He recounted that: "Considering my strength and preparedness before the fight I knew, as I said in the [post-match] interview in the ring that 'Ruelas was not a match for me'."²³⁴

His fans in Accra and other parts of the country rejoiced in his victory. Customarily, the ministry in charge of sports, and the G.B.A., sent congratulatory messages to the champion.

After the fight Ruelas revealed that he was not, or had not been, physically and mentally well for the fight. He later complained that before

²³³ Consult Richard Hoffer, "Ghost in the Ring. Azumah Nelson won Gabriel Ruela's title, but the fighter who Haunted Ruelas was Jimmy Garcia," *Sports Illustrated*, December 11, 1995, p. 1-2. <http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1007539/2/index.htm> (Information was retrieved on September 2, 2010).

²³⁴ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op. cit.*

the fight he was bloated – full of gas, nauseous and had hot and cold flashes. He claimed that:

I was sick, so sick I thought about not even doing the fight. . . . But there were too many people [in attendance] and I thought that if only I could get out into the fresh air, and once the fight begin . . . well, that's what I thought. When the fight started, and I didn't feel any better, I just wanted to get it over with.²³⁵

This, perhaps, was the reason why he did not fight like the brawler that he was known to be. Incredible as it sounded though, he complained that he saw an apparition of Garcia in the ring. Whether or not he was physically sick and/or had been haunted in defeat by Garcia's ghost, which, according to Ruelas, formed just beyond the referee's shoulder at the conclusion of the fight,²³⁶ Ruelas lost painfully, while Azumah Nelson succeeded in doing what he set out to do. He became a champion again and made his fans happy. As champion, he was met by sections of his fans in Accra by a festive welcome, befitting a hero. He did not box for about a year. He later boxed after he accepted a challenge from Jesse James Leija. By the way, he had promised earlier that he would retire with his title, and so when he lost the title to Leija, many boxing aficionados were not surprised that he did not retire. However, when he reclaimed it and decided to continue fighting, many boxing fans in the country became worried. The hope of many of his fans that he would retire, after becoming champion, faded when he accepted to fight Leija. He recalled that: "I just could not retire. I was still filled with passion for the sport and I felt strong to continue."²³⁷

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

²³⁷ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

Consequently, he fought Leija for the third time on June 1, 1996 in a contest, which was labeled by the renowned promoter Bob Arum, who was a major business rival of Don King, as one of the greatest bouts to take place in boxing history.

Bob Arum, a Harvard Law School graduate, was the founder and C.E.O. of Top Rank, a professional boxing promotion company based in Las Vegas. This key personality, behind international professional boxing, paid a glowing tribute to the two fighters at a pre-fight press conference, which was held on May 30, 1996. He emphasised that with the title changing hands from Azumah Nelson, James Leija, Gabriel Ruelas, and back to Azumah Nelson, the 130-pound division, at the championship level, had become a most difficult and exciting category in boxing. He described Leija as a hard working boxer who “comes to fight to win.” Moreover, the famous boxing promoter described the champion as: “legend of legends”²³⁸ and an exemplar in international boxing. Azumah Nelson’s status as a great boxer and role model had clearly attained international recognition. It was in the light of that fact that Bob Arum added that Azumah Nelson was “one of boxing’s role models.”²³⁹

At the press conference, the champion explained why, contrary to the expectations of those who wanted him retire, he decided to fight Leija. He disclosed to the press that the deal for the fight started immediately after he defeated Ruelas. According to him he spoke to Arum about his intention to give Leija another chance. Although he did not say it at the press

²³⁸ Sammy Okaitey, “Moment of Truth,” *D.G.*, June 1, 1996, p. 16.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

conference he, in the spirit of good sportsmanship, considered “giving another chance” to Leija because he, perhaps, expected to gain a handsome financial reward from such a fight. In other words, the monetary rewards, he must have naturally envisaged in such a fight, must have led him to speak to Arum. Moreover, he told the press that he wanted to battle Leija who was only man to have fought him a second time and won. Nevertheless, this face-saving, “reclamation of glory,” and score-settling aspect of that overture must have also been a significant concern for him. If that reason – to satisfy his ego – is true then he was not only risking his title by doing Leija a favour, but he was “selfishly” doing so at the expense of the emotions of his numerous fans, especially those in Ghana

Victory or otherwise in his fights had never been business and concern of Azumah Nelson alone. They were and had always been, of interest to the nation of Ghana. His boxing exploits and activities had attracted the attention and loyalty of the majority of the Ghanaian population and numerous fans outside Ghana. His victories and defeats were celebrated and mourned respectively by his loyal supporters. However, in the context of his decision to fight his personal interest, apparently, got the best of him. Incidentally, his personal ambition selfishly made him to transcend a national concern by making him to accept the challenge from Leija. Nonetheless, he was sure of victory and assured his agitated fans of a win.

When Azumah Nelson further declared, at the conference that: “I have come here [U.S.A. for the fight] to prove a point that no one beats me twice,” Leija dramatically responded that he was grateful to the champion

for the kind gesture and added that the titleholder was someone that he respected and took inspiration from outside the ring. However, he conversely, added that since there was not respect for anyone in the ring, he, like the titlist, was going into the fight for a victory.²⁴⁰

Debunking the champion's prediction of a first round K.O., the challenger declared that he was not perturbed, because in 1994, Azumah Nelson told the world that he would retire if he lost. "I beat him and here he is again to fight me and make predictions," Leija charged.²⁴¹ Wittingly, the champion retorted: "When he beat me I retired for two years and came back again. If he beats me this time I will retire for two years and come back." Leija then cautioned the champion that:

I have never been knocked out; only once (referring to his fight with the W.B.O. lightweight champion, Oscar De La Hoya on December 15, 1995, in New York) was I stopped [in round two] and in that fight, it was the referee who stopped the fight for a cut I had.²⁴²

Consequently, the boxers fought at the Boulder Station Hotel, where an approximated 4,000 sitting capacity structure was erected on the hotel's sprawling car park in Las Vegas. The globetrotting champion had perambulated again to Las Vegas for a good payday and glory. Similar to what he did to Fenech, he wanted to beat Leija and bring back, to followers of boxing, memories about how he stormed Melbourne and executed the "father" and "son" fight. He wanted to beat Leija in his own backyard, and turn that world contest into "a tutorial for his student (Leija) and his

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

²⁴² *Ibid.*

admirers.”²⁴³

Apparently, ambivalent, most Ghanaian fan waited for the outcome of the fight. He recounted that: “My fans thought that I was treading on dangerous grounds fighting Leija. I knew many were afraid because Leija had beaten me once, but I had really prepared for him and was confident that I was going to beat Leija.”²⁴⁴

The Ministry of Youth and Sports, and the G.B.A. on behalf of the Ghana government and people, sent good luck messages to the champion. Signed by the Minister for Youth and Sports, E.T. Mensah, a letter that was faxed to the champion in Las Vegas showed how delighted the government official reacted to the champion’s prediction of the outcome of the fight. The letter *inter alia* stated that: “Ghanaians all over the world undoubtedly have such confidence in your ability to follow up on your prophecies that we see your victory as a forgone event.”²⁴⁵ It also pointed out that the boxer, through his excellence, discipline, and victories in boxing, had over the years brought honour and glory to Ghana. These boons, the missive said, could not be matched in the annals of the country’s sporting scene. The message asked for divine blessings for the champion. The statement echoed the nation’s confidence in and expectations from the champion, by declaring that: “this encounter indeed will prove once again your own mighty stature among such greats like Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier, Mike Tyson, Sugar Ray Leonard, Marvellous Marvin and others.”²⁴⁶ Implying that the champion had positively promoted boxing as a popular sport and

²⁴³ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁵ “E.T., G.B.A. Wish Him Good Luck,” *D.G.*, June 1, 1996, p. 16.

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²⁴⁵ "E.T., G.B.A. Wish Him Good Luck," *D.G.*, June 1, 1996, p. 16.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

profession in Ghana, and that his career would inspire generation and generations of sportspersons to give their best to “mother Ghana,” the minister, on behalf of the nation, referred to the champion as a “legend in your life time.”²⁴⁷

It was with such accolades and words of inspiration from Ghana, personal determination to win, good training, and belief that Providence was his ally, that the champion fought Leija. He recounted that: “I had trained well and was well motivated. I went in to win. It was a revenge fight for me.”²⁴⁸

A handful of Ghanaian supporters were by the ringside. The about 37- years old champion, carrying a trimmed and well-shaped body, threw an approximated 443 punches, at the younger Leija. With a powerful left hook, he opened a deep cut on the right eyebrow of the challenger. The cut occurred approximately one minute and fifty eight seconds into the round five. It almost exposed the eye socket after it suffered more left, right, and left combinations from the champion. Blood enveloped the left eye and face of the challenger. The champion stopped his opponent in round six to keep his title.

Referee Richard Steele, having witnessed enough bashing, was moved to bring the fight to an end to stop more bloodshed. Following a total of 227 of the champion’s punches landed against 114 from Leija, the T.K.O. truncated the task of the judges, Angel L. Guzman, Jerry Roth, and Richard James Davies, whose scores for the fighting stood at 48-46, 48-46,

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁸ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

By the way round six proved to be the bloodiest, but it was round one that proved to be the most sensational. Note that the champion, possibly encouraged by how easily Oscar De La Hoya had handled Leija at the Madison Square Garden on December 15, 1995, predicted that in the absence of a round one K.O., the fight would not go beyond round three. However, Leija, did not allow himself to be pounded into pulp in rounds one and three. Standing toe-to-toe with the champion, Leija fought hard to make it impossible for the champion to execute his ambitious mission and plan.

Incidentally, the champion nearly succeeded in getting the K.O. about some thirteen seconds to the end of the first round when “boom!” a wild flash-like right hook from him to the jaw of Leija got the challenger to fall on the canvas on his back. The timely intervention of the bell, which saved Leija and gave him some time to go into his corner to clear his head and return for round two, deprived the champion from actualising another of his prophecies in his wonderful vengeance. As the bout progressed into round six, the champion dominated the fighting. His persistent crunching body punches and jabs into the deep laceration on the junction of the eye brow and eye lid of Leija, during round five, nearly blinded the challenger. Leija started to spit out his gum shield and signaled to his corner that he could no longer continue when he proceeded into his corner during the recess. The men in his corner, including Joe Souza, who was his cut-man, and his father, ignored his shaking of head and bloodied face and urged him into round six to fight the champion. When the champion continued to

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oblige the Leija camp with total mercilessness the referee stopped the bout. Realising that it was for his own good, Leija did not complain when referee Steele stopped the fight. He walked into his corner and accepted the T.K.O. with total equanimity.

Under the spotlight of the in-the-ring post-match interview with the sports section of the Home Box Office (H.B.O.), which is a U.S.A.-based premium cable television network which is owned by Time Warner, the champion pontificated about how his God and his superior fighting power brought him victory. Disclosing that it was impossible for any boxer to beat him twice, he added that he changed his mind to K.O. Leija in round one because he wanted to “punish him.”²⁴⁹ Moreover, he wanted to take Leija further into the bout and K.O. him in the last rounds, to prove his critics wrong for thinking that he was old and lacked stamina to keep on boxing at that professional championship level. He added that he even wanted to K.O. Leija in the last rounds “for people to know that the stamina that I have is unquestionable.”²⁵⁰

Arum was impressed by the champion’s sterling performance, which truly had made the event one of the greatest fights in history. The elated promoter described him as fantastic and added that: “He is getting better with age. I am going to start work immediately to get him here again in September.”²⁵¹ Although Arum was unable to get him to fight in September, his statement of praise that the boxer was getting better with

²⁴⁹ See *Azumah Nelson vs Jesse James Leija III Part 3*, YouTube, (10:59 minutes), uploaded by The GreatA, January 6, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tq02X7g3sPA&feature=related> (Information was obtained on October 15, 2010).

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁵¹ See Sam[my] Okaitey, “Azumah Rides On: Referee Stops Fight in Round 6 to Save Leija from Further Trouble,” *D.G.*, June 3, 1996, p. 1, 16.

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age, like the other compliments from some fans that he should keep fighting, perhaps made him not to retire at that time, when other fans thought that he should retire. Having gained the respect of Arum, the boxer fought again and again.

Knowing that the profuse bleeding had contributed to bringing the fight to the abrupt ending, Leija did not begrudge the referee. He disclosed in an interview that he was a boxer who sustained cuts easily and throughout his career so far, that had been his “down fall.”²⁵² He, however, expressed hope that maybe the champion, whom he described as a good fighter would give him a rematch.

Did the champion plan to retire immediately after accomplishing that glorious victory? No. In response to a question about who he would like to box in the future, the champion disclosed in the post-match interview, that he did not know who he wanted to fight, but was ready to fight “tomorrow or next week.”²⁵³ Did he not feel old? Was he not satisfied that he had won, revenged his defeat, and retained the title and could, as he had promised earlier, retire with the title? Did the “old Professor” really think that he had tenure for life? Perhaps, he wanted tenure for life in boxing. Incidentally, when he finally, retired in 1998, the W.B.C., in recognition of his excellent record, and dedication to and discipline in his career, conferred on him the honorary position of a W.B.C. Emeritus Champion for Life.

After defeating Leija, he remained stubborn and adamant to leave

²⁵² Azumah Nelson vs Jesse James Leija III Part 3, *op.cit.*

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

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the ring. However, he should have been aware that he was a natural subject to the law of diminishing returns and so, eventually, his “active tenure” as “the Professor” would be short circuited, more likely by young, stamina-filled, and equally skilful title-hungry boxers. “Beware Champ! Beware “Lion of Africa”! The younger lions are hungry and are waiting,” someone should have sounded that warning to him. But it seemed that none in his camp was able to admonish him thus. With his camp and himself caught in the addictive fame and jolly ride of victories, it seemed that no one in his entourage strongly sounded such a warning. Moreover, the champion had demolished ferocious fighters like Gomez, Martinez, Fenech, and Leija and so, perhaps, he and his followers, at the subconscious level, felt that he was indestructible.

The Beginning of the End: Genaro Hernandez defeats Azumah Nelson, 1995

After mauling Leija, Champ had said that he would like to fight any boxer who dared to give him a good deal for his title. Consequently, when offers of challenge from some young boxers went to him, he accepted one challenge and fought in 1997.

Naturally, the prospective challengers must have thought that the aged champion was just on the edge and would fall down from a little nudge. The applicants included Genaro “Chicanito” Hernandez, who was a determined “younger lion” who was waiting in the tall shrubs, to end the reign of Azumah Nelson, the aged “Lion of Africa.”

Was a younger boxer ready to wrestle the title from Azumah Nelson, and also truncate his position as “the Professor” in the boxing

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“college” of the super-featherweights? Could an ambitious boxer unseat “the Professor” and thank him for doing a commendable job by giving boxing lessons of beating to many school boys and students in the “college”? Who was going to send “the Professor” home to rest because his tenure was not for life? Was the aged champion going to pay a sordid prize for being obstinate?

The stubborn “old lion” trod a road to disaster in 1997 when he accepted to fight the 31 years old Genaro Hernandez from the U.S.A. who had once been a W.B.A. super-featherweight titlist. The Azumah Nelson side thought that the fight would be an easy one, which would allow the boxer to pick up some cash and smoothly cruise to retirement. However, the challenger was determined to maul the “old lion.”

The fight took place at the Memorial Coliseum, in Corpus Christi, Texas, on March 22, and after twelve rounds of boxing, the challenger was pronounced, by the ring announcer Dave Bontempo, to the world as the winner by a split decision verdict. 115-113, 118-110 and 113-114 were the scores from judges Alfred Asaro, Richard James Davies and Gale E. Van Hoy respectively.

During the fight, the champion was, noticeably, not the fast and powerful fighting “machine” that he had been during the fifteen years of his professional career.

Was the fighter in the ring a shadow or an apparition that was trying to look like Azumah Nelson? No. It was Azumah Nelson who was trying to be Azumah Nelson. Clearly, he proved in the fight to be a little slower and took longer to recover and/or react to attacks. Had he become a “shot

fighter”? [University of Cape Coast https://ir.ucc.edu.gh/xmlui](https://ir.ucc.edu.gh/xmlui) In other words, had he become a fighter whose reflexes had diminished and whose legs could no longer carry him out of range and support him through a tough fight? No he was not a “shot fighter.” His brain had not been injured, and he was lucky to have “left” or retired from boxing before such a horrible incident of midbrain damage, which could lead to slow deterioration of the brain and neurodegenerative diseases such *Dementia pugilistica* (Punch Drunk Syndrome), could have happened to him like it unfortunately affected Muhammad Ali, Joe Louis, Sugar Ray Robinson and others who, perhaps, “over boxed” and sustained repetitive head trauma from strong punches to their head.

Worthy of note, is that within the span of a few years, Joe Louis developed advancing mental decline, although it has been rumoured that his problem stemmed from drugs, and Sugar Ray Robinson became a victim of Alzheimer’s disease (it has been rumoured that Robinson’s was from old age) and died. Muhammad Ali progressed with shocking speed from boxing-induced neurological damage to a Parkinson-like symptomatology. Ali who, in 1999 was crowned “Sportsman of the Century” by *Sports Illustrated* and “Sports Personality of the Century” by the B.B.C., lived, after he retired in 1981, a docile life engineered by Parkinsonism.

The slowness of Azumah Nelson in the fight with Hernandez was, no doubt, a product of the disadvantage of old age and tired muscles. Hernandez, who was young and energetic, busily controlled the fight from the outside against the older, careless, slower and maybe overconfident champion. The challenger employed the outfighting style in that bout. Operating within the context of that style, he maintained a distance between

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himself and his opponent, fought faster, and employed long range punches, most notably the jab, which frustrated and wore down his opponent. Outfighting boxers are best boxing strategists due to their ability to control the pace of fights. Exhibiting more skills and *finesse* they methodically lead and wear their opponents down. That was what Hernandez employed against the old champion who kept pressing forward, but was unable to land, on a consistent basis, because of the outfighting of Hernandez.

As the fight progressed the champion threw some heavy punches in his determination to win by K.O., but Hernandez proved to be a tough fighter. By round seven Hernandez was ahead on all the score cards. Frustrated by his opponent's outfighting the champion, in an attempt to land a K.O.-oriented, but delayed, punch in round seven, unintentionally, hit his opponent's throat after the bell to end that round had been tolled. Hernandez went down in pain. Recounting how he felt about the incident Azumah Nelson said that:

I did not do it intentionally . . . I know what to do in the ring and I have always made sure to do the right things in the ring that is why I am called "the Professor." The hitting of throat [incident] was an accident and I thought I would be disqualified, but I was not.²⁵⁴

Hernandez, who needed some time to recuperate from the illegal late hit, was informed by the officials that if he could not continue, the offender would be disqualified and Hernandez declared winner. However, Hernandez, who intended to triumph the way real champions did, used about five minutes to rest and decided to continue with the bout. Azumah Nelson, who was deducted one point, was impressed with the good

²⁵⁴ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

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sportsmanship, which Hernandez showed. Moreover, the heroic act of Hernandez to continue fighting drew a lot of applause from the crowd.

But why did Hernandez decide to continue the fight? In an interview with Ed Ludwig of *East Side Boxing*, in 2006, Hernandez was asked the question, "In your fight with Azumah Nelson you took a hard shot to the throat and you were in some discomfort as a result of it. At any point did you or your corner think about stopping the fight?" He answered:

I did not want to win on a disqualification. I was controlling the fight and when the punch landed I couldn't even feel my face. The referee then told me if I didn't continue I would lose the fight. I was going to beat Azumah Nelson the way a true champion should be beat [sic] and that is by fighting. The time I had to recuperate gave me the time to recover.²⁵⁵

Hernandez dominated the fight, and unleashed some beating to the "ghost" of Azumah Nelson in the ring and cruised to victory. By choosing to continue Hernandez allowed Azumah Nelson to remain in the contest and to lose by the more honourable way through the decision of the judges.

Incidentally, the fight proved to be the most favourite of Hernandez, because he demonstrated that he did not need a lesson in boxing from the boxing "professor." Azumah Nelson who was impressed with the gallant fighting spirit of the challenger started to applaud after the scores were announced in the favour of Hernandez. When the boxers were interviewed, by Dave Bontempo, the new champion revealed that he had great respect

²⁵⁵ Ed Ludwig, "Exclusive Interview with Genaro Hernandez," *East Side Boxing*, March 2006, boxing forum online posting, <http://www.eastsideboxing.com/boxing-news/Genaro-Hernandez-Interview.php> (Information was retrieved on September 4, 2010).

The boxers displayed an exciting episode of good sportsmanship after their interviews. They started to converse and the Ghanaian boxer told Hernandez that he wanted him to be a champion for a long time. In response Hernandez said that: "As long as you don't come back." Symbolically, the new champion then proceeded to return the title belt to Azumah Nelson by placing it around his waist and said that: "You came as a champion, you leave a champion" and, honourably, raised the hand of the Ghanaian.²⁵⁷ Incidentally, that show of good sportsmanship and camaraderie from the boxers was not just a passing epoch in a fight in which Azumah lost. It was evidently one on the finest moments, produced by one of the better fights which the sport of professional boxing had seen in sometime.

Azumah Nelson did not exhibit the total boxing power, he demonstrated some years ago, because he was a little older and a step or two slower. Yet, Hernandez venerated him with those gestures because he respected him as someone who could bring the best out of his opponents. Even in his "ripe" age of 37 years, having well past the age of 30 years, which in the category that he fought was considered old and the age for retirement, he brought the best out of younger boxers like Whitaker, Leija, and Hernandez. He gave Whitaker a tough time that in the post-match interview Whitaker declared that he: "brought the best of me since my

²⁵⁶ Bruce, Bacharach (pusboil@netlabs.net), "A Light in the Darkness," *Cyber Boxing Zone Journal (The America Online Boxing Newsletter)*, May 1997, online posting, <http://cyberboxingzone.com/boxing/box5-97.htm> (Information was obtained on October 15, 2010).

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

In 2006, Genaro Hernandez, who retired from boxing in 1998, also testified to that quality in Azumah Nelson. When Ed Ludwig asked him the question: “You gave boxing fans many action packed fights over the years. Which one stands out as your favourite?” The response of Hernandez was: “I would say Azumah Nelson.”²⁵⁹

Azumah Nelson was a “legend of legends,” as E.T. Mensah described him, and his boxing excellence was respected by his compatriots. Maybe he stayed on for too long a time, which cost him to lose his title. Perhaps, he did not want to just retire, and leave the title vacant – on a silver platter – for some other boxers to take. Just as he sweated and wrested belts from champions, he made contenders to sweat for his title. It was only natural for someone to wrest it from him. Hernandez finally succeeded in doing that.

His hard work, long impressive list of victories, and significant role in inserting Ghana into international consciousness through boxing and the popular culture of sports, indubitably built and solidly secured his boxing legend and national hero status forever in Ghana.

Incidentally Azumah Nelson received a hero’s welcome from his fan in Ghana. The government and people of Ghana congratulated and acknowledged him as their hero. His loss to Hernandez could not have deprived him of such national acclaim. Like empires, boxing champions rise and fall and Azumah Nelson was not an exception.

²⁵⁸ Joe Aggrey, “Azumah Loses to Whitaker . . . He is Still W.B.C. Super-featherweight Champ,” *op.cit.* p. 15.

²⁵⁹ Ed Ludwig, “Exclusive Interview with Genaro Hernandez,” *op.cit.*

By the way, did Azumah Nelson quit immediately after that defeat from Hernandez? No, he did not. He felt that he was “strong” on his feet because he, during training, could manoeuvre to “roll” to the left and right, stop, stutter steps, shuffle, and “dance.” He could pull back his head, dodge punches here and there, and slide there and there. Therefore, he ignored public statements that he was old and decided to remain in active boxing for some time. He did not fight again in 1997. He fought in 1998. Apparently, his passion for active boxing as a sport and profession was still strong. It gave him money and fulfillment, so he wanted to remain in it for some time. He planned to remain in boxing for maybe a year or two to fight, get some money, and attempt to satisfy his dream of clinching another title before he went on retirement.²⁶⁰

Meanwhile, he committed himself to managing his commercial ventures, taking care of his nuclear and extended families, and engaging in other social activities. This aspect of his life will be explored when the wider frame of his out-of-ring lifestyle is examined in the next chapter.

To prepare for his next envisaged engagement, he maintained strong training sessions of jogging and sparring to keep his body in shape. As he lurked in the background as a well-known and respected ex-champion, he became restless because he was not the star of the super-featherweight show. He felt as if he had been exiled and he wanted to come back into the championships. He started to dislike the idea of quitting on a loss and

²⁶⁰ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

therefore ^{© University of Cape Coast <https://ir.ucc.edu.gh/xmlui>} planned an attempt to clinch another international title and achieve his dream of reigning in another division. He wanted to be “Azumah Nelson” one more time, shock and amuse the world of boxing, and reiterate to the world that “I am the best. I am the Professor.”²⁶¹ He wanted to bring joy back to his fans and country, and re-immense himself in their love and exaltation. But he soon learnt that he, as an ex-champion, could end his active professional boxing career without losing his status as a national icon and glory as a legend of international reputation. After all, many celebrated and famous boxers like Muhammad Ali, known as “the Greatest,” ended their careers as ex-champions, yet the world continued to regard and celebrate them as international legendary icons of boxing.

As he wanted, he had a fight with Leija in 1998, but his performance in that fight showed that he had become a spent force. At 39 years old, age had finally caught up with him and the good old days of superior moves and punches, which yielded glorious victory after victory, had passed. He was beaten and his body “told” him that the era for competitive professional boxing was over for him. Consequently, he announced his retirement and stayed out of competitive professional boxing. Ten years later, he would fight Jeff Fenech, as part of a showbiz ploy to get some financial capital to set up a charitable and humanitarian foundation.

His ability to fight a championship bout at the age of 39 years was not a miracle. It was a testament to one of boxing's enduringly successful careers. Azumah Nelson who primarily had built his career on a warrior's

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*

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mentality and a keenness to fight anywhere at any time, was still respected by many boxing aficionados, even at a time when he appeared to be a spent force. He took a 39-4-2 record into a lightweight bout with Leija whose record stood at 34-3-2. Noted for his ability to pull surprise-oriented power-laden punches, Azumah Nelson was still respected as someone who could astonish the boxing world with a victory in that bout. His ability to surprise and throw powerful shocking punches had received international acclaim. “He is as awkward as Prince Naseem [Hamed],” said Bert Randolph Sugar, the Executive Editor of *Fight Game Magazine*. “He throws looping punches that aren't really seen here in America. It's more from the European and African school. He has power, because he gets his whole body behind punches.”²⁶²

How did this bout with Leija progress? What was the general expectation of fans for the fight? This rematch, which was to settle a 5-year-old score, took place on July 11, 1998, at the Alamodome. Other featured bouts that were also schedule at the Alamodome included Tracy Harris Patterson vs. Goyo Vargas, Gabriel Ruelas vs. Troy Dorsey, and Miguel Angel Gonzalez vs. Alexis Perez.

Similar to featherweight archenemies Sandy Saddler and Willie Pep, alias Guglielmo Papaleo, who between 1948 and 1951, waged one of the most memorable four-fight rivalries in boxing history, Azumah Nelson and Jesse James Leija also brought into the history of boxing their own memorable four-fight rivalry leg. Their fight, in 1998, became the fourth

²⁶² Timothy W. Smith, “The Best Boxer Nobody Knows; After 19 Years, the Career of a Ghanaian Legend Nears an End,” *op.cit.*

and final stage of that series. The two fighters competed for the widely unrecognized vacant I.B.A. lightweight title. They estimated the fight as the final time they would fight each other, but Leija quickly added that: “unless something crazy happens. . . . Like another draw.”²⁶³ Excited about the fight they believed that it would be a good one. “We’ve had some classic battles,” said Leija. “I don’t expect the fourth to be any different.”²⁶⁴

The bout attracted a large audience, and drew a big home support for Leija. The older among the two boxers entered the ring with full of dignity and posture, but he was unable to beat the revenge-filled Leija. Age was clearly not his ally, and he fractured his left hand in round five, which left him to essentially fight with one hand for the rest of the bout.²⁶⁵ However, his ability to go the whole twelve rounds with the younger boxer, in that fight which was refereed by Laurence Cole, demonstrated that, perhaps, his stamina was unquestionable. Apparently, what he lacked was speed and ability to land his power-infused punches. Leija was, unmistakably, the faster, and agile. He landed most of his punches on target. The final analysis of the judges – Gale E. Van Hoy, Gary Merritt, and Harold Lederman – revealed a scoring of 110-119, 112-116, 112-116 respectively, in favour of Leija. By a unanimous decision Leija became the titlist for the I.B.A. lightweight division. Obviously, Azumah Nelson, after this fight, did not need a prophet or seer to tell him or help him to know that his best days in boxing were over and, therefore, needed to retire.

²⁶³ “Alamodome fight fourth match between Leija, Nelson,” July 11, 1998, online posting, <http://www.texnews.com/1998/texsports/ala0711.html> (Information was retrieved on September 10, 2010).

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁵ James B. Roberts and Alexander G. Skutt, *op.cit.*, p. 531.

Mashie, who hoped for a victory, were disappointed. After the defeat by Leija, the tale of the active professional fights of Azumah Nelson ended. But his legend as one of the great featherweights and super-featherweights of all time continued.

Incidentally, when Joe Goosen, as trainer, assisted Azumah Nelson in Goosen's gym in Van Nuys, Los Angeles, California, the "old" boxer clearly had lost some speed and agility of youth. These were deficiencies, which contributed to his eventual loss to Leija. Nevertheless, the experienced top trainer, who had been in the training business for a few decades, confessed that Azumah Nelson had a unique air of boxing expertise about him until the end. Goosen declared that: "When I trained him, it was one of the few times I was in awe of the guy working out" Goosen added that: "He knew every trick in the book, he had an answer to anything you could throw at him . . ." Moreover, "He really made it an art form."²⁶⁶ Joe Goosen, who worked for the corner of Gabriel Ruelas on all the occasions he fought Azumah Nelson, gave testament that he had always considered Azumah Nelson as even more than "great" – legend – and, throughout the years, appreciated his skill from across the ring. "He's beyond good, and there is a line of demarcation where certain guys go beyond great," said Goosen. He added that:

Gretzky has crossed that line in hockey, Ken Griffey, Jr., in baseball and Magic Johnson in basketball. Those are the guys who make it all look so easy. Azumah has crossed that

²⁶⁶ "Boxing: Best African fighter," *Modernghana.com*. Source: *Daily News*, August 18, 2003, online posting, <http://www.modernghana.com/news2/39422/2/boxing-best-african-fighter.html> (Information was retrieved on September, 10, 2010).

line in boxing. He just hasn't had the kind of exposure in this country to put him up there with them.²⁶⁷

The trainer was right about the prodigy of Azumah Nelson, but not quite correct about his assertion that the boxer's exposure in the U.S.A. was rather minimal. The boxer's legend is widely recognized in the world of true and real boxing aficionados in the U.S.A. and the world over.

Retirement and Life after Retirement

As it has been hinted, the boxer, retired in 1998, and stayed in Ghana as a respected boxing icon and national sporting legend. His out of professional boxing life that followed his retirement was spent receiving local and international honours, doing social advocacy and philanthropic work, spending more time with his wife and children as well as his extended family members in Ga-Mashie, and featuring on television and radio shows and interviews to inspire up and coming sportspersons. Additionally, he also contemplated on how he could make further contribution to the improvement and growth of sports and sports-inclined talented but underprivileged youth in Ghana and Africa. Moreover, he managed some of his business ventures. Those commercial activities of his would be reviewed in the next chapter.

As he stayed out of the ring and fathered in his mansion and, as an internationally acclaimed celebrity, wined and dined with famous boxing icons, politicians, and C.E.Os. of businesses and firms, he felt that his time out of active professional boxing was a perfect period in his life for him to strongly expound a humanitarian ideology, establish a community-centred

²⁶⁷ Timothy W. Smith, "The Best Boxer Nobody Knows; After 19 Years, the Career of a Ghanaian Legend Nears an End," *op.cit.*

support © [University of Cape Coast](https://ir.ucc.edu.gh/xmlui) <https://ir.ucc.edu.gh/xmlui> institute, and provide a tangible and eternal infrastructural mechanism, in the Ghanaian and eventually the African society, to assist young and talented Ghanaians and, by extension, African youth to develop their sports talents and their academic potentials.

Azumah Nelson's Controversial "Fund Raising" Fight with Jeff Fenech in 2008

He resolved to establish a foundation and an ultra-modern sporting and academic complex to serve such a purpose. Such a goal, he recounted, "... was something, which, since I retired, I thought of committing the rest of my active life to and achieving in the period of my retirement." He conceived the plan of depending on his fame, international connections, and the fighting of an exhibition bout with another old and retiree boxer to generate funds, and material and immaterial assistance to support his big humanitarian mission. In pursuance of his agenda to find funds for his project, a project, which he had put under his Azumah Nelson Foundation, he verbally solicited help and support from the W.B.C., the G.B.A., notable boxers, international and local cooperate bodies, politicians and other philanthropists. Moreover, he decided and arranged a fund raising bout with the retiree boxer Jeff Fenech who, incidentally, also suffered a defeat at the lightweight division before retiring. In an I.B.F. lightweight title contest, which was Fenech's last title fight, he was "blown out" in two rounds, by the South African Philip Holiday, on May 18, 1996, in The Glasshouse, in Melbourne, Australia. His chin seemed to have totally gone – no punch-resistance at all. Similarly, as underscored, Azumah Nelson was well-beaten on points by Jesse James Leija at the lightweight division in his last

bout. © [University of Cape Coast](https://ir.ucc.edu.gh/xmlui) <https://ir.ucc.edu.gh/xmlui>
Regardless of these records, the two retirees decided that they needed to stage a “return” match.

After putting the deal together, the two retirees fought in 2008, which was the sixteenth year after their second engagement in 1992. The arrangement attracted mixed reactions from their fans and boxing aficionados in their home countries. It also drew a certain strange curiosity from the world of boxing, largely, because on the surface their endeavour appeared to be a weird, if not comical, a case of “two aged businessmen” taking part in a gimmick type of event. While some minds thought that it was thrilling and good for the records of the two “one-time world class” boxers, and entertainment of their die-hard fans, others believed that health-wise and ethically it was dangerous and immoral for the two “aged” boxers to fight, because the outcome could be fatal. For example, Douglas Travis, the president of the Victoria chapter of the Australian Medical Association (A.M.A.), which was a nationwide Association which did not support any form of boxing and in a determined manner had continued to lobby for the State Government to ban the sport, was against the fight. He complained that “Boxing matches, whose primary aim is to render your opponent unconscious by belting them about the head, are very dangerous.”²⁶⁸ While the A.M.A. bashed the fight, which the organisers labelled as “The Final Round,” the G.B.A. denounced and outlawed it, and dissociated itself from it. According to the Authority’s Chairman, Moses Foh Amoaning, the two opponents had earlier on informed the G.B.A. that they were only going to

²⁶⁸ “Australian Doctors call for Ban of Azumah, Fenech Fight,” *Modernghana.com*. Source: *Herald Sun*, Thursday, 19 Jun 2008, <http://www.modernghana.com/sports/170630/2/australian-doctors-call-for-ban-of-azumah-fenech-f.html> (Information was retrieved on September 12, 2010).

exhibit. However, the two boxers went ahead to sign contracts to engage in the fight, which made it a “serious” competitive and commercial affair, which the laws of the G.B.A. could not allow. In addition, the G.B.A. decided to dissociate itself from the so-called “exhibition fight” because of the Authority’s conviction that it was going to be serious and could have a negative effect on the health of the two “aged” boxers.²⁶⁹

Of course, the G.B.A. and other groups had every reason to conceive such a fear, particularly when Azumah Nelson made it clear (regardless of whether it was a gimmick and a strategy to draw a large crowd to the match) that he would put aside his friendship with Fenech when he takes to the ring. He added that: “He’s got a big mouth, he’s got a big punch, but I have a bigger punch. I’m going to knock him out.”²⁷⁰ By the way, it was reported that Barry McGuigan, another International Boxing Hall of Fame member, lamented to the *London Daily Mirror* that: “This contest will prove nothing, other than that one old man is better than another. . . . This is ridiculously silly on a number of fronts, but first and foremost it’s dangerous.”²⁷¹

Some boxing experts in Australia and Ghana who were concerned about the health of these “aged” retired boxers, it was reported, called the

²⁶⁹ See Daisy, “G.B.A. Outlaws Azumah vrs Fenech,” June 24, 2008, online posting, <http://ghanazone.com/blogs/sports/archive/2008/06/24/gba-outlaws-azumah-vrs-fenech.aspx> and “G.B.A. outlaws Azumah vrs Fenech,” Myjoyonline.com. June 23, 2008, <http://news.myjoyonline.com/sports/200806/17484.asp> (Information was retrieved on September 16, 2010).

²⁷⁰ “I’m going to Flatten Fenech: Nelson,” *Jeff Fenech vs Azumah Nelson 3*, June 25, 2008, online posting, <http://fenechvsnelson.blogspot.com/> (Information was retrieved on September 17, 2010).

²⁷¹ Ron Borges, “A Really Bad Idea: Nelson/Fenech III,” *The Sweet Science*, boxing forum online posting, June 23, 2008, <http://www.thesweetscience.com/boxing-article/6002/really-bad-idea-nelson-fenech-iii/> (Information was retrieved on September 17, 2010).

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two fighters “mad” for deciding to do what they intended doing.²⁷²

Nevertheless, the two “boxers,” who felt that they were “fit” and had, apparently, been declared fit by ring doctor Peter Lewis, debated the concerns and notions of such critics and defended their positions. Azumah Nelson considered the criticisms but he, stubbornly, ignored the much talked about potential dangers in the envisaged bout. He felt that it was for a noble cause. He later stated that: “I was just sacrificing. I told you that Jesus Christ was sacrificed for us, that is you and I, to make our lives better. We also have to sacrifice for others at times.”²⁷³

However, apart from his intention to fight for charity, he could have also been pushed by another reason. Considering his proverbial strong appetite for active boxing, which even made him to hesitate to retire it was possible that he wanted to use the bout to once more be in the limelight of boxing. Fighting with his archrival Fenech was not going to give him a title but at least, a fight between the two, surely was going to throw more light on the Azumah Nelson legend and fame. At least, even if for a short time, it was surely going to soothe the natural uneasiness and dissatisfaction of the ex-champion Azumah Nelson for being actively off the limelight of boxing, and stagnating in, perhaps, “a state of boredom due to lack of active boxing,” and attending social ceremonies in Ghana and abroad.

Before he fought in 2008, he refused to admit that anyone could be killed in that fight, and, in justification of his convictions, he disclosed to the *Herald Sun* that: “I’m too tough to get hit. . . . A champion is always a

²⁷² See Daisy, “G.B.A. Outlaws Azumah vrs Fenech” *op.cit.*, and “G.B.A. Outlaws Azumah vrs Fenech,” *op.cit.*

²⁷³ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

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champion. This is not killing, this is boxing. That's why the referees are there."²⁷⁴

Although, in principle, the contest was geared towards a philanthropic cause, Fenech, who decided to fight to support his friend's charitable work, also saw the fight as an opportunity for him to strive to get a win and thereby attain a sweet revenge – *La Revancha* – for his draw and loss to Azumah Nelson, his nemesis, in 1991 and 1992 respectively. In fact, just a few days to the fight, Fenech, in a showbiz interview, advertently or inadvertently gave a clue to that personal notion of his when he stated that: "I just want to prove to a lot of people who have doubted me that I can beat Azumah Nelson Not only did I beat him the first time (1991) and got robbed, but if I had not been so stupid and thought I was invincible I could have won the second time."²⁷⁵ Meanwhile Fenech, defensively, reacted to raging criticisms, from a section of the public, about the fight. Although he admitted that in his days as a young man he, probably, would have called a clash between two "forty something" years old retirees and adventurers stupid and supported a ban on such a clash, he, at 44 years old, felt different and had no hesitation getting into the ring because he believed he was strong enough for such a contest. He, however, stated that he would never support a fight between two unfit boxers. Nevertheless, since the two boxers were declared fit by a ring doctor, Fenech did not think that the fight was inappropriate and he, it was reported, stated that: "I would never have thought a 44 year[s] old [man] could be this fit. In a way, I would say I am

²⁷⁴ "Australian Doctors Call for Ban of Azumah, Fenech Fight," *op.cit.*

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

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crazy now [for agreeing to box].” He asserted that he felt stronger and smarter for the fight and believed that the fight should go on in spite of the so-called dangers that some critics thought it could pose to the contestants. He opined that: “I’m not out to kill anyone [in the fight], but if that happens, that’s life, if I die, it would be doing what I love.”²⁷⁶

Conversely contesting the position of the A.M.A., Azumah Nelson opined that: “They are the medical people and we are boxers. . . . This is our game, this [is] what we know. When you come into this world, God gives you something, God gives you a profession. Boxing is my profession.”²⁷⁷

Regardless of their overt and covert reasons, the two “aged” retired boxers, on June 24, returned to the ring, at the Hisense Arena, (formerly known as Multi-Purpose Venue and Vodafone Arena) in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, to duel. In opposition to the position of the A.M.A., Bernie Balmer, chairman of the Professional Boxing and Combat Sport Board (P.B.C.S.B.), in Victoria, which counseled the government of Victoria on all matters relating to professional boxing and other martial arts in Victoria and administered the conduct of professional boxing and martial arts contests in the State, remarked that the Board “did not oppose the fight and accused the medical association of jumping in for publicity.”²⁷⁸ The well-known Melbourne barrister Bernie Balmer, whose responsibilities included making sure that fighters did not risk their health, added, “They [the two boxers] have both been passed as fighting fit, so we [the

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁷ “I’m going to flatten Fenech: Nelson,” *op.cit.*

²⁷⁸ “Australian Doctors Call for Ban of Azumah, Fenech Fight,” *op.cit.*

P.B.C.S.B.] have no problem with two middle-aged blokes jumping into a ring and having a go. . . . Both guys are skilled and world champions.”²⁷⁹

Considering the strong resolve which they exhibited, the boxers surely must have felt that the fight would be a blockbuster, which would entertain their fans and the world of boxing as a whole. Invigorated by their determination and inspired by the strong support they received from some of their fans, powerful groups, including the P.B.C.S.B., and some influential persons like Bernie Balmer, the former cricket champion Shane Warne, and Domenic “Mick” Gatto, alias The Don,²⁸⁰ who supported the organisation of the fight²⁸¹ and provided the gym, which Fenech trained in, Azumah Nelson, who weighed approximately 152 pounds, and the about 151 pounds heavy Jeff Fenech, defied the criticisms and engaged in the bout, which was refereed by Malcolm Bulner. The two boxers disregarded the politics of controversies, and plethora of competing views and concerns bordering on issues of health, professional ethics and morality, which, emanating from pro-fight and anti-fight schools of thought, surrounded their planned fight, and dueled.

“The Final Round” fight, which was considered as part of a long-standing epic boxing grudge and, prior to June 24, was declared by the organisers as a bout, which was committed to restoring “professional

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁰ Domenic Gatto (born on 6 August 1955) is an Italian-Australian former heavyweight boxer, who once was a serious contender for the Australian heavyweight title. It was rumoured that he was involved in the Melbourne underworld.

²⁸¹ Stathi Paxinos, “I love you to death Mick Gatto,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 13, 2008, <http://www.smh.com.au/news/sport/i-love-you-to-death-mick-gatto/2008/05/13/1210444406680.html>. (Information was retrieved on September 16, 2010). See also Johnmichael-bric, “Mick Gatto – Heavyweight Boxer or Gang Member?” *Boxingcraft.com*, May 3, 2008, online posting, <http://www.boxingcraft.com/mick-gatto-heavyweight-boxer-or-gang-member/> (Information was retrieved on September 16, 2010).

boxing's tarnished reputation," surprisingly turned out as an uninspiring ten rounds affair.

Both boxers did train hard for the bout, but in the ring they could not camouflage their sluggishness and mask the fact that they were many years older, and many pounds heavier than when they last met in their prime. The proverbial rage and brawling spirit of Fenech "the Marrickville Mauler" was nowhere to be found. The zooming speed and strong punches of Azumah Nelson was visibly absent in the bout. Afflicted with such deficiencies, the two boxers revealed little of their old class, and catcalls of dissatisfaction, from some spectators who had paid up to 2,500 Australian dollars for a ringside seat, reverberated in the arena.

Because the fight had been denounced by some national bodies in both Australia and Ghana, the crowd that it attracted, to the ringside, was minimal and, moreover, in Ghana, where it lacked the support of the G.B.A., it could not whip up and receive a lot of popular attention. Nevertheless, it was televised live on some of the television networks in the country and attracted some Ghanaian viewership. The lack of interest in the fight by many followers of boxing in Ghana must have also emanated because the bout appeared more as a personal and commercial gimmick of the two boxers, than a serious title or championship-oriented engagement, worthy of tremendous popular Ghanaian support. In any case what the boxers were able to showcase in the bout were their determination to box and their stamina, which appeared to be good for their ages. Nevertheless, the famous vigour, dynamism and power of Azumah Nelson, who had not fought professionally for a decade, had clearly diminished.

Round one was a dawdling section. For eight rounds, Jeff Fenech worked Azumah Nelson into the ropes, using perhaps his superior fitness to throw more punches. They later “slugged it out” in the corners and stiffly exchanged some not-too-fluid punches. To tactically save their stamina, they spent some time in the corner, where they clinched and “shoulder-wrestled” each other. That sensible boxing strategy was not exactly scintillating for most of the spectators who had gathered to watch a match filled with speed of body and conditioned by rapid and fluid exchange of power-infused punches. The boxers did not receive many cheers for their demonstrations. Perhaps the largest cheer of the night went to the bikini-wearing dame who held the number cards up between rounds.

As the fight progressed into the last two rounds, Fenech refused to engage in an exchange with Azumah Nelson. He “ran” and “danced” around his opponent. Fenech’s tactics of evasion, however, attracted boos from the not so large partisan crowd, which was disappointed because it had assembled to watch a fight not a show that looked like a “dancing rehearsal.”

After the fight, he admitted in an interview with Fox Sports, which is an Australian group of sports channels, that after a big strike was unleashed to his ribs he used those tactics to evade any late injury in the bout. In defence of his actions he said that: “I know it was not the old Jeff Fenech, but hopefully it was smarter.” He also added that: “I had to make sure I got protected as much as I could. . . . Azumah Nelson is a great, great

Apparently, the bout failed to fully capture an optimum patronisation from the public. The approximated 11,000 seat stadium was about only two-thirds full, with spectators, which, interestingly, contained some celebrities and notable sportspersons who had joined the bandwagon and circus of celebrities to “see two old geezers slug it out in the ring.”²⁸³ The notables included Shane Warne, rugby league player Wendell Sailor, Australian Football League (A.F.L.) stars Rene Kink, Brendon Fevola, Matthew Richardson, and Matthew Lloyd, and businessman Mick Gatto.²⁸⁴

Finally the fighters were scored 94-96, 94-96, and 95-95, by judges Andrew Campbell, Aneeka Williams and Ignatius Missailidis respectively, Jeff Fenech, who won by a majority decision (M.D.), gleefully told the crowd that he was honoured to have a little win over Azumah Nelson. Azumah Nelson on the other hand claimed that the fight should have been a draw and was critical of the Australian’s evasive tactics late in the bout. He lamented that: “The fight is supposed to be draw . . . but you kno’ it is in his country. . . .”²⁸⁵

Commenting on that “sparring” of the “golden oldies” as to whether or not it passed as a serious boxing engagement that thrilled the spectators, *The Age* speculated the different perceptions, which the crowd in

²⁸² “Azumah Nelson vs Jeff Fenech III (6/6) Full Fight Excellent Quality,” YouTube, (9:47 minutes), uploaded by boxingheaven, June 23, 2009, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xY1vS_u7_c&feature=related (Information was obtained on January 6, 2011).

²⁸³ “How the Australian Press Reported the Azumah vrs Fenech Fight,” *Modernghana.com*. Source: *The Age*, June 25, 2008, online posting, <http://www.modernghana.com/news2/171503/2/how-the-australian-press-reported-the-a-zumah-vrs-f.html> (Information was retrieved on September 10, 2010).

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁵ “Azumah Nelson vs Jeff Fenech III (6/6) Full Fight Excellent Quality,” *op.cit.*

attendance © [University of Cape Coast https://ir.ucc.edu.gh/xmlui](https://ir.ucc.edu.gh/xmlui) might have had about the apparent mediocre performance of the two fighters. *The Age* sarcastically wrote that: “It, [the fight], had been a circus all night, and as these two distinguished gentlemen climbed out of the ring, it was hard to know if they were strongmen, lion tamers, or just clowns.”²⁸⁶

Regardless of the different popular perceptions and the views and descriptions of sports scribes about the entire boxing affair in Melbourne, the fight was important for the two boxers, who may have appeared in different shades – strongmen, lion tamers, clowns, bored-glory-looking ex-champions – to the fans of the boxing world. For Fenech, it was clear that the fight naturally gave him some emotional and psychological satisfaction since it clearly gave him the chance to successfully realise his dream of beating his nemesis.

Although he lost in the fight, Azumah Nelson at least was satisfied for being able to get the fight to take place. He had hoped that the fight would provide some funding to support his noble philanthropic agenda and it was in line with that hope that he selflessly risked his reputation and health and engaged in a fight that he considered important to his charitable endeavours. Incidentally, he, consequently, showed a high measure of aggravation and threatened legal action against Fenech’s camp when the money he hoped to get from the fight, through that camp, did not materialise up to the amount he expected. After receiving \$272,000 from the fight, Azumah Nelson alleged, in October 2008, when he visited Australia as a special guest of the Australian National Boxing Hall of Fame

²⁸⁶ “How the Australian Press Reported the Azumah vrs Fenech Fight,” *op.cit.*

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to its induction ceremony, that the Australian group, including Fenech and one of Sydney's managers Max Markson, which collaborated with him to put "The Final Round" together, owed him more than \$500,000.²⁸⁷ He claimed that he agreed to a fee of \$800,000, and that the Australian side of the agreement had done him wrong by denying him his *bona fide* financial reward.

Despite claiming in an interview with the *Herald Sun* that he could have "knocked Fenech out whenever he wanted" Azumah Nelson who lost in the bout was more concerned about the financial aspect of the arrangement, which was for a purpose. He declared that the money was not for his personal use and good but was for God since he intended to use it for charity by building a school of excellence in Ghana for about 1000 under-privileged African children. He cautioned the Australian boxer that: "I deal with God directly. Nobody does something to me and go free. He (Fenech) is going to put himself in a big problem."²⁸⁸ He added, "Big trouble. God will become annoyed with him, then his children will suffer. . . Today you think you are free but tomorrow you are not."²⁸⁹

However, the Australian and his side refuted the Ghanaian's allegations. Fenech claimed that Azumah Nelson should be satisfied with the \$272,000 that was paid to him, because the money that he was claiming

²⁸⁷ Jon Anderson, "Azumah Nelson versus Jeff Fenech Fight Night Cash Row," *Herald Sun*, October 14, 2008, <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/victoria/azumah-nelson-fight-night-cash-row/story-e6frf7kx-1111117742395> (Information was retrieved on September 10, 2010).

²⁸⁸ Jon Anderson, "Jeff Fenech to Azumah Nelson: There's no Secret Stash," *Daily Telegraph*, Source: *Herald Sun*, October 15 2008, <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/sport/jeff-fenech-to-azumah-nelson-theres-no-secret-stash/story-e6frefxni-1111117756015http> (Information was retrieved on September 14, 2010).

²⁸⁹ Jon Anderson, "Fenech owes me \$500K: Azumah," *Fox Sports*, October 15, 2008, <http://www.foxsports.com.au/story/0,8659,24499190-5009280,00.html> (Information was retrieved on September 14, 2010).

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did not eventuate because of the fight's inability to create the public interest expected. He stated that: "Azumah should be over the moon with what he's got, which is more than I ended up with. . . . To my knowledge he was never promised \$800,000 or a figure like that." Moreover, "We both hoped to make more money and our expectations were high but it didn't turn out that way."²⁹⁰ He later explained that when they first agreed to fight, he thought, "who is going to come and watch us?" I'm a critic of old boxers coming back, but once we agreed to it, I made sure it was done properly."²⁹¹

It was approximated that 23,000 homes paid to view the Hisense Arena fight on T.V., and that, according to Fenech, was a lot fewer than what the promoter Max Markson and the fighters had hoped for. Fenech, however believed that the promoter did a good work and added that: "Yes, it was his (Markson's) first fight promotion, but he worked his arse off." Furthermore, Fenech stated that Markson "was brilliant with the publicity."²⁹²

Speaking to the press in October 2008, Fenech, in defence of himself and Markson against Azumah Nelson's charges, said that: "If anyone wants to check my bank accounts, go ahead. There isn't any secret stash." He then explained that his side ended up giving away a lot of tickets and so had it not been for his friend Mick Gatto who sold a whole lot of tables there would have been a lot less money. Markson also said that the fees for the two boxers were dependent on ticket sales and P.P.V. figures,

²⁹⁰ Jon Anderson, "Jeff Fenech to Azumah Nelson: There's no Secret Stash," *op.cit.*

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*

²⁹² *Ibid.*

On his part Fenech contended that, as 40-plus years old boxers, they were well paid by Markson for their performance and added that: "Where else would we get paid that money as fighters?"²⁹³ "Maybe Azumah has been getting some bad advice. Maybe he has been listening to the wrong people" he, it was reported, added.²⁹⁴

Claiming that, for the purposes of the fight, he lost weight to make the required weight limit and promised Fenech's family he wouldn't "hurt him" in any way,²⁹⁵ Azumah Nelson, registered a discontent, which implied that his Australian "partners" had been dishonest and betrayed his trust, a trust which had even led him into a bout in which he intentionally was lenient with Fenech. "But if I know [sic] before the fight that some people tell lies, then I would have knocked him out," Azumah Nelson said. "I tried to fight him like I was sparring with him, because he don't know how to box. First fight, second fight, third fight, he don't know how to box . . . just walk up going bang, bang, bang. . . . After the fifth round he was puffing like a cow. He was so tired I had to hold him up."²⁹⁶

Having had a "cold" relationship with Azumah Nelson over the money incident, Fenech and Max Markson said that they were ready to sit down with the Ghanaian to discuss the issue and the latter's complaints, face to face and directly.

So that was, by the way, the post-match row, which emanated

²⁹³ Jon Anderson, "Fenech owes me \$500K: Azumah," *op.cit.*

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁵ Jon Anderson "Azumah Nelson versus Jeff Fenech Fight Night Cash Row," *op.cit.*

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

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between the two old boxers who organised perhaps the most controversial post retirement boxing spectacle in boxing history. Whether the 40-plus-years old boxers, in their engagement on June 24, 2008, appealed and appeared, or did not, to the world of boxing as “mad men,” “stupid geezers,” “strongmen,” “bored businessmen,” “cash hunters,” “lion tamers,” or “clowns,” it is a fact that, in their prime, these boxers were fierce and skilful boxing “gladiators.” They were simply in the category of champions.

A Review of the Boxing Brilliance of Azumah Nelson

The boxing genius of Azumah Nelson was unquestionable and his record in active professional and title-oriented boxing, which formally ended in 1998, gives testimony to that fact. In that epoch of boxing victories, which was largely characterised by numerous K.Os., of some of the most hard-to-break boxing contenders, from different parts of the world, he showcased his boxing prodigy and, for his excellence, he gained recognition in the world of boxing and sports as a fierce globetrotting boxer and champion who possessed amazing strength, flawless dedication, incredible courage and perseverance, and inspiring discipline. He possessed all the qualities of a perfect and celebrated national and continental hero of sports, boxing and popular culture. He was young, witty, adventurous, spiritual, entertaining, chance taking, stubborn, tactical, stylish, and proud of his modest Ghanaian and African origins.

Although Azumah Nelson can be ranked with other notables from Africa like Marcellin “Le Bombardier Marocain” Cerdan, the French *piéd noir* who learned his boxing craft in Africa (Algeria and Morocco), Roy

and D.K. Poison, he, indubitably, is extensively acknowledged by boxing fans and critics, including José Sulaiman, as the greatest of the fistic sport ever to come out from Ghana and Africa. In Ghana, he has received a number of awards including one of the country's highest honours – the Order of the Volta – which rewards creativity, innovation, excellence and hard work among Ghanaians.

What about his place on the international scene? He, within the feather/super-featherweight division(s) that he ultimately operated in, was simply prodigious. No problem! Compared to “the oldies” or “old-old timers” like Willie Pep, Sandy Saddler and Eusibio Pedroza, it could be said that they were all good, but when one looks at the quality of opponents that Azumah Nelson fought and the speed associated with the fights of his time, then one could say, debatable though, that those legends in their time fought in slow motion, which could not be matched to the fights of Azumah Nelson's time. With respect to Salvador “Chava” Sanchez, who was Azumah Nelson's contemporary, he was a fistic genius. With a T.K.O. he stopped Azumah Nelson on the Ghanaian's first but “rush” attempt at a world title, and the latter has continued to give him much reverence for that. However, Azumah Nelson, who was fond of saying that: “Nobody beats me twice,” continuously stated that he regretted that Sanchez died

²⁹⁷ Hogan “Kid” Bassey (M.B.E.) was born Okun Asuguo Bassey in Creek Town, Calabar, Nigeria in 1932. He took the name Hogan Kid Bassey when he became a professional. He was Nigeria's first world boxing champion. He had a lot of stamina and a strong knockout punch. He died in 1998.

²⁹⁸ Cornelius Boza Edwards was born on May 27 1956 in Kampala, Uganda. He was a once the world junior-lightweight boxing champion. He took the W.B.C. world junior-lightweight title from Rafael Limón with a fifteen round decision in 1981 at Stockton, California. He kayoed Bobby Chacon in thirteen rounds in his first defense bout and lost the title to Rolando Navarrete by a K.O. in round five.

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early, because it made it impossible for them to meet again, at a time when he, Azumah Nelson, would have been really prepared to avenge his defeat. Nevertheless, what was apparent was the fact that Azumah Nelson established himself, after the death of Sanchez, as the indubitable best that the world saw in the feather and super-featherweight levels. It is, however, impossible to know for sure if Sanchez reached his peak or could have reached the peak, which Azumah Nelson attained. Azumah Nelson reached his peak and his record supported an excellent career of boxing greatness. Because he dominated the two lower divisions (featherweight and super-featherweight) of international professional boxing, by beating the rest of the greats of his time, for about a decade and a half, the renowned connoisseur of international boxing, Bob Arum admirably called him the “legend of legends.”

As the years flew by and generations of boxing lovers and aficionados in Africa and the international boxing world, and especially Ghana, grew and evolved, “Azumah Nelson” was that one name that was (and has been), synonymous with “champion.” Clearly, it was his preserved legend and excellence in the ring and his international fame, which the media helped to generate, that catapulted him into the list of nominees for International Boxing Hall of Fame on January 8, 2004. Having made history as the first continental African to be selected to that hall, he was inducted on June 13, 2004. For his discipline, legend, contribution to society through sports, and boxing prodigy he has received other international awards of which some will feature in the discussion in the next chapter.

So, how did this multi-nicknamed boxing gem manage to chalk such an admirable record of great victories, attain a long and durable tenure as champion, and enjoy a career of superb boxing? What was his secret or were his secrets for his fineness, which brought him national and international honour and fame?

All professional boxers or boxers who hope to and/or make a career in boxing nurture the idea and hope to succeed. They anticipate gaining more victories, having enduring reign as champions and, enjoying celebrityhood. Hence, within the intrinsic occupational and career culture of boxing, boxers do construct, as tools for their survival and success, certain attitudes, techniques, aspirations, illusions, ideas, beliefs, and structured roles. These constructs which are lived, played out, and internalised by the boxers, are made to motivate and assist the career of the boxers within and outside the ring.

Normally at the genesis of a career in boxing, a boxer becomes impressed with the notion of exercise and partakes in the ritual of training. A boxer also internalises the idea of the need to train to improve his/her physical condition, acquire and sharpen the skills needed to win fights, and to avoid unnecessary injuries. The devout boxer sees training as the primary tool for success and trains rigorously to keep in shape at all times to avoid the dire consequences of not training. When the boxer attains such a status as to be sought after by promoters and the crowd, for example as a champion, the boxer assigns a specific interval for training before bouts. Since victories in bouts are fundamentally imperative for all occupational boxers in their quest for successful careers, boxers tend to devise means

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which they believe will ensure their victories. Before and during a bout self-confidence is important. Given that in the unpredictable career and journey of boxing, which are full of ups and downs, bouts are erratic, occupational boxers, either by themselves or with the cooperation of their managers and/or coaches, usually have or devise superstitions, which tend to create confidence, emotional control and security for them in their career. Some may believe that by eating certain foods, they will win, because such foods will give them strength. Consistent with this attitude others may insist on wearing or carrying into the ring of fight the same garment or robe, which they wore when they won their first fight. In consonance with this mind-set, some may even keep charm pieces, “magical” amulets and/or Bibles or Korans in their lockers. Many intensify their religious or spiritual outlooks and kneel down in the ring to say a prayer before fighting. Some may insist on not allowing women to watch them train because that would bring bad luck to them. Thus superstitions and certain beliefs form an important and functional part of the career culture of occupational boxers. This is fundamental because on their career journey, and in the face of an up and coming bout, and in the process of training, occupational boxers become adjusted to a fragiley balanced physical and emotional state, and frequently are irritable, restless, edgy and anxious. They, therefore, naturally tend to grow dependent and susceptible. These situations then make superstitions, coupled with optimistic support from their fans and technical team, a tool which consciously or unconsciously bolster the confidence of career boxers, whether they are champions or aspiring to be champions.

Career boxers naturally regard their bodies, especially, their hands, as their main tools-of-trade, and devise means to protect them. For example, they create, develop, and rely on varied formulas for preventing hand injuries, like swellings, fractures, and excessive pains. In their quest to protect their hands, which is their main equipment needed for their trade, develop their bodies, and improve and/or enhance their successes or chances of success, the boxers continually seek assistance in the form of recipes, panaceas, and exercises.

Moreover, occupational boxers involve themselves in a scheme of relationships and traditions, which focus upon building and/or enhancing confidence. The boxing tradition is full of legends of feats of exceptional fighters, and so to boost their confidence and aspire for greater heights in their career most occupational boxers tend to draw inspiration from past and present outstanding “boxers.” Apart from copying the modes of training, the style and general movements of such boxing greats, as ways of becoming successful, the boxers may have the pictures and sculptured images of their icons in their gyms, homes, and closets, or in pendants, which they keep on their bodies. The boxers use such visual images as guides to assure themselves that they can become like or are like their role models. Some may wear their icon’s garments, for example trunks or socks, or take the names of legends or, in training camps, endeavour to sleep in the bed that an icon once occupied. All these customs, which may seem as idolatry and/or appear as products of superstition, but functional to those who adhere or practice them, looks toward the viewpoint of the practitioner’s quest of “occupying the shoes [or gloves]” or taking the role,

Additionally, accomplished or up and coming boxers may practise religio-spiritual exercises like yoga, and, those who are superstitious or believe in Providence, visit psychics, mediums and religio-spiritual experts to rely on their assistance to know the outcome of fights, and/or through arcane spiritual techniques, manipulate fights in their favour. Others may only stick to physical exercises, abstain from certain lifestyles like smoking and drinking of intoxicants, and/or periodically, fast to condition their bodies, and/or seek out portions, vitamins and other means of advancing their fortitude, attentiveness, effective punches and general success. These become the secret tools of occupational boxers.

Career boxers are single distinct contestants who are compelled by a definite feeling of self-centredness, and driven by the character of boxing. They are therefore always expectant of occupational climbing, which is necessary for celebrityhood and social recognition. There is, therefore, another “secret” technique, which they develop as they embark on the quest for advancement, victories and success. This is the development of a spirit of determination and reliance on a kind of persevering courage, referred to as “fighting heart,” which means a boxer must in principle “never admit defeat,” must “never be afraid of the opponent,” and must always “keep his/her eyes on the big prize.” Boxers who develop these techniques internalise the belief and lingering optimism that their determination and exhibited courage will ultimately bring them to the victories and success which they aspire. This was true in the case of Azumah Nelson who recounted that: “Determination was the major key for my successful

As a child and adolescent, he internalised the idea that he would succeed in whatever capacity of work he found himself and become a source of economic redemption for himself, family, and other needy people. That determination compelled him to have confidence in himself. Consequently, he conveyed that confidence into the sphere of boxing during his days as an amateur and through his period as a professional. Through his sweet victories and knowledge about the glory of local and international boxing idols and legends, he came to understand that within the realm of boxing, and sports in general, there was only one position and designation, which brought recognition to athletes. This was the position and label of champion, and an athlete's ability to acquire, protect, and dominate such a position for a long time were sure ways of guaranteeing for the athlete a long and enduring period of recognition, fame, and excellent career in sports, especially in boxing, which was his field of interest.

Having been dished a spoonful of local publicity and having tasted a little of the stimulating “wine” of stardom in Ga-Mashie, Ghana, and Africa as a whole, during his heyday as an amateur, he came to like both – publicity and celebrity. Consequently, he, naturally, could visualise and comprehend what the glory and fame of being an icon at the professional level would be like. He, naturally, envisioned a celebrityhood, which would far surpass that which his amateur victories had brought him. As he became professional and clinched titles at the African and Commonwealth levels, he further enjoyed glory and eminence. In those situations he intuitively

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came to have a deeper understanding about the obvious boons of stardom, and he confidently felt that he could be and should become a world recognised star, champion, millionaire, and legend and have the world of boxing to acknowledge his excellence for a long time. Consequently, when his “lucky break” came and an opportunity was created for him to compete against Salvador Sanchez for a world title, Azumah Nelson, with a determined and courageous spirit and physical and psychological fortitude, fought valiantly and impressed the world of boxing. Even though, he did not succeed for the first time, the world of boxing recognised him and was ready and eager to witness him compete for a title again. When another opportunity opened for him, through the instrumentality of Don King and Ringcraft, to challenge a world titlist – Wilfredo Gomez – Azumah Nelson, by relying on his wits, skills, strength, ever present confidence and determination, and inspired by popular support from Ghana, went into the fight and ultimately clinched the title.

After attaining the position of a titlist Azumah Nelson maintained, within him, a “yes-I-can,” “go-for-glory,” and “never-say-die” psyche through the rest of his days as a champion and professional boxer. These he, practically, translated into “I-am-born-to-be-a-champion,” and the idealistic “I-will-be-a-champion-forever” mental outlooks which, serving as psychological stimulants, encouraged him to persevere and maintain his position as champion and an excellent boxer throughout his active and tedious and uneasy boxing career. Incidentally, the career, within which his stardom was to manifest, was not easy. He recounted that:

The painful body bruises (hematomas), facial cuts

(abrasions) and swellings (contusions), and, sometimes, the inadequate financial rewards, and the feeling of homesick (nostalgia) for family and country when training and fighting overseas, at times, were frustrating and discouraging. However, my desire to secure my future financially, the anticipation for victories, as rewards at the end of such difficult undertakings, and determination to bring fame and honour to myself and country, which brought me priceless happiness, kept me going in a career which was filled with tension, physical punishment and tiredness (fatigue).²⁹⁹

Apart from the power of determination, which contributed to his success as a boxer, he nurtured and developed other personal qualities and perceptions, which played their roles in his success. These factors, which he referred to as “life skills,” he believed could make a person who applied them well or otherwise to succeed in sports, business or education. Within the scheme of such life skills was the principle of adequate preparation before fights, which included hard work, maintaining a disciplined life of training, respecting one’s opponent(s), and recognising one’s own strengths and the weakness (es) of opponents. “If you step into a ring without having done the training you are likely to fail dramatically, so too [in] life.”³⁰⁰ Moreover, “You have to work hard in training. For me it was hard work and it was most of the time difficult, but I knew that success was impossible without that.”³⁰¹ “[So] over the years and throughout my career as a professional boxer, I have come to realize that lazy people can’t be successful in any arena of life.”³⁰² He recalled that: “Preparing well for a fight, through adequate psychological, spiritual and physical training and

²⁹⁹ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

³⁰⁰ Nii Anum Telfer and Azumah Nelson, *Azumah Nelson, The Professor. 12 Rounds of Boxing and Life*, 2009, p. i

³⁰¹ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

³⁰² Nii Anum Telfer and Azumah Nelson, p. 2.

Moreover, Azumah Nelson knew that team work was very important in life. So, in the context of boxing, he knew and believed that without a team, comprising a manager, promoter, coach, trainer, corner persons, and family, there would be no boxer or winner. Therefore, he respected his team and paid attention to its guidance and advice, and relied on it for positive and cheerful support, which had a progressive impact on his career. In addition, the ever present support he received from his fans, particularly from Ga-Mashie, and ultimately from the Ghanaian nation as a whole, was a great boost to him and his performance as a boxer. Apparently, he was conscious that his victories brought happiness and honour to his fans, country, and continent. Conversely, he was aware that defeat, laziness, and any misdemeanour on his part would, naturally, bring sadness, shame, disappointment, and disgrace to his followers and the numerous people that his personality, discipline, and victories inspired. He was a boxer, but also was an inspirer of persons. His victories were made by him, but ultimately they were made to satisfy his fans. He, therefore, through his career, was mostly conscious of satisfying his fans and being a worthy ambassador for his country and continent. That consciousness and the ever present support he enjoyed from his fans and the Ghana government compelled him to give his best during fights and, in life outside the ring, abstain from lifestyles like laziness, complacency, fixing of matches, drug use, smoking, and drinking that could tarnish his image and reputation, bring disgrace to his country, and diminish his strength and

³⁰³ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit*
579

fighting power. He stated that: “Sure, without my team and encouragement from the support I continued to receive and enjoyed from my fans, particularly from the people and government of Ghana, who I always wanted to make happy, I would not have been successful.”³⁰⁴ In addition, “my desire to make my fans happy and ultimately myself proud, gave me the power to develop an effective secret weapon – a sharp focus – in the ring during fights.”³⁰⁵

Throwing light on his secret weapon of focus he revealed that: “During training, I stay focused on the practice routine. In the ring, I stayed focused on my opponent(s) throughout the match. My mind cannot wander; it must always be on the assignment at hand. I do not think about the crowd, I think about my performance all the time.”³⁰⁶ Furthermore he explained that he closed his mind to the crowd because, “I could easily get distracted by the cheering and roaring of the crowd, but that will have a negative effect on my performance.” So adherence to such a sharp and consciously generated focus and concentration in the ring contributed to his achieving a lot of victories, which were important markers of success in his chosen career and quest for fame. “My reason for entering rings of fight was one thing: success. That was the big picture I always carried in mind from my days as an amateur through my days as a professional.”³⁰⁷

Irrefutably, as Azumah Nelson confirmed, adherence to and application of what he referred to as “life skills” in his career, and the enjoyment of support from his fans, enhanced his strength, skills,

³⁰⁴ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁶ Nii Anum Telfer and Azumah Nelson, *op.cit.*, p. 8.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

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discipline, focus, victories and general success in boxing. However, time management was also an important tool of his and he divulged that: “My ability to manage time was also very crucial in my success in boxing. A boxer, likewise any other professional, who does not manage his time very well will not succeed.” He claimed that his childhood and youthful days inculcated in him the habit of good time management. During those days of hardships he managed his time well and used it productively to do his household chores, go about to do odd jobs to get some pocket money, practise his amateur boxing, and spend time with family and friends. He disclosed that: “I did not ignore that quality and habit as I progressed in boxing.”³⁰⁸ Moreover, “In boxing there is time to train, a time to rest, and a time to compete.” In addition, “Time management is important and should be adhered to even within boxing itself . . . winning a round, or ultimately the match, depends on two things, good performance and time management.”³⁰⁹ Clearly, Azumah Nelson combined two things – performance and time management – very well in his career. He claimed that:

I divided my time well and prioritised my daily activities. So I did not waste time chatting and partying at the expense of my training and preparation for fights. I made sure I stuck to a timetable, which gave me time to do [social] work, be with family and friends, and train and prepare for fights. This kept me [psychologically] balanced and [stress] free, and contributed to the successful career I had, and made me a person who was also able to stick to (perform) his social and familial responsibilities on time.³¹⁰

Azumah Nelson had a long reign as an excellent boxer and

³⁰⁸ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

³⁰⁹ Nii Anum Telfer and Azumah Nelson, *op.cit.*, p. 5.

³¹⁰ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

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international champion. Evidently, the quality of self-discipline, the gift of national support, his unquenchable quest for honour and adherence to the “skills of life,” his superior boxing talent and skills, and his patriotism and love for country and continent were contributing factors for his long tenure of boxing greatness and a superb career. However, apart from these factors, he mostly adhered to the rules of the sport cultivated the skill-centred ability to often land powerful and accurate punches. These qualities contributed in constructing and consolidating his legend. In addition to these qualities, he believed that the strong faith that he had in God was also a major key to his accomplishment, excellent career, and fame.

As a Christian, he had a strong belief in God, since his childhood days. This must have contributed in shaping for him a strong mental fortitude and confidence, which supported his idealistic conviction that he would succeed in his chosen career. Faith and convictions of people are created through different means. Faith, which is inspired by people’s belief in animate and inanimate things, concepts, chance, science, and ideologies, is for many people a necessary tool for success and the reason and need to live or even die. It is obvious that people do and can do extraordinary, amazing, and paranormal things, through faith. Faith can “push” people to do things far beyond their nature-given capabilities. Some people, for example, because of their “faith” may succeed in walking barefooted on fire hot coals without getting burnt. Additionally, it can make people to take strong actions against a particular status quo, without the fear of suffering unfavourable consequences. Clearly, Muhammad Ali’s faith in the Nation of Islam was a major force that compelled him to challenge the U.S.A.

government on its policy of conscription and war in Vietnam. It was that same faith, which cost him his title, which made him resolute against and ultimately triumph over the persecution he suffered from the government. It was that faith that contributed in the building of his fame as a national icon and acquisition of the status of an international boxing legend. Although he was not a lazy boxer, and was aware of that, he, because he had faith, believed also that Elijah Muhammad and Allah had a hand in his success and remained loyal to his religious cause and course. Additionally, it was common to hear the British boxer Prince Naseem Hamed, who used to be a world bantamweight and featherweight champion, articulating, during interviews, his loyalty to Islam and his strong belief in the Prophet Muhammad and dependence on Allah, because of his faith which makes him to believe that his actions, including his fights were divinely guided.

What was characteristic about Azumah Nelson from his childhood days to his days as a professional was his belief in the miracle of prayers and divine predestination. Therefore, at the height of his boxing career, he became a member of a Ghana-spawned Christian [Spiritual] Church – Apostles Revelation Society (A.R.S.), which was founded by Prophet Charles Kobla Nutornutsi Wovenu who “was followed by many adherents from every station in life,”³¹¹ and whose fame as “Man of God” (Mawu fe Ame) came to national and public notice when Lt. General Ankrah, the Chairman of the National Liberation Council junta which overthrew the C.P.P. government, selected him to officiate the Christian ceremony to

³¹¹ D.E.K. Amenumey, *Outstanding Ewes of the 20th Century: Profile of Fifteen Firsts*, Vol 1, Accra: Woeli Publishing Services, 2002, p. 143.

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³¹¹ D.E.K. Amenumey, *Outstanding Ewes of the 20th Century: Profile of Fifteen Firsts*, Vol 1, Accra: Woeli Publishing Services, 2002, p. 143.

spiritually dedicate the Christiansborg Castle, as the seat of government on May 22, 1966.³¹² The Church had a reputation for believing in metaphysical revelations, divine guidance, and prophetism. Members believed in the clairvoyant and clairaudient gifts of their Spiritual leader, Mawu fe Ame Wovenu, and understood that divine Providence was essential for the attainment of a successful life.

D.E.K. Amenumey has revealed that the “Prophet was someone who extended hospitality in the most spontaneous way to . . . [people] who visited him,” and that “people in need of spiritual help or counsel went regularly to Tadzewu, [in the Volta Region, where he was based].” The subsequent answers to the prayers of such visitors led them to become members of his Society.³¹³ Amenumey divulges that within that category of the many “faithful” could be counted Azumah Nelson.³¹⁴ Consequently, Azumah Nelson, who was a follower of the Prophet, believed that Providence was a major contributing force to and of his success, and he has continuously articulated that “divine intervention” is necessary for success in all endeavours of life. Evidently, it was his dependable faith in the power and guidance of Providence, which made him to develop the habit of asking his supporters to literally pray for him before he fought. Moreover, he made it a “custom” to say a “thank you” to God in most of his post-match interviews.

Speaking about his life and faith, he affirmed that: “I am a strong believer in God. I invite God into all things I do . . . with God all things are

³¹² *Ibid.*

³¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*

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possible.³¹⁵ He added that: “The practice of inviting God into my affairs and endeavours through prayers and fasting has brought me to where I am in boxing and on the international scene.”³¹⁶ However, simultaneous to that mindset was his belief in physical training as a key to success.

To be a successful sportsperson one must think fast, stay alert, make quick and accurate decisions, avoid drugs, live a healthy life, obey the law, learn from your mistakes, believe in yourself and never give up. I applied all these concepts in my boxing enterprise.³¹⁷

These qualities and concepts, which he internalized and endeavoured to live, also facilitated his rise to fame. He, on the balance, was for that reason, a pragmatic and knowledgeable boxer who understood and knew the power and effect of physical training to the sport and performance in it. He, as a realistic boxer, therefore, knew that physical training and effort were necessary for success in boxing and life in general. Hence, he believed that his strict adherence to physical training and life skills, and dependence on God made him succeed in his career. For that reason he remarked that:

Believing in God does not mean you should not play your human and physical part to achieve success. There is a saying that, “God helps those who help themselves,” therefore we must make sure that we have done all that is in our physical and mental power to excel.³¹⁸

In a nutshell, Azumah Nelson’s strong faith in God afforded him a psychological boost and power to pursue his career with confidence, which evidently yielded positive results and made him Ghana’s most celebrated boxer.

³¹⁵ Nii Anum Telfer and Azumah Nelson, *op.cit.*, p. 13.

³¹⁶ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*

³¹⁸ Nii Anum Telfer and Azumah Nelson, *op.cit.*, p. 13.

A review of Azumah Nelson's trade and showmanship in the ring, projects him as a confident fighter. As a fighter he did not allow his confidence to wane when his opponents and their fans tried to out-stare him and/or make some irritating or deflating remarks or gestures against him.

Throughout his active career, he largely maintained and expressed tactical self-confidence through the maintenance of a strong focused mind, a healthy physical condition, and the employment of brilliant body movements in the ring. His ability to retrieve his strength quickly and place his opponents' off-balance earned him his victories. His morale was supported by his ability to out-slug, out-spar and to absorb punishment. He exhibited his ability of not going down and out-manoeuvring his opponents, by changing his style in whole or part, during fights.

All occupational boxers and champions are typed or labeled by their style and their *modus operandi* in the ring. Fenech, for example was a "mauler,"³¹⁹ hence his nickname "Marrickville Mauler." It is difficult to classify Azumah Nelson's boxing style, because throughout his fights he displayed his capability of being able to change his style in whole or in part at will. He had a reputation for not being a "tanker," or someone who went down easily. Capable of fighting as a "butcher," he was recognised by his tendency to hit hard and ruthlessly when his opponents were helpless. He also possessed the qualities of a "miller," or a "continual swinger," and a boxer who saved his energy by fewer movements. He was a fighter who craftily combined, in a sophisticated way, the qualities of a "puncher,"

³¹⁹ In boxing terminology a "mauler" is an inside fighter who tries to prevail by smothering his opponents.

“miller,” “mauler,” and an energy-saving “boxer.”

In an attempt to describe the complex and eclectic nature of Azumah Nelson’s fighting methods, the experienced U.S.A.-based trainer, Joe Goosen, reportedly, remarked admiringly that:

If you saw him once, you never forgot his style. . . . He had a beautiful brawling style when he wanted to, one-punch knockout power, and he could put on a virtuoso boxing exhibition when he wanted to. . . . He could do anything.³²⁰

In short, Azumah Nelson was, noticeably, a “smart” fighter and “versatile” boxer who was capable of improvising and reformulating his styles, devising original punches and leg movements, cunningly out-maneuvring opponents, and unleashing compensatory hostility, deadly impulsiveness, and quick reflexes to defend himself, and finish off opponents in vital split seconds. “He was smart. He knew what he had to do in the spur of the moment. I don’t think he even needed a game plan,” was how Gabriel Ruelas once applauded Azumah Nelson’s versatility in the ring and his virtuosity in boxing.³²¹

Certainly any student of the history of the fistic sport of boxing, within the context of Ghana and Africa, has to place Azumah Nelson’s name at the top of the list of Ghanaian and African champion boxers who transcended and influenced the sport, became famous through it, and through their efforts, internationalised the African flair in and for the sport.

It is a fact that within the account of the emergence of renowned champions, in the context of Ghana’s boxing history, pioneer titleholders like Roy Ankrah and D.K. Poison entered the sport and career before

³²⁰ “Boxing: Best African Fighter,” *op.cit.*

³²¹ *Ibid.*

Azumah Nelson did. They also hit the international scene as good boxers before Azumah Nelson. Nevertheless, the latter is well known and widely celebrated in Ghana and on the international scene than those pioneers and even other champions like Nana Yaw Konadu, who for some time was Azumah Nelson's stable-mate,³²² and Ike Quartey. For the latter day boxers, like Konadu, Quartey, and Alfred Kotey, their reigns compared to Azumah Nelson just did not last for long, and so memory about them is weak if not so little in the minds of boxing aficionados.

For the early pioneers, whose victories were first to put Ghana on the international boxing map, it can be posited that, unlike Azumah Nelson, they were products of a period, which did not allow them much international publicity. Ankrah for example operated at a time that Ghana was very much under British control. His visibility, which evolved from and largely took shape within such a restricted and controlled political and cultural environment, was therefore ordained to be minimal on the international scene. Hence, his popularity mainly manifested itself within the periphery of British Commonwealth's competitive boxing. D.K. Poison, who enjoyed some support from the government, was also unable to get the needed international exposure through the media and his tenure was also truncated abruptly. That lack of media exposure, particularly through the medium of satellite and cable television significantly deprived him of wider global recognition, even though he was a W.B.C. titlist.

Although, these boxers are known in Ghana, their accomplishments,

³²² In boxing lingo "stable-mates" are fighters who train at the same gym or under the banner of the same promoter.

unlike that of Azumah Nelson, are not boldly etched on the minds of many. The career and accomplishments of the latter flourished in a different political, social, economic, and technological milieu. The situation, which he largely operated and thrived in, was one which ultimately allowed him to undertake wider travels, and made available conditions which assisted his professional personality, fights, and accomplishments to receive greater media coverage, and supported him to enjoy publicity on the international scene, and to have a resilient and vibrant environment of national acclaim, which without a doubt was nurtured and enhanced and a longer period of durable patronisation from the Ghana government.

Apart from becoming a globetrotting champion who fought in different parts of the world and defeated opponents in their backyards, often in front of their kith and kin, and thereby made a mark on the international scene as a renowned and courageous “smart fighter,” Azumah Nelson was perhaps lucky to have nurtured, cultivated, and made a professional career during an age when the technology of electronic and even cyber-media communication was fast maturing. This period gave him the possibility, hitherto unthought-of or scarce, of appearing easily on a worldwide stage to showcase his talent and skill. Such showcasing, through the underscored technology of communication, naturally, popularised his image, skills and accomplishments and contributed in inserting his name and feats in the awareness of many followers of boxing in Ghana and on the international scene.

His professional breakthrough emerged at a time that the television technology was fast maturing and becoming an easy to access global

commodity. This was during an age when the multi-media of satellite and cable television, capable of showing live matches and interviews across the globe was becoming accessible and/or had become democratised. Again the video phenomenon also helped to widely promote his image and name, because it made it easy for his fights to be recorded and disseminated to the public and sports fans in Ghana and on the global scene. Consequently, it helped to publicise and project, nationally and internationally, his image as a great boxing genius from Africa.

His supporters in Ghana and different parts of the world, without being by the side of the ring, on many occasions saw him in action. Such visual gifts of his fights gave many boxing fans a firsthand insight into his power, skills, and victories, which naturally endeared him to the fans. Recorded videos of his fights have immortalised him, and, serving as quick archival and reference material, they keep his talent and internationally acclaimed prodigy alive. They, therefore, have continued to position him and his career as a major source and issue of popular discourse on boxing and popular culture. Consequently, most boxing enthusiasts, especially Ghanaian fans, have become or are more knowledgeable about Azumah Nelson and his career than they are about pioneers like Roy Ankrah and D.K. Poison. For Roy Ankrah and D.K. Poison, it was only a handful of supporters, at the ringside, who saw them fight. Video recordings on them do not abound in the same way as they do on Azumah Nelson to remind fans about their fights and accomplishment. This is why, perhaps, popular recognition of them, in the national and international milieux, as great boxers has not been as strong as that of Azumah Nelson.

Another explanatory factor for the sharpness of his acclaim is that Azumah Nelson operated largely during the era of the P.N.D.C., and the government supported him and promoted his image through the issuance of goodwill and congratulatory messages as he fought. His image as a national hero was thus promoted by the government, which took special interest in his fights, since his victories did not only enhance the country's image internationally and inspire some of the nation's youth, but helped to create periods of national we-feeling and unity which are necessary for nation building and peace. These media publicities and political support, coupled with his sheer showmanship, sportsmanship, boxing virtuoso, and his victories, which incarnated him as a national and international boxing hero, has made him simply, far and away, the greatest and well-celebrated African boxer of his time. In Ghana he is the unsurpassed and most celebrated "pug" – boxer – of all of the twentieth century Ghanaian professional boxers and champions.³²³

³²³ Some of the notable boxers of Ghana's Boxing Hall of Fame are Roy Ankrah, Floyd Klutei Robertson, Attuquaye (Atukwei) Clotney, and D.K. Poison. Another is Ike Quartey, Snr., who was the first Ghanaian Olympic Silver medallist. He won the medal in Rome Olympics in 1960. He also won Gold at the Perth Commonwealth Games in 1962. Eddie Blay was a top amateur boxer. He won a Bronze medal at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, a Gold medal at the 1962 Commonwealth Games in Perth, Australia and a Gold medal at the 1966 Commonwealth Games in Kingston, Jamaica. Prince Amartey won Bronze at the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich., Germany. Sulley Shittu won Gold medal at the 1966 Commonwealth Games in Kingston, Jamaica and another gold medal at the 1970 Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh Scotland. Flash Emma won a Gold medal at the 1970 Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh, Scotland. Raymond Narh won a Gold medal at the 1998 Commonwealth Games in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Adama Mensah, a heavyweight, won a Gold medal at the 1978 Africa Games in Algeria. Stephen Dotse, a light-flyweight, won a Gold medal at the 1990 Africa Games in Cairo. Others are Ike "Bazooka" Quartey, and Nana Yaw Konadu.

IS IT JUST ABOUT THE PAIN (AN ETHOS OF BRUISING)?

Introduction

Apparently, sports are more than games, play and entertainment. Furthermore, sports (including modern boxing), as social constructions, have dynamic interrelations with political systems, ideology, social class, gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality.¹ And modern boxing has more to it than bodily pain and bruises. It has more to it than being just an art of attack and defence with the fists. It transcends the concept of an affair where two contestants, matched in weight and ability and wearing padded gloves, box bouts of three to fifteen rounds and, generally, observe the code set forth in the Marquess of Queensbury rules. Boxing has more sides of meaning and value than the “exoticised” and more visible public side of it, especially at the high levels, as an individual and competitive quest for glamour and riches. It is interesting, for example to note that Cress Welsing² declares modern boxing, of the twentieth century, as a highly symbolic activity. She posits that it is embedded with certain encoded and visible symbols which impact at the subconscious and unconscious levels of the brain-computer, escaping conscious level screening and control over the behavioural outflow that has been stimulated by the symbol and symbolic. Thus, according to Cress Welsing, the symbolism and symbolic elements in the behaviour of boxing can be decoded. Once decoded and defined they can reveal and explain the existence of the phenomenon and

¹ Jay Coakley and Janet Lever, “Sport,” in Edgar F. Borgatta and Rhonda J. V. Montgomery, (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Sociology*, New York: Macmillan, 2000, p. 2985.

² Frances Cress Welsing, M.D., is a general and child psychiatrist in the U.S.A. who has an interest in interpreting the symbolic play of children and symbols in dreams.

problem of racism, “the problem of the colour-line” in the U.S.A. and on the global scene.³ Cress Welsing equates racism with what she perceives as “white supremacy.”⁴ She defines it as “the local and global power system structured and maintained by persons who classify themselves as white, whether consciously or subconsciously determined.”⁵ Racism, according to Cress Welsing, “consists of patterns of perception, logic, symbol formation, thought speech, action and emotional response, as conducted simultaneously in all areas of people activity, (economics, education, entertainment, labor, law, politics, religion, sex and war),”⁶ to prevent what she calls “white genetic annihilation.”⁷

Through time and societies, sports, including boxing, have had multiple meanings. As Coakley and Lever have argued “sports come in many forms, and those forms can have, [do have and will continue to have] many different associated [inner] social meanings and [values].”⁸ They indicated that: “organized sports were implicated in processes of social development and the structure of family life, socialization and education, identity formation and government policy, commodification and the economy, and globalization and the media.”⁹

Boxing as an “Elevator” or “Debaser” of Boxers: A Review

Evidently the sport of boxing, especially modern boxing and its behaviour and symbolism, also has meaning. Apart from influencing the

³ Frances Cress Welsing, *The Isis (Yssis) Papers: The Keys to the Colors*, Chicago: Third World Press, 1991. See “The Symbolism of Boxing and Black Leather,” in *Ibid.* p. 209-218.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. i.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. ii.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Jay Coakley and Janet Lever, *op.cit.*, p. 2985.

⁹ *Ibid.*

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categories mentioned by Coakley and Lever, boxing also influences other spheres of social life, including health.

An insight has been provided in the previous chapters, particularly the first three, into the roles that boxing has played in human society. In its rudimentary state as a bare-knuckled fisticuff combat, it had been natural to many human societies. In its transformation as a gloved and refereed combat, it has become a globalised cultural activity and a sport with tremendous commercial powers.

The chapters have revealed how this “form of basic human competition” existed in the ancient cultures and civilisation of Pharaonic Egypt, Sumeria, the Indus Valley, and the Graeco-Romans, as evidenced by archaeological relics and historical records.

Furthermore the chapters have also revealed how boxing manifested itself as a popular sport in eighteenth century England. In addition the chapters discussed how that English construct of modern boxing found its way into the imperial dominions of the British, to ultimately become a globalised commodity. The discussions also shed light on how the sport and its cultural contents manifested in Gold Coast, where it has remained as a popular sports which has been dominated largely by the Ga especially the Ga-Mashie.

In addition to the exposure that the chapters gave to the religious, economic, recreational, health, political, racial and ideological functions, which boxing as a sport has played in distinct societies, they also threw light on its historic roles within and impacts on international diplomatic relations. The discussions tackled the issue of how boxing, for example,

served as a tool of cultural imperialism of the English during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and how it became a weapon of ideological warfare and propaganda for the competing blocs during the Cold War era.

When it was perceived and discussed from a conceptual angle, boxing could be viewed as a sport which has been pursued by some groups of people and societies because historically they have had pro-pugilistic habitus cultures. Attracting especially the proclivity of Ga-Mashie, the first indigenous community to give it greater roots in Ghana, the pugilist culture and fisticuff craft of modern boxing, reasonably can be said to have easily found currency within the popular culture of Ga-Mashie, because that society possessed an original department for pugilism. In the light of this observation, this study agrees with Bourdieu that people or groups gravitate to certain sporting behaviours because they have certain disposition to sports, and in order to understand why they move to certain sports one has to know such characters and outlooks. In the context of that thought Bourdieu has posited that:

one would be likely to make serious mistakes if one attempted to study sporting practices [such as boxing] (more so, perhaps, than with any other practices, since their basis and object is the body, the synthesizing agent *par excellence*, which integrates everything that it incorporate), without replacing them in the universe of practice that are bound up with them because their common origin is the system of tastes and preferences that is a class [group or ethnic community] habitus.¹⁰

According to Bourdieu,

the logic whereby agents incline towards this or that sporting practice cannot be understood unless their disposition

¹⁰ See P. Bourdieu, "Sport and Social Class," in C. Mukerji and M. Schudson, (ed.), *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies*, Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991, p. 367.

towards sport, which are themselves one dimension of a *particular relation to the body*, are reinserted into the unity of the systems of dispositions, the *habitus*, which is the basis from which lifestyles are generated.¹¹

The indigenous martial culture of Ga-Mashie that accommodated *nomo* tradition, which venerated strong masculine bodies because they represented beauty, hard work, and were necessary for defence, also respected the fighting art and sport of *atwele*. Such natural and cultural outlooks to the body, and existence of an indigenous respect for *atwele*, which subsequently developed and shaped *Asafo Atwele* within the milieu of urban colonial Accra politics, provided the cultural “pull,” – the *pugilistic habitus* – for Ga-Mashie to easily embrace modern boxing.

This sport which gained acceptance among the Ga-Mashie people eventually became an important part of Ghanaian popular culture. It produced local, national and international icons from the Ghanaian population, especially from Ga-Mashie. Azumah Nelson has been one notable product of that development. An insight has been provided into his childhood days, local environment, and ethnic origins. An attempt has been made to explain why he went into boxing. In the light of that attempt the social, cultural and economic factors which compelled him to join the sport have been discussed. Apparently, joining boxing was a way of living his indigenous Ga-Mashie culture. It was a way of living a prevailing *habitus* of his indigenous environment. Additionally, light has been shed on his failures, difficulties, and accomplishments in that field during his days as an amateur. Information has been provided on his ultimate entrance into the

¹¹ *Ibid.*

professional scene. His boxing undertakings, obstacles, trials, and major bouts in the international limelight of professionalism, which incarnated him into a continental and international icon, have been discussed. Insights have been provided into his struggles in life as a boy and adolescent. What is of further significance is the insight that has been provided into how, regardless of the difficult socio-economic conditions which surrounded his birth and childhood days in the harsh realities of the squalid spatial conditions of Central Accra, he remained focused and achieved national and African recognition as a great boxer and sportsman. He had such recognition at the national, Olympic and Commonwealth levels of competitive boxing. How as an adolescent he worked to support himself and family, and with determination and improvisation he endured the difficult rigours of amateur boxing, and obstacles and disappointments of professional boxing, has been discussed. More importantly has been the discussion about how he navigated and became a world acclaim fighter and boxing celebrity whose iconographic image has loomed big in Ghanaian, African and within the international iconography of the popular culture of boxing and sports in general.

As reflected in the previous chapters, the sport of boxing has revealed itself as a tool for mediating racial issues and concerns, as was done by Muhammad Ali in the U.S.A. It has also been used to enforce group and ethnic identity as has been done by Ga-Mashie, which considers itself and is proverbially known in Ghana as a quintessential boxing ethnic group. What is more, it has served as a tool for the negotiation of personal identities, whereby people with non-regal backgrounds have used it and

become “key figures” and those in obscurity have used it to achieve international acclaim and wealth. This can be seen in the lives Joe Louis, Muhammad Ali, and Azumah Nelson. As underscored, Azumah Nelson even used boxing and his victories in it as a platform to articulate comments, couched in Pan Africanist and trans-African nationalist verbal idioms, his views to the world on his identity as a Ghanaian and African.

Moreover, from a theoretical perspective Eldridge Cleaver in *Soul on Ice* conceptually presented boxing as a representation of masculinity for the so-called “black” and “white” racial groupings in the U.S.A.

Boxing as a social activity and a subject of popular discourse elicits and has over time invited near schizophrenic and schizoid responses¹² from people by either captivating or repulsing them. It is cherished or despised, applauded or criticised, and leaves some persons indifferent.

Whereas some individuals¹³ and groups like W.M.A. have advocated that boxing should be banned on the basis that it is an anti-human sport, and incompatible with good healthy lifestyle, boxing has been seen as a powerful aspect of popular culture. It has gained the participation and attention of the so-called underprivileged in society, as well as some of twentieth century’s political figures and international icons in other fields of endeavour. Examples of the former include Theodore Roosevelt, Adolf Hitler, Idi Amin, Nelson Mandela, I.K. Acheampong, and J.J. Rawlings.

¹² See Gerald Early, “Hot Spicks versus Cool Spades: Three Notes Toward a Cultural Definition of Prizefighting,” in David K. Wiggins (ed.), *Sport in America: From Wicked Amusement to National Obsession*, Champaign, Illinois: Human Kinetics, 1995, pp. 319-331.

¹³ For example Gerald Early advocates that professional boxing should be banned and amateur boxing, which, in his view, is more sanely supervised, kept and offered in colleges. See Gerald Early, *ibid.*, p. 328.

Such elements were drawn to the sport and played roles in it, not as professionals, but as amateurs and *aficionados*. This was because of their love for the aesthetics of the sports and more importantly the conviction that the sport could functionally bring about positive ideological, health, recreational social and political changes to their beings and society as a whole. From the previous chapters it became clear that two heads of state in Ghana, I.K. Acheampong and J.J. Rawlings showed a great interest in boxing. They supported the careers of D.K. Poison and Azumah Nelson respectively. As politicians they knew the relevance of boxing to the promotion of the image of Ghana on the international scene and they were not ignorant of the benefits that their governments and Ghana could derive from the victories of these boxers. The international victories of the boxers were good recipes for national cohesion and solidarity.

For its aesthetics as a scientific display of self-defence and a physical exercise for shaping the body, boxing was pursued and given attention by a leader like Theodore Roosevelt. His childhood days, university years at Harvard, and tenure as the twenty-sixth president of the U.S.A., when he led “the strenuous life”¹⁴ featured him in boxing engagements. Roosevelt “had boxed with gloves at Harvard University,

¹⁴ It was the name of a speech that Theodore Roosevelt gave before the Hamilton Club in Chicago, Illinois on April 10, 1899. See Theodore Roosevelt, *The Strenuous Life: Essays and Addresses*, e-book, New York: Bartleby.com, 1999, on <http://www.bartleby.com/58/> (Information was retrieved on October 23, 2010). Reflecting Roosevelt’s own personality and life experience the speech basically preached that the highest form of success and splendid ultimate triumphs came not to persons who desired mere easy peace but to those who leading the strenuous life did not shrink from danger, from hardship, or from bitter toil. It posited that those who did not embrace the strenuous life, however, did not live meaningful lives because the strenuous efforts of overcoming hardship were ideals for a better life.

sparred with Mike Donovan, a former bare-knuckle middleweight champion, and received John L. Sullivan at the White House.”¹⁵

Adolf Hitler saw physical exercise through sports and gymnastics as important for the production of “physically powerful” versatile and bold individuals needed to build a nation. In the light of that thought he perceived boxing as an important tool needed within his wide framed agenda of nation building. In chapter two – “The State,” – of his *Mein Kampf* he expressed and emphasised his interest in boxing thus:

Here especially one kind of sport must not be forgotten which in the eyes of many ‘nationals’ [folks] is considered as brutal and undignified: boxing. It is incredible what erroneous opinions are current about this in the circles of the ‘educated.’ That the young man learns to fence and then goes about fighting duels is looked upon as natural and honourable, but that he boxes is supposed to be brutal! Why? There is no sport that, like this, promotes the spirit of aggression in the same measure, demands determination quick as lightening, educates the body for steel-like versatility. If two young people fight out a difference of opinion with their fists it is no more brutal than if they do so with a piece of ground iron.¹⁶

Moreover, he added that:

Also it is not less noble if one who has been attacked wards off his attacker with his fists instead of running away and calling for a policeman. But above all the young and healthy boy has to learn to be beaten. . . . Thus the meaning of sports [and especially boxing] [in the folkish State] is not only to make the individual strong, versatile and bold, but it has also to harden him and to teach him how to bear inclemencies.¹⁷

¹⁵ David Nasaw, “Fisticuffs,” *The Nation*, N.Y.: The Nation Company, L.P., February 28, 1987, p. 262-263. That work reviewed Elliot Gorn’s *The Manly Art: Bare-knuckle Prize Fighting in America*.

¹⁶ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, (Complete and unabridged), John Chamberlain, et.al., (eds.), New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1940, p. 616.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Nelson Mandela also boxed as an amateur because of the sport's acclaim as a noble art of self-defence. In his *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*, Mandela wrote that:

Although I had boxed a bit at Fort Hare, it was not until I had lived in Johannesburg that I took up the sport in earnest. I was never an outstanding boxer. I was in the heavyweight division, and I had neither enough power to compensate for my lack of speed nor enough speed to make up for my lack of power. I did not enjoy the violence of boxing so much as the science of it. I was intrigued by how one moved one's body to protect oneself, how one used a strategy both to attack and retreat, how one paced oneself over a match.¹⁸

Apparently, other perceived race and health-oriented implications in and of the sport attracted him to amateur boxing. He was also captivated by amateur boxing because of the mental energy and physical verve it gave him in his daily struggle and "fight" against apartheid. It was in the light of such perceptions that he added that:

Boxing is egalitarian. In the ring, rank, age, color, and wealth are irrelevant. When you are circling your opponent, probing his strengths and weaknesses, you are not thinking about his color or social status. I never did any real fighting after I entered politics. My main interest was in training; I found the rigorous exercise to be an excellent outlet for tension and stress. After a strenuous workout, I felt both mentally and physically lighter. It was a way of losing myself in something that was not the struggle. After an evening's workout I would wake up the next morning feeling strong and refreshed, ready to take up the fight again.¹⁹

Boxing therefore has been seen from different perspectives by different people. Certainly, it is its appeal as a complex and an interesting

¹⁸ "The Struggle is my Life," Boxing, Part Four, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*, December 10, 1994, online posting, <http://archives.obs-us.com/obs/english/books/Mandela/pp167box.html> (Information was retrieved on October 5, 2010). See also Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: the Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*, Boston, New York, London: Little, Brown and Company, 1994, 1995.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

sport, which possesses deeper social, economic, political and cultural significance and purposes that has allowed it to remain as an important and popular sport and career followed by groups and pursued by individuals worldwide. There is no doubt that boxing, which has attracted and continues to attract the desire and “passion”²⁰ – a complex sense of a love for a suffering – of occupational boxers, can elevate or debase. It is apparent that it can help and hurt, and can give “self-possession” or “self-dispossession” to those who find it desirable. Occupational boxers are aware that just as their trade, which they love and endure the suffering that goes with that love, can liberate them from the clutches of absurdity and social obscurity, it can also lead, trap and incarcerate them in the very state of existence of marginality, social obscurity and pain from which it can liberate them. If a boxer falls into the wrong hands of an insensitive cheat of a promoter, no egalitarian relationship will exist between them. There will be no true partnership. The relationship that will exist between them will be nothing more than an unequal one between a pugilistic prostitute – boxer, and a pugilistic pimp – promoter. The former will sell his body in agony in the ring to make money for the latter. It is common for boxers to toil during their heyday and make a lot of money, but retire with nothing financially substantial to live on because they were “pimped.” They were exploited by some promoters and managers, whose greed made them to exercise unfair control over the allocation of the monetary returns their “prostitutes” made from years of selling and abusing themselves in their

²⁰ Interestingly the word “passion” etymologically appears to connect to the Old French *passion*, which connects to the Latin *passionem* “suffering, enduring,” and *pati* “to suffer, endure.” See “Passion,” *Online Etymological Dictionary*, [circa 2001], <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=passion>, (Information was retrieved on November 20, 2010).

intercourse with boxing. From a health-oriented perspective, it is also true that a boxer's brain can be at times damaged, and his person transformed into a zombie-like being, through boxing. Such an unfortunate boxer will instinctively have the need to find the "earth" and will walk like a sailor on a ship in the middle of a storm, for the rest of his or her life. The lives of Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali are practical illustrations of this aspect of the argument. They became international icons and key social and political figures in the U.S.A. Yet, because of blows to their heads, their days after retirement were spent, health wise, in a state of "social death" and pain caused by symptoms of boxing-induced mid-brain damage and dementia. Boxing can make occupational boxers the best or the worst in the world. It can even take their very lives from them – death. Thus there is no doubt that like all other sports, professions, and human endeavours, which possess aspects of physical and psychological torture and are inherently laced with degrees of risk, boxing has a negative and positive side. All professions attract people because of a passion that those people have for them. They have inherent pains. Yet people love to suffer such pains which emanate from their professions.²¹

The future of boxing is unknown. In the face of calls from critics for the sport to be banned, it is only time that will tell whether or not boxing,

²¹ Professionals acquire a formidable array of skills, habits, and understandings to master their fields. Their quest to succeed in their professions leads them to acquire an orientation and commitment to utilise their skill to accomplish a mission that transcends the self. The pursuit of that mission, in spite of inherent dangers and/or fun, inspires passion. Pursuing "noble" missions are often painful, yet it is the pleasure which the accomplishment of those missions bring that makes people to pursue such missions. The pleasure and pain/suffering that people find in their professions and missions produce passion for and in those who pursue them. Passion, whether painful or pleasurable, both energizes the mission, for example of occupational boxing, and provides an enduring emotional reward – victory and fame, that goes beyond physical pleasure or pain.

especially professional boxing, will see a proscription on the international scene. Currently, very much alive and legal globally, it is still popular in Ghana where many up and coming boxers are aspiring to become like the legendary Azumah Nelson. For Azumah Nelson boxing was a positive sport. Fortunately for him, boxing a sport which he continues to call or refer to as his life: “boxing is my life,” gave him self-possession instead of dispossession and rewarded him with international acclaim instead of obscurity. He got out of the sports – retired – in time to risk living a boxing-induced Frankenstein-like life of pain and suffering, engineered by symptomatic neurological damage and/or *pugilistica dementia*. So far, since his retirement, he has not showed symptomatic signs of punch drunk syndrome²² and he is smart, attentive, mentally alert and fast, and work effectively as a boxing consultant, father, national icon and philanthropist.

As a social product of his indigenous society, a society whose association with a martial culture and fisticuff tradition made it easy for it to embrace modern boxing and project it as an important cultural activity and product, Azumah Nelson joined boxing in Ghana and made a livelihood from it. He created a sterling career from it. He applied it to further inscribe the name of Ghana in international psyche, and utilised his iconic image which he gained from it to negotiate enterprises of social growth in Ghana and for Africa as a whole. He transcended some of the

²² Boxers who have suffered or sustained midbrain damage often find themselves in that condition. Commonly associated with this condition are slow speech, slowness in comprehending what is said to the diseased boxer, thickened voice, loss of blink reflexes, and flattened and expressionless face, because the nerves that control the facial muscles necessary for signaling facial expressions no longer work. Additionally, the diseased boxer exudes tremors, becomes slow in thinking in words, which produces a loss of ability for verbal articulation, and loses balance, which produces a shuffling-like movement and slow walking gait in the boxer. The ability of the boxer to recall also becomes impaired.

narrow and at times uncomplimentary interpretation of the sport as an uncivilised exercise in animal brutality; a bloody spectacle, which at worse can be fatal and dangerous and at best can bring physical wealth. In his historical study Sammons estimated the sport as “one of the supreme anomalies of our time (twentieth century).”²³ Boxing, which in 1824 gained the name “sweet science of bruising”²⁴ was and became, within the context of Azumah Nelson’s life and career, more than just a producer of bruising and quest for prize money. It was, as he has consistently declared, “my life. It has made me what I am today.”²⁵ When an orphan, at the S.O.S. Village in Tema once asked him that: “What do you gain from boxing?” he answered the orphan that with and through boxing “he raises the flag of Ghana in the international sporting arena and also makes himself popular and rich.”²⁶ Indubitably boxing was not just a sport, and a “show business of blood” which Azumah Nelson joined because of a need to play and/or to satisfy a sadomasochist urge. He perceived boxing and it became a negotiator of identity for him. Significantly, it was, as he perceived the sport, a tool to shape and support his identity as a Ga-Mashie person, realign and re-orientate his socio-economic standing and status, and make him a key figure. Additionally, it was a means for him to etch the name of Ghana and African boxing prowess into the consciousness of the powerful world of international sports and diplomatic relations. This was an

²³ J.T. Sammons, *Beyond the ring: The role of boxing in American society*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988, p. 235.

²⁴ Gerald Early, “Hot Spicks versus Cool Spades: Three Notes Toward a Cultural Definition of Prizefighting,” *op.cit.*, p. 319.

²⁵ Azumah “The Professor” Nelson alias Samuel Azumah Nelson, (hereafter Azumah Nelson), 51 years old, personal interview, at his restaurant in Central Accra, October 5, 2009.

²⁶ Frank Mensah, “Azumah Nelson, the Modern Hero,” *Graphic Sports* (hereafter *G.S.*), March 24-30, 1992, p. 3.

important way of enhancing international recognition for Ghana. Moreover, it was also viewed by him as a tool to use and a platform to launch himself as a social activist in order to impact meaningfully on Ghana's (and Africa's) agenda of social advancement for the people and communities. His persuasion of boxing, within the context of sports as a popular culture in Ghana, as he hoped, moved him from financial poverty to economic independence. More importantly, he has become a local hero for Gama-Mashie, a national icon, and a symbol of hope and inspiration for many youth in Ghana. He has gained international acclaim. As a philanthropist, employer and entrepreneur, and a national and continental diplomat, he, as would be subsequently discussed in detail in the following pages of this chapter, has given a plethora of support to society. Such broad notion of society includes the different contours and concentric rings of spheres of groups of individuals and peoples such as his extended and nuclear families, friends, and different and various Ghanaian and African youths and communities.

Significantly, he has committed himself to the quest of helping his country, and continent to approach, from an organic level, the issue of poverty eradication from the spheres of formal and sports education. In the light of that commitment to assist, he has embarked on an enterprise to set up an academy complex to educate and train talented but needy children and youth, through formalised curricula in moral instructions, vocational education, sports training, and literacy and numeracy, to become self-reliant.

Having explored, from the third to fifth chapters, how the ring proved to be a springboard that catapulted Azumah Nelson to fame, an insight has been provided into his entrance into stardom. A discussion was made about how “boxing and the ring” served as bridges that carried him into the enticing, other-worldly universe of local and international V.I.Ps., and “celebrities.” The following exploration, in this chapter examines and discusses Azumah Nelson’s legend beyond the ring. Furthermore it significantly explores and evaluates his life as a family man, social person, philanthropist, and national icon that has worked and is contributing to improving the social and economic conditions of individuals and communities in Ghana and by extension Africa.

Without the Boxing Gloves: Azumah Nelson as a Husband, Father and Family Member

The transition of Azumah Nelson to fame from the level of a continental amateur champion to that of an international professional champion basically manifested from between 1979 and 1984. That transition also engineered major transformations in his personal life and that of his family. One significant change that took place in his personal life was marriage. The other was the long cherished idea of making and providing a comfortable place of residence and home for himself and his mother and family. Having dated Beatrice Nana Tandoh for some time Azumah Nelson decided to abandon the life of bachelorhood and marry her for them to make their own nuclear family. Meanwhile he planned to acquire a new place of abode where he and his wife would start a family and live comfortably. He married Beatrice. He also undertook his world

boxing title engagement in 1984 and after winning the title which brought him some money and fame, he realised his dream of acquiring a house for himself. He bought a house, which had V. 7 as its registration number, at Community 9 in Tema where he and Beatrice moved to live and start a family.²⁷ Azumah Nelson started to combine responsibilities as a husband, family member who took care of his extended family, and boxer.

The couple lived in that location until sometime around 1987, when they moved to New Achimota, a location which in comparison to Tema, was in proximity to the boxer's familiar Accra Central. Although the move was necessitated mainly because Azumah Nelson completed the building of a new ultra-modern mansion, which had a swimming pool and a gym to facilitate his boxing training, he wanted the transfer in order to be close to the business nerve centre of Accra and to his relatives and old social contacts.

As a husband and champion he also found space in his busy schedule to see his siblings and parents. This body of relatives had been a major source of inspiration and motivation for him as a boxer. He kept a strong relationship with his brother Joseph alias Sagacious, who also experimented with boxing and aspired for professional greatness. Joseph, however, became and remained as one of Azumah Nelson's confidants in his boxing posse. As Azumah Nelson emerged on the scene as African, Commonwealth and World champion, Joseph, whom he had always protected together with his other siblings, frequently accompanied him to

²⁷ Azumah Nelson, 53 years old, personal interview at Foodies Restaurant, Osu R.E. Accra, February 10, 2011.

most places. Sagacious tagged along as the champion moved in pursuit of fights. Azumah Nelson, who wanted to use boxing to improve his financial conditions and that of his family, was not enthralled and happy with Joseph's engagement in boxing. Apparently, the latter was not as good and talented as Azumah Nelson. Although the latter had tried to be as good in the sport as the former, he proved to be naturally ill-equipped for a promising future in the sport. This situation bothered and worried Azumah Nelson, because he knew that his brother could not make a boxing career as a successful fighter. As a senior brother, he knew however that his younger brother could become an important member of his technical (corner) team and be his immediate right hand man. He also envisaged that a strong association of the two would give Joseph some understanding into some of the basics in boxing. Furthermore he knew that such an association with his team would give Joseph some comprehension about managerial procedures and administrative ideas in boxing which he could use to set up a boxing school and train fighters. As Azumah Nelson attached his younger brother to himself, Joseph gradually gave up the idea of becoming a boxer like his brother. He remained in the champion's camp as one of his *aides de camp*, and Azumah Nelson provided him with material and financial needs. Having found an ideal and higher cause in boxing by becoming a prominent part of the Azumah Nelson winning team, Joseph remained very close to the brother. This closeness has continued to this day.²⁸ The association was highly beneficial and rewarding. It provided him with some financial assistance, and technical insight into the basics of boxing

²⁸ *Ibid.*

techniques, coaching and administration. Joseph utilised these rewards and ideas in the establishment and running of the Sagacious Boxing Gym, at Adabraka, Accra, which gym has continued to train a lot of up and coming boxers in the capital city of Ghana. The success of his brother, who he had helped to make a career in boxing not as a fighter like himself, but a trainer of fighters, was satisfying to Azumah Nelson. Devoted to Joseph and his parents and other siblings was Azumah Nelson. As he traversed the path of professionalism and celebrityhood, he committed himself to helping that extended family of his. All his childhood days and years as an amateur, he knew he had a life-time responsibility to support his family. This he had toiled to do. In his days as a professional and a champion, when he started to make bigger purses of cedis and dollars from his fights, he continued to pursue that noble cause. Nothing compelled him to forsake his family because:

They, [my family members] were my first associates and supporters. . . . I had seen and experienced poverty with them, and so when I became big (a star), I knew that the time had come for me to take care of them. I ensured that if I had the means I provided them with their basic needs and wants. This I have continued to do.²⁹

Neither did Azumah Nelson devoid his life of acts of charitable donations and the character of being philanthropic. In addition, he took care of his nuclear family as a husband and a father.

The privileges [and fortunes] that I could not get as a boy and child, especially the necessities of life such as proper formal literacy [and numeracy] and education, I decided to give to my children. . . . I also decided to be a good husband and make my wife happy.³⁰

²⁹ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

According to the boxer,

Beatrice had been a close supporter since my amateur days and did not lose faith in me. She liked me for me at that time, and so when I became a celebrity, I knew that she deserved to be happy, taken care of, and respected as my wife. . . . I realised that many women were attracted to me, but I realised that most of them were only interested in my fame. It was for the devotion of Beatrice to me that made me to concentrate on her and to avoid the temptation of womanising which easily comes with greatness in sports.³¹

Having proceeded into marriage, from a sporting life in which he had largely been absorbed in a Spartan-like regimen of training, he did not find it professionally rewarding to indulge in the tempting life of womanizing which is a common associated feature in the world of male stardom. Life with a woman of his heart, as wife, was heavenly, and he enjoyed it. Champ disclosed that Beatrice was well-balanced, sensitive, an inspiration and a good wife to him. Furthermore, he stated that: "I needed order in my life, and she provided it as a good wife."³² With his fame, media publicity and tough well-muscled body the boxing celebrity became a sought after male specimen by many women and a sexual magnet to the "foxy ladies" in particular. However, he rigidly avoided them and their temptations. He did not succumb to enticing feminine blandishments from the foxy ladies in Ghana and those he encountered outside Ghana. With Beatrice in his life, he did not "chase the skirts" but paid attention to his business and family. He was committed to his wife who had a well formed body, naturally beautiful, and statuesque. In addition she was a strong willed woman who was protective of her possessions and her man. The two

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

were lovebirds and the boxer was enamoured by her. Beatrice continued to support her husband's career until her death. She remained a great fan of the boxer. She rooted, cheered, and praised her boxer-husband's victories, and nursed his bruises and wounds. There were times that she also travelled with the husband on his competitions and provided moral and matrimonial support to Azumah Nelson. On occasions that her globe-trotting performer and celebrity husband was away, either gracing ceremonies with his presence, fighting somewhere or moving from one place to the other in search of fame without her, she waited patiently and never scolded him or complained. She was the boxer's partner in life and boxing career, and she never complained when they were inundated by invitations for the celebrity to attend social functions. She supported her husband to prepare for his flights when he received his plane schedules to fly out to fight. The boxer was doing what he was made and meant to do – fight, entertain, and be available and accessible to society. Apart from her position as wife and mother of the children they had together, it was the moral, emotional and physical support she gave to the boxer, the companionship she provided, and the strong willed protection she gave to him from the foxy ladies that have continued to keep strong memories of her in the mind of Azumah Nelson.

The couple had three children – a boy and two girls. The first born was David Aruna Nelson. He was followed by Dorinda, who was followed by Doris. Modest and culturally conscious Beatrice was in full support of her husband's assistance to his extended family. She supported her husband's enterprise of restoring, renovating and expanding his father's

house in Mamprobi. Azumah Nelson, also, as a way of giving back to his family, and living up to his responsibility of helping that group, acquired for his mother a car. Moreover he obtained a house in the neighbourhood of Dansoman in Accra and made his mother the owner of that house.³³ That new home and neighbourhood meaningfully had most of the needed social infrastructures which her old deprived neighbourhood of Timber Market lacked.

Remitting his father and mother, and siblings became a natural thing for Champ to do. Furthermore he did not fail to think about assisting the wider society as a whole. His acts of generosity and charity were immense and commendable. This part of him will be discussed later in this chapter. True to the projections he made in the past, when he was a struggling youth and amateur, the prize money he made from a career as a celebrity of professional boxing, enabled him to accomplish those familial and social responsibilities. Life with Beatrice, who made Azumah Nelson a proud father, lover, and husband, was satisfying. The money flowed in and the family could buy whatever they wanted. They had afforded to get a big and sumptuous house at Achimota, away from the dilapidated stretch of Jamestown, Ussher Town and Mamprobi, where Azumah Nelson spent most of his childhood days. Whenever Azumah Nelson was not fighting or engaged in any social event, he stayed with his wife and children and played with them and showed his love and affection as a father and husband. The family on occasions attended social functions, like receptions and parties. They could also be seen at boxing matches, including some of

³³ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

Azumah Nelson's. For example Beatrice was in Birmingham and celebrated joyfully with him in the ring when he defeated Pat Cowdell.³⁴ However, Azumah Nelson's matrimonial bliss with Beatrice was short circuited in 1991, when Beatrice after battling with cancer, for about a year, died. The loss of his wife was devastating. Disturbing his emotional, psychological and physical balance, which are relevant for maintaining focus and good training in a career in boxing, the loss nearly cost him his title to Jeff Fenech when the two fought for the first time. It is worthy to note that in his match with Pernell Whitaker, the sickness of his wife, impacted on him and contributed to his loss. Furthermore, in his fight with Jeff Fenech the excruciating pain of his loss of Beatrice and a lack of high concentration affected his output. He found himself battling on two fronts. Fighting the challenger was physical. Fighting the pain of losing a loved one was psychological. Such a divided attention, which was stressful, contributed to his mediocre performance which led him into a draw with the challenger. However, consolation from family members and friends were therapeutic. The sympathy that emanated from the entire nation was soothing. These contributed to soothing and healing the pain, but did not remove the memory of Beatrice from his mind. The relations of Beatrice and his external family, mother and sisters, were very helpful in taking care of his three children who were still young, especially when he had to travel to fight. They assisted in caring for them when he had to attend trainings and social functions. However, when he was not on the road, he found it

³⁴ See the video of Azumah Nelson vs. Pat Cowdell fight. See *Azumah Nelson vs. Pat Cowdell – Part 2*, YouTube, (8:19 minutes), uploaded by zendo59, June 22, 2008, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pgXJgSJ_u_rQ (Information was retrieved on November 12, 2010).

easy an obligation to be with the children and play with them in his home. They watched movies and swam together. He also would send them to school. Relying on his knowledge of cooking and taking care of one's body, which as a child he was compelled by social hardships to learn, he cooked for the children and cleaned them. He basically played the role of a responsible and single parent. He endeavoured to be a good father to the children. They still remember and are fond of those days, which were also blessed with the chains of victories which he continued to acquire in the ring.

Apart from ensuring that his children did not lack the basic needs and formal literate education which he lacked as a child, he also exposed them to the outside world by sponsoring their trips to overseas and pushing them high on the academic ladder into the realms of tertiary educational institutions. He revealed that:

I did those things for them because I did not have such things when I was growing up. Having succeeded through boxing, I felt that it was only sensible and natural for me to support my children and provide the best upbringing for them. I therefore decided to be a good father to them, let them see other parts of the world and give them the maximum support, if they wanted, and opportunity for formal education. So far, all my children, six in all, have all taken advantage of my support and are improving themselves academically.³⁵

Apart from David, Dorinda and Doris, Azumah Nelson, had three other children when he married again. Peggy was the woman he married.

Before remarrying he stayed single and led a life of a widower for some time after the demise of Beatrice. As underscored earlier, he focused

³⁵Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

on his children, family, career and social activities. Women flocked to him and his celebrity personality. Those who genuinely needed some financial help or assistance, he did his best to work them into his schedule of support. However, he avoided the fame looking ones and kept them out of his personal life. During the period of his widower-hood, many foxy ladies gave him many amorous overtures and made advances at him. However, he, still working to get over the pain of losing Beatrice, avoided them. The advances did not cease. His friends and family advised him to realign himself to another good woman as wife. Knowing that naturally he needed a woman – a wife – to manage his home, be a mother to his children, and serve as a partner in life, he reconditioned his psyche and opened his eyes and heart to identify and select a wife. It was on that trajectory of searching that he met Peggy. Instinctively realising the qualities of a wife in her he arranged and married her. She has remained his wife till date and has had three children with Azumah Nelson. The children are Denise, Dalvin, and Delory. The couple, as the story goes, met sometime in 1993. According to Champ they met informally at one social function, which the boxer attended. It was a reception which was held in his honour at the plush Labadi Beach Hotel in Accra. At the function, the boxer interacted with Peggy who was then working as a front desk administrator. Her beauty and calm composure attracted the champion.³⁶ As it turned out she was also related, as a daughter, to one of Ghana's most successful and renowned boxing managers, Yoofi Boham. Yoofi Boham is known in Ghana's boxing arenas as the person who guided and managed boxers like Ike "Bazooka"

³⁶ Azumah Nelson, personal interview at Foodies Restaurant, *op.cit.*

Quartey and Alfred “Cobra” Kotey to international fame. It was from that encounter that the boxer’s interest and admiration for Peggy grew. They continued to see each other after their first meeting at the reception. After dating for some time, not a long time though, they married. “I knew that she would be my wife when I saw and conversed with her.”³⁷

Consequently, having avoided a life of sexual promiscuity, which the trooping legions of worshipping females and foxy ladies could have given him, provided he had chosen to lead a hedonistic lifestyle, the boxing champion wedded Peggy. After shunning the temptation of a life of pelvic adventurism, which he could have easily gone into when he was a lonely widower, he married again and started a family with his wife.

With her connection to Yoofi Boham, Peggy was not a stranger to the world and sport of boxing. She understood and knew the sport. She was aware of the rigorous training schedules of professional boxers, which meant that she would be required to nurse his husband’s bruises and injuries. She knew the life of travelling which accompanied the profession, which meant that her husband would occasionally not be around her and the children. These did not bother her. She therefore provided a lot of morale support to her husband as he trained, travelled and fought. After leaving her work as a front desk administrator, she dedicated herself to the task of managing his home and taking care of the children. She has supported him in his quest to invest back in society through his numerous charitable activities. Using her experience and knowledge in the hospitality and catering industry, she has also supported him in his business ventures

³⁷ Azumah Nelson, personal interview at his restaurant in Accra Central, *op.cit.*

such as the running of a students' hostel for tertiary students in Accra, and managing their two restaurants – Foodies Restaurant – around Tudu and in Osu R.E., in Accra. It is worthy to note that, since the beginning of their marriage Peggy became and has remained a helpful life partner of Azumah Nelson.

It was from social and economic obscurity that Azumah Nelson emerged to fame and wealth. Having made it in the realm of professional boxing, the boxer has lived up to his plan to philanthropically assist whenever he could, the needy in society. He is a boxing legend who has continued to receive international and national respect. His prowess in sports is well known, but it is perhaps his activities in the realm of kindness, and of generous acts of giving gifts – anonymous and open – to the disadvantaged in society such as investing financially in society and providing outlets for those in need of jobs that solidifies his legendary position. It is such social and humane gestures aimed to contribute to social advancement in Ghana that consummate his status as a key figure. It is these characteristic qualities that make his boxing career meaningful and relevant to him and society. These are important qualities that clearly distinguish him as a venerable sportsperson and make his career an agency to social growth in Ghana.

He believed that the ultimate method of sustaining ones charitable deeds is to provide outlets and facilities that would help the needy to know how to help themselves. He believed in the metaphor that the needy should not be given fish all the time, but should be taught how to fish. It was on that path of thought that he decided that it would be necessary to use part of

his prize money to set up businesses to employ many unemployed Ghanaian youth. That mind set and commitment to society has continued even in his days of retirement. His daily life as a national hero especially during his days as an active boxer was packed with commendable small tokens of affection. He would at times stop, whilst driving any of his nice cars in the middle of neighbourhoods, especially deprived ones in Accra, like his old Jamestown, Ussher Town and Mamprobi, and exchange pleasantries with old and young fans. He would converse in such situations with various elders in those societies and whenever any person appeared to be in need of financial assistance he did his best to help. Such financial donations were mainly given to help in the paying a debt and/or school fees, or buying food and/or medicine. He would hug old women to show affection and occasionally shadow box with aspiring and “wanna be” boxers to inspire them.

Azumah Nelson’s out-of-the-Ring Life as a Social Activist and Idol

This was a boxer, a man of his people, national and local hero, who loved his people. His accomplishments in the ring during his active days were used by people, in many cases, as teaching examples to quicken industriousness and dedication in Ghanaian youth. For example R.F.G. Akilakpa Sawyerr, who served as Vice Chancellor of the University of Ghana, Legon, invited the boxer to the University in November 1985, to congratulate him for his accomplishments in boxing. Using the person and life of the boxer as teaching aids, the university professor then asked the youth of Ghana to emulate the humility, dedication and self-discipline of the champion to enable Ghana to achieve good results in all fields.

Addressing the students and youth of Ghana, the academic said that: "Azumah's feat in his chosen field should spur you on to achieve excellence in your academic pursuit, for the champion always backed his utterances with action, which is worthy of emulation by all Ghanaians."³⁸

Another interesting aspect about Azumah Nelson is that his open and anonymous philanthropy to needy children, especially orphans, and his ambassadorial role and heroic contribution within Ghana sports, have drawn local and international homage and awards of recognition. Apparently various charitable homes, for the aged, orphans and sick in Ghana received donations and support from him. Because he succeeded in using boxing to improve and develop his person, and reshape his financial condition for the better, he was able to embark on such acts of kindness to society. Such acts were all part of his quest to bring desirable socio-economic transformation in the lives of people and communities in Ghana. Boxing liberated him economically. With its associated rigorous training and demand of a life of dedication, fortitude, and morality, boxing also worked on his character and strengthened his discipline and morality. It negotiated a better life of living for him. His exemplary and iconic life, which was created through hard work, discipline and self-assurance, has served as an inspiration for many Ghanaian and African youth. Seeing his high status in society, such youth desire to be like him.

During his active professional days, he made Ghana his permanent base of residence, even though, because fights staged outside Ghana

³⁸ Frank Mensah, "Azumah - A Real King of the Ring," *G.S.*, March 3-9, 1992, p. 4.

brought more money in foreign currency,³⁹ he mostly fought outside Ghana. Whereas he could have chosen to live in the bigger economies of the U.S.A. and Europe, he chose to stay Ghana, and in the capacity of a businessperson, invested in enterprises to contribute to commerce and economics in the country. He has maintained this residential pattern even after his retirement and has continued to tend his numerous businesses and spend time with his family.

Existing as a social, family and national icon he remained in touch with his family and nation. As an entrepreneur who wanted alternative sources of income to augment what he made from the ring, he perceived that investing in the world of commerce and business would be rewarding. Such investments he hoped would provide financial security for him on his retirement. However, because such investment would also require the labour and expertise of people, he knew that they would give job opportunities for people and help the national economy. Consequently, used some of his prize-money to initiate and set up firms and businesses during his days as a professional boxer. He went into businesses like farming, animal husbandry, manufacturing of ceramic tiles and bricks for building houses, teak cultivation, and restaurants. He also established a hostel to cater for the accommodation needs of polytechnic students in Accra. He set up an industry to produce cookware. He imported vegetable cooking oil and alcoholic beverages, and went into the manufacturing of liquor. He experimented with transportation and high seas trawler fishing.

³⁹ Oko Kwatekwei, interview on the video documentary, *Nelson: Ghana. Out of Africa*, YouTube, (4:22 minutes), uploaded by marvindiggia, February 21, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZPHaCtVsdYs&feature=related> (Information was retrieved on November 18, 2010).

These were among some of the businesses of Azumah Nelson. He divulged that:

They [the establishments] were [basically] created with money I made through boxing. I established them because I wanted to give back some of my wealth to society. But I also was aware that they would help me make some income to support my future, because I knew that I will not remain in boxing and make money from it forever. I established the businesses for society and myself.⁴⁰

Commenting on their socio-economic relevance Azumah Nelson stated that:

They provided some needed services and products for the use of the country. They gave employment and financial security for various people, especially the unemployed youth, [and therefore contributed to the nation's drive towards the alleviation of poverty in the country].⁴¹

As a sports personality, he was employed by some companies for their commercial adverts. Thus, typical of sports persons like the basketball legend Michael Jordan and golf legend Tiger Woods, who have been paid huge monies by certain companies, for example *Nike* to use their images to advertise their products, Azumah Nelson, made commercial gains as he was used by some commercial companies for their adverts. For example he was contacted by a pharmaceutical company in Ghana to advertise a painkiller tablet on T.V. Furthermore, *Lennards Ghana Limited*, a footwear manufacturing company, also used his image to promote their products in the newspapers and on T.V. in Ghana.

As he made money and enhanced his social status through most of his businesses and advertising commitments, his prestigious personality

⁴⁰ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

attracted the friendship and company of some of the top personalities in the corporate world of Ghana. These included notable business gurus like Mr. Bamfo, the controller of Bamson Company Limited, which is the representative of Sikkens Car Paint in Ghana,⁴² and George Adu Bonsu, alias Benjillo, the owner of Benjillo Fabrics Company in Ghana, who was later jailed in 1997, in a criminal case in which he was implicated for transacting narcotics.

Regardless of his association with such high classed persons, Azumah Nelson remained a man of the common people. Although he bought himself some nice cars, including a very expensive chauffeur-driven Lincoln Stretch Limousine, which was not common in Ghana, he continued to mingle with the ordinary people. He hoped to use such luxuries of his, as materials to inspire the so-called struggling and ordinary people to strive hard and diligently to achieve their aims. It was in the light of that that he kept close ties with the masses and mingled with them.

I bought the Lincoln, because I wanted to reward myself for all my hard work. But most importantly I wanted to use my image and person in the car, as it cruised the streets and roads in the country, to inspire other underprivileged elements and the youth of the ghetto especially and the Ghanaian youth in general.⁴³

He hoped that it would send them the message that if, "I had made it in life they could make it too. And that with the right mental condition and

⁴² Because of his friendship with Azumah Nelson, Mr. Bamfo, popularly known in Ghana as Sikkens, became involved in the development of amateur boxing in Ghana. In 1994, for example, he and his business company provided a trophy and funds to support the G. A. B. A. to organise the Individual Amateur Boxing Championships at the Accra Sports Hall, to select a regional team for the Greater Accra. Consequently the event was called Sikkens and the organisers planned to replicate the event in other regions to select fighters to form the core of the Black Bombers. See: "'Sikkens Boxing' attracts More," *Daily Graphic* (hereafter *D.G.*), October 7, 1994, p. 15.

⁴³ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

attitude, and hard work, they could also be successful in their respective fields of endeavours.”⁴⁴

His gifts of generosity and donations of financial help and logistics to asylums of psychiatric patients and orphanages put smiles on the face of many disadvantaged. Some of the homes which have benefitted from his benevolence include the Osu Children’s Home, the Tema S.O.S. Village,⁴⁵ the Akropong School for the Blind, and the Dzorwulu Children’s Home. Intermittently, he donated gifts like sports items such as uniforms and balls, and cash to some amateur sports clubs, and keep-fit gymnastic and aerobic clubs in Accra. His outside-the-ring life of generosity, use of his celebrity personality and words of advice and encouragement, to inspire the youth to a life of hard work, self-confident, patriotism, and God fearing has not stopped. His commendable commitment to educate the youth to become health conscious and morally upright has continued unabated even in his retirement.

Admirably, his concern for society and heroism pulled and has continued to attract to him the praise, friendship, commendation, and honour from certain notable persons and organisations in Ghana and outside Ghana. In 1992, his legend was celebrated in Ghana when a special “life achievement” prize was bestowed on him at the Kumasi Brewery Limited and the S.W.A.G. award night. This ceremony was held at the Golden Tulip Hotel in Accra, to honour the nation’s outstanding sports personalities and writers. Having proclaimed March 28, 1992 as “Azumah

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ For example see Frank Mensah, “Azumah Nelson, the Modern Hero,” *op.cit.* p. 3.

Nelson Day in Ghana” for sportspersons,⁴⁶ to celebrate his legend and contribution to national sports, the S.W.A.G. presented a certificate of honour to Azumah Nelson at the function. This was for “his tremendous contribution to the sport of boxing, and in deep appreciation for being the greatest Ghanaian sports hero and setting an example to the youths of Ghana.”⁴⁷ This “Life Achievement Award,” signed by the Mr. H.P. Nyametei, the President of the Council of Patrons for the S.W.A.G. and Mr. Joe Aggrey, the President of the S.W.A.G., was presented to the boxer by the P.N.D.C. member responsible for sports affairs, Lt. Gen. Arnold Quainoo.⁴⁸ Moreover, as underscored in the previous chapter, his heroism and legend landed him in the International Boxing Hall of Fame. This was an accomplishment which has further inscribed Ghana’s name in the international mind.

These successes and sterling life qualities were the same which, according to José Sulaiman, convinced the W.B.C. to give him “the greatest respect and admiration” by conferring on him the honorific title of “the W.B.C. Emeritus Champion for Life.”⁴⁹ They were the same reasons why the W.B.C. appointed him as the W.B.C. World Champion Ambassador for Africa. This official position of an ambassador was given to him in January 1999. This occurred just a few months after the W.B.C. had honoured the boxer, by proclaiming him as the Greatest African boxer of all time, at a

⁴⁶ Perpetual Crentsil, “Lifetime Award Bestowed on Azumah Nelson,” *People’s Daily Graphic*, (hereafter *P.D.G.*), March 30, 1992, p. 15.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* See also “At the SWAG Nite at Golden Tulip,” *Sporting Times* (hereafter *S.T.*), March 31, p.1.

⁴⁹ A video recorded address by José Sulaiman to mark the launch of the Azumah Nelson Foundation. See “Azumah Nelson.” YouTube, (9:46 minutes), uploaded by cmbnoticias, September, 18, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MK-ceLIZbZA> (Information was retrieved on November 19, 2010).

ceremony during the 36th Annual W.B.C. convention in Johannesburg, South Africa. The convention, which attracted a number of international V.I.Ps., was opened by Nelson Mandela on October 26.⁵⁰ The ceremony to honour Azumah Nelson provided an avenue for him to formally announce, amidst a grand ovation from the dignitaries, his retirement.⁵¹ José Sulaiman hailed the announcement and said that it had come from a man who had lived a sporting life with dignity.⁵² The boxing icon also utilised the international exposure of the ceremony to articulate the frustration that African sportspeople and boxers go through because of the lack of proper training facilities. Thinking about the situation of African boxers in general he campaigned on their behalf and in their interest. Advocating for positive assistance to be given to sportspeople, especially for boxers in Africa, he lamented about the poor state of training facilities in Africa. He was quick and precise to add that it had denied many youths the opportunity to develop their full boxing potentials. He drew international and continental attention to the need for sports personalities to be considered as important social beings that must be immortalised in history for their contribution to social growth. He did not selfishly talk about his stardom and bask in the state of fame and glory which the W.B.C. had given to him. He indicated that it was sad that under-privileged fighters who struggle and manage to get out of their harsh environments and poor facilities and become

⁵⁰ South Africa, Office of the President, "Address by President Mandela on the opening of the 36th Annual World Boxing Council (W.B.C.) Convention, Johannesburg, 26 October, 1998," *South African Government Information*, http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/1998/98a27_0x6059811277.html (Information was retrieved on October 22, 2010).

⁵¹ See "Azumah Nelson gets Lucrative Deal," *Modernghana.com*. Source: *Daily Guide Sports News*, July 25, 2007, <http://www.modernghana.com/news2/139794/2/azumah-gets-lucrative-deal.html> (Information was retrieved on October 20, 2010).

⁵² Sam[my] Okaitey, "Azumah Nelson Made Boxing Ambassador," *G.S.*, January 22-25, 1999, pp. 1 and 12.

champions, are rarely celebrated, honoured and given their rightful place in history. He then added that most of them are also frustrated by unscrupulous and greedy foreign promoters and managers.⁵³ His plea was well noted by the W.B.C. Apparently, as Mandela in his address to open the convention had revealed, the W.B.C., had earmarked U.S. \$100,000 for the construction of two gymnasiums in South Africa.⁵⁴ This was intended to assist the country to develop its boxing, and African boxing in general, and sporting potentials. Azumah Nelson's call therefore came at a right time as it accentuated the urgent need for the development of boxing infrastructure in Africa. Furthermore, it buttressed the relevance of the generous decision and timely commendation of the W.B.C. to support the building of boxing complexes in South Africa, with one in the township.⁵⁵ It was also reported that the W.B.C. commissioned Nii Cofie Ajenkwa III, Nii Quaye Mensah and Azumah Nelson. to solicit from the government a site big enough for the construction of a W.B.C.-supported boxing complex in Accra.⁵⁶ It was also in recognition of the huge impact which the legend and personality of Azumah Nelson could have on the growth of sports and boxing in Africa that he was honoured as an ambassador. Additionally, it must have been in recognition of his potentials to inspire and educate the African youth to strive diligently to succeed in life, the W.B.C. gave him that office, shortly after the convention.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁵⁴ "Address by President Mandela on the opening of the 36th Annual World Boxing Council (W.B.C.) Convention, Johannesburg, 26 October, 1998," *op.cit.*

⁵⁵ Sam[my] Okaitey, "Azumah Nelson Made Boxing Ambassador," *op.cit.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

In a message from the W.B.C. president, in Mexico, to internationally announce Azumah Nelson's designation as ambassador, the W.B.C. promised to supplement efforts towards the building of a boxing gym in Accra to lionize and eternalise the name and memory of the boxing icon. In addition, the president stated that he was sure that with his designation as ambassador, Azumah Nelson would continue to carry his dignity "to show the children and the youth of Africa, the type of behaviour an athlete needs to reach the highest level."⁵⁷

Other honours have been done him in his indigenous Ghana to acknowledge his contribution to social growth and reward his continuous struggle to help engineer positive transformations in lives and communities in Ghana and Africa. For example, in venerating his contribution towards the effecting of changes in society for social and economic growth, and legendary SCANCOM Ghana Limited, a telecommunication company that operated the Spacefon telephone network in Ghana, and Charterhouse, a programmes and events organising group in Ghana, named him, in July 2004, Spacefon (Sports) Legend. The award was conferred, without regard to age, on an accomplished living Ghanaian personality whose life has made a mark in his or her field of endeavour. The award celebrates individual career and professional excellence that have made lasting contribution to Ghana's social, economic and/or politics. Azumah Nelson was nominated to honour him as a contributor to the growth of the social construct of boxing in Ghana. When Moses Foh Amoaning announced the

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

nomination at a ceremony at the Jazz Optimist Club in Accra, he reiterated that Azumah Nelson was being honoured,

for his exploits in the boxing ring, which united the people of Ghana and put the name of Ghana on the world map, eventually earning him a place in the international Boxing Hall of Fame, [as] the first [continental] African to receive such an honour.⁵⁸

The Spacefon award, which was formally conferred on him at an awards night ceremony at the National Theatre in Accra in September 2004, was received on his behalf by his wife Peggy. The renowned Ghanaian popular highlife music legend Abrantie Amakye Dede was the second distinguished gentleman honouree for the evening. He received the Spacefon Legend award in the music category.

Moreover, his philanthropy, iconic key social figure, and work as a social advocate, such as his crusade for the environment and its protection in Ghana, brought from the people and government of Ghana, the Order of the Volta medal to himself. It is one of the highest national laurels.

In his days an active professional boxer, he also took interest in environmental issues and embarked on tree planting exercises. This was one of his methods of advocating to the public to protect the environment. In a country where there is an apparent rapid degradation of the forest, because of bad practices such as illegal and indiscriminate logging and cutting of trees to acquire timber for export and wood for fuel, and indiscriminate mining, and poor waste management practices, his advocacy sought to educate the public about the fragile nature of the environment. It

⁵⁸ "Abrantie, Azumah Are Spacefon Legends," *Ghanaweb.com*, Source: *ghanamusic.com*, online posting, July 22, 2004, <http://ghanaweb.com/GhanaHoemPage/audio/artikel.php?ID=191461> (Information was retrieved on October 20, 2010).

sought to sensitize the public about the need to pursue practices that would protect the environment both in the rural and urban areas.

His interest in the environment also stemmed from his desire to see to the removal of the filth that has engulfed the city Accra and especially its ghettos. Filth had been and is a major contributor to the nurturing of malaria and consequently the high rate in malaria cases in Accra and parts of the country. He believed that his advocacy would sensitise the public about good waste disposal practice and help in ridding the city of rubbish. Leading an on-going crusade to salvage the environment, and using his fame campaign for good health and sustainable development in Ghana through an advocacy for environmental cleanliness and protection, Azumah Nelson attracted the attention of the Ghana government. Recognising his crusade to protect the environment, and his anti-rubbish and anti-malaria advocacy works, the Ministry of Environment and Science in Ghana, became convinced that he deserved to be honoured and encouraged to do more work in the area of environmental protection. Before the award was conferred on him he demonstrated his strong commitment to the environment when he rescheduled a trip he had to make to the U.S.A. for his induction into the Boxing Hall of Fame. He rescheduled his trip because he wanted to have time to participate in a coconut tree planting exercise at the Sakumono Beach, near Tema. This exercise was part of activities that were put in place to commemorate World Environment Day, which fell on June 5, 2004.⁵⁹ It was after this exercise that he went to the U.S.A. where in

⁵⁹ "Azumah Nelson honoured as Environmental Ambassador," *Ghanaweb.com*, Source: *Ghana News Agency* (hereafter *G.N.A.*) Boxing News, July 21, 2004, <http://ghanaweb.com>

the presence of about 2000 boxing fans, he and the Class of 2004 inductees, which included light-heavyweight boxer Dwight Muhammad Qawi of the U.S.A, former welterweight champion Carlos Palomino and bantamweight fighter Daniel Zaragoza of Mexico, promoter J. Russell Peltz, and South African referee Stanley Christodoulou, were enshrined in the Hall of Fame.⁶⁰

On Monday, July 19, the Ministry of Environment and Science conferred on him the title “Environmental Ambassador.”⁶¹ The ministry hoped that the gesture would spur the honouree on to continue to assist with the educational campaign of the ministry to raise the awareness of Ghanaians on matters of the environment.

Showing appreciation to his enduring dedicating to the protection of the environment, Kasim Kasanga, the Minister of Environment and Science, stated that: “In view of the interest shown over the years in environmental conservation and protection our ministry has decided to confer on you the title of Environmental Ambassador.”⁶²

Azumah Nelson received the award and said his poor background and beginnings had made him openhearted to all activities aimed at ensuring poverty reduction. He pledged to assist the ministry in its crusade to educate Ghanaians on proper and sound environmental practices.⁶³

Azumah Nelson, whose concern about environmental issues had been a

eb.com/GhanaHomePage///SportsArchive/artikel.php?ID=62254 (Information was obtained on October 15, 2010).

⁶⁰ “Azumah joins International Boxing Hall of Fame,” *Ghanaweb.com*, Sports News, June 14, 2004, <http://mobile.ghanaweb.com/wap/article.php?ID=59675> (Information was obtained on November 20, 2010).

⁶¹ “Azumah Nelson Honoured as Environmental Ambassador,” *op.cit.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

long standing one, believed that people were poor because they had not effectively mastered their environment. Therefore, as Environmental Ambassador, he continued to echo the need for environmental protection as a means of alleviating poverty. He undertook trips to parts of the country to spread the message. For example, he, in September 2004, went to the Western Region on a campaign to raise public awareness about environmental conservation. It was also a field trip, which he used to promote popular knowledge about Eco-Tourism Festival (ECOFEST), which had been scheduled to take place in October, in the Western Region of Ghana.

The third in a series of commemorations, ECOFEST 2004, which was conceived to operate under theme: "Water for Life," was a festival that aimed at promoting eco-tourism in Ghana, and raising national and global environmental awareness through a number of activities including seminars, photo exhibitions, durbars and international musical concert. Realising that some schools in the region, especially two special schools, lacked some basic necessities of life like good drinking water, he used the opportunity to appeal to philanthropists, public and private firms and religious organisations to give their maximum support to specialised educational institutions in the country to enable them to operate more effectively. Charitably, he presented a 10 million cedis cheque each to the Ekuasi Twin City Special School for the Mentally Handicapped and the

Sekondi School for the Deaf at separate ceremonies at Ekuasi and Sekondi during that trip.⁶⁴

His role as a major national social activist who has made meaningful contributions to the Ghanaian community of people, as highlighted, earned him the friendship of notables, in the country, including J.J. Rawlings. The President was not the only political leader who was his friend. He received respect and honour from indigenous paramount chiefs and earned the friendship and admiration of indigenous political authorities because of his service to the country and self-discipline. These leaders included the Ga Mantse, Nii Amugi II, who died in 2004, and Okuapehene Oseadeeyo Nana Addo Danquah III. His friendship with the powerful indigenous ethnic chief of Okuapeman (the Akwapem State) was cemented in April 1992, when Okuapeman bestowed on him, perhaps, the greatest of all the titles which he had received within the indigenous Ghanaian environment. In reverence of his accomplishments the indigenous Akan regal title *Barima*, which easily connotes a strong, powerful and affluent man, was conferred on him. This regal title, which can be equated to the Ga *oblempon*, was dedicated to the boxer at a grand durbar of Okuapeman in Akropong, the capital of the State. Although he had a non-regal antecedent in his own ethnic group, it was his fistic prowess and warrior spirit in the ring that had fundamentally facilitated his acquisition of that regal position among a different ethnic group. In other words, his rise to the chiefly

⁶⁴ "Azumah gives to Two Specialised Institutions," Source: *G.N.A.*, Sports News, September 5, 2004, online posting, <http://www.ghanatouristvillas.com/news2/62464/2/azumah-gives-to-two-specialised-institutions.html> (Information obtained on October 15, 2010).

position of *Barima* was possible because of the martial art and sport of boxing. The sport of boxing negotiated a regal identity for Azumah Nelson in Okuapeman. The prestigious title *Barima*, qualified the boxer as an honorary citizen and divisional chief of the Akropong-Akwapem area.⁶⁵ The Gyasehene of Akropong, Nana Ofei Nkansah, revealed the title to mean a person who is “exciting, unconquerable, unchallengeable and never to be beaten.”⁶⁶ As an honorary divisional chief, the regal title conferred the rank of *Ankobia*⁶⁷ (Ankobebe) on him.⁶⁸ This meant that he could give counsel to the paramount chief. Conferred on him on a Saturday, his elevated position in Okuapeman was accompanied by a ceremony which had all the customary attributes of an indigenous enstoolment and coronation. Having left his Achimota home, on morning of that faithful Saturday, for Akropong in a convoy and entourage of well-wishers, his lawyer Mr. Ansa Asare and his family, and his children David, Dorinda and Doris, accompanied Azumah Nelson. His children kept calling him *Nana o, nana o*, (Chief, chief) in praise of his regal look, because he was clad in a magnificent Asante woven Adinkra cloth. His personal friend Mr. Antwi Gyamfi also accompanied him.

Thinking that he was only honouring the Okuapehene’s invitation for a fete in his honour, he embarked on the trip without knowing the magnificent honour that awaited him – enstoolment. On arriving at the

⁶⁵ Frank Mensah, “Azumah – Another Coronation,” *G.S.* April 21-27, 1992, p. 3.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ankobebe* is construed as, “one who stays at home or does not go anywhere.” *Ankobeahene* in the Akan system of chieftaincy and political hierarchy is a caretaker of the palace of the paramount chief. He also, like the elders of the State, provides counsel to the paramount chief.

outskirts of the town, a delegation from the Okuapehene met him. That delegation led him into Akropong, amidst spectacles of regal pomp and grandeur, to a durbar where his enstoolment was scheduled to take place.

The *Fontomfrom* drumming and dancing, the highest drumming honour that can be received from the Akan ethnic group was played and performed for him. This was done in the presence of an assembly of *Nananom* (royals and chiefs), citizens and visitors. With the Okuapehene referring to him as his foster son and invoking blessings on him for more successes in his career as a boxer and national hero, Azumah Nelson was seated on a stool, a symbol of political office. He was also given a golden crown by the Okuapehene and his elders.⁶⁹ After doing a customary dance to *fontomfrom* music, he expressed his gratitude for the honour done him. He was overwhelmed by the grand honour and durbar. Showing his gratefulness and appreciation to Okuapeman, he thanked the State and added that: "I understand this honour is normally done to people over 60 years of age. I'll therefore do my best to protect the confidence reposed in me."⁷⁰ As an ambassador of the Ghanaian youth he also used the opportunity to advise the youth to be God-fearing, disciplined, and be against drugs, alcohol and social vices. To make his warnings meaningful to the youth he stated that, "My laurels [fame and success] are due to my fear for God and discipline."⁷¹ He made donations to the State and paramount authority, which apparently had given him a piece of land to develop. He thanked the State for the land which it offered him and said

⁶⁹ Frank Mensah, "Azumah – Another Coronation," *op.cit.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Before he left for Accra, a reception was held at the Presbyterian Teacher Training College, in Akropong, under the patronage of the Okuapehene and the “Kwakwaduam Fekuw,” a benevolent society of citizens of the town. At the function Azumah Nelson, the environmentalist, planted some trees to commemorate the occasion. In his proverbial character of easily showing generosity, especially to assist to positive social projects, he promised the Kwakwaduam Fekuw 100 thousand cedis,⁷⁴ as a way of supporting the society with its social projects.

As a sponsor of social projects Azumah Nelson’s commitment to supporting boxing in Ghana is one important aspect of his life in retirement. Bent on seeing more world champions being produced from Ghana, he has been supporting Ghana amateur and professional boxing, as a technical director of the G.B.A. He has been interested in helping to develop professional boxing too. Hence he makes his Zoom Zoom Gym in his Achimota residence available to some of the up and coming professional boxers in Ghana for their training. Being committed to the mission of helping to grow boxing in Africa as a whole, he has put his position as an ambassador for boxing on the continent, and his expertise in boxing to the beneficial service of non-Ghanaian boxers and teams. For example, after retiring from the ring, he in July 2007 provided technical service to a delegation of the Burkina Faso National Boxing team⁷⁵ by supervising their training. Recognising his devotion to helping African boxing to grow, and his rich expertise and experience, which could be depended on to cultivate

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ “Azumah gets Lucrative Deal,” *op.cit.*

and build Burkinabe boxing, the Burkinabe team, it was reported, expressed interest in receiving technical assistance from Azumah Nelson. In their scheme of things, he, in their hope, was to work with Jean Pierre Mahe, a French and former lightweight champion to groom and develop professional and amateur boxers in Burkina Faso. It is worthy to note that although the presence of the team in Ghana, to train under the supervision of Azumah Nelson was financially beneficial to Azumah Nelson, it had a wider relevance to the nation. It was important for projecting a good image of Ghana on the continent. It, in a sense, indicated that the glorious reputation of the country as a nation of boxing prowess and the achievements of Azumah Nelson in boxing and the area of sports were highly recognisable and deemed important in Africa. It was also important for promoting a healthy and cordial diplomatic relationship between Ghana and Burkina Faso.

Made up of five boxers, a coach, and assistant the team spent three weeks in Ghana, as part of a training tour, and largely trained at Azumah Nelson's gym.⁷⁶

The group agreed to institute a memorandum of understanding to establish a strong relationship with the boxing legend and ambassador, so that the team "would have the opportunity to come to Ghana for training under the supervision of Azumah, who would also go to Burkina Faso whenever the country was preparing for boxing tournaments."⁷⁷

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

As planned the agreement to create a lasting relationship between Ghana amateur boxing and Burkinabe boxing through Azumah Nelson's affiliation with the Burkinabe team was formally instituted. Consequently, in the light of that arrangement, Azumah Nelson again received Jean Pierre Mahe and four Burkinabe fighters, in 2008, into his gym. The boxers, who came to Ghana to put their bodies in shape for world class competitions, were Kabore Alexis, a bantamweight, Sou-Tohe Patrice, a welterweight, Kabore Boniface, a super-middleweight, and Kabore Irissa, a super-welterweight. Explaining the rationale for choosing Ghana for the training of the four boxers, Jean Pierre Mahe disclosed to the media that:

In Ouagadougou, my boxers lacked sparring partners due to their status as professional boxers. Therefore, we find it convenient to travel to Ghana as one of the boxing nations on the continent for training. Out of over 300 boxers in Burkina [Faso], only four are professionals.⁷⁸

Significantly, he added that the team was in the country to “tap the experience of the boxing professor.”⁷⁹ The Frenchman disclosed that the long term plan of the Burkina Faso Boxing Federation was to maintain a lasting relationship with the “boxing professor,” to facilitate the training, sparring and preparation of boxers from Burkina Faso whenever they were getting ready for a world title bout.

The coach described Azumah Nelson as a legend and praised him for allowing the Burkinabe team to train at his gym free of charge, and

⁷⁸ Pierre Toto, “Azumah Welcomes Mahe,” *Modernghana.com*, Source: D.G., Sports News, April 9, 2008, <http://www.modernghana.com/news2/162172/2/azumah-welcomes-mahe.html> (Information was retrieved on November 19, 2010).

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

added that the former world champion was still a great personality out of the ring.⁸⁰

Although Azumah Nelson has acquired many significant international statuses, recognition and wealth, his proverbial sympathy for the common people and humble lifestyle that he exhibited when he was in active boxing, qualities which were attested by Oko Kwatekwei,⁸¹ have led him to live a very simple life in his retirement from active boxing.

He spends much of his retirement days travelling or having meetings with individuals, groups or government and non-governmental agencies to solicit their help for his charitable deeds. If he is not doing such fundraising activities or taking trips as a goodwill ambassador of the environment or attending meetings of the G.A.B.A. and boxing tournaments, he visits his teak farm and livestock ranch at Dodowa, near Accra. He also makes visits to his livestock farm at Kasoa, in the Central Region. On such intermittent visits, he gets the chance to escape the hustles of city life in Accra. Such periods spent in the serenity of the farms and around the simplicity of animals and plants provided him with relevant rest and solace. He also loves to be a father who spends time at his home with Peggy and the children, especially the last three who are still young. He also likes to take his son Dalvin, who has taken keen interest in amateur boxing as a hobby,⁸² through some of the good techniques and lessons in

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Oko Kwatekwei, interview on the video documentary, *op.cit.*

⁸² For example see Jonathan Cook, "Boxing Legend Azumah Nelson Heading to Perth," *West Australian*, August 14, 2010, <http://au.news.yahoo.com/thewest/sport/a/-/other/7759203/boxing-legend-azumah-nelson-heading-to-perth-for-aus-v-ghana-clash/> (Information was retrieved on January 19, 2011), and Jonathan Cook, "Azumah Nelson brings son for WA bout" *Azumah Nelson Foundation blog*, August 23, 2010, online posting, <http://w>

boxing in his gym.⁸³ As a devoted Christian he likes to read the Bible, go to church and attend other Christian functions. He plays with his pets which include dogs, tortoises, and birds. Azumah Nelson swims at home, warm up, hit the punching bag and spars in his gym to physically keep fit in order to go about his every day work, which includes directing and managing of his business ventures.

His status and role as an owner of business ventures are very important to him. Some of the businesses he created, when he was still active in boxing, have remained and operated under his overall direction in his days in retirement. Others dissolved because, as he matured as a businessman, he eventually found them to be unsustainable. For example according to him, he had to unfortunately close down some of these job giving ventures because of managerial problems. As a fighter his training sessions and fights mostly took his time and person away from his ventures. Consequently, he was not always available to effectively oversee the efficient running of such ventures, hence the problems and closures.

Others later turned out to be financially unrewarding. For example after importing cooking oil, Zoom Zoom Oil, into the country for traders, especially some Makola traders to sell, he realised that the turnover was dwindling. Consequently, he abandoned that business. He also had to shut down some because he realised that their existence went against his moral principles. For example he experimented with the trucking business. He bought some big trucks which carted goods to and from other West African

www.azumahnelsonfoundation.org.gh/azumah-brings-son-for-wa-bout.html (Information was retrieved on October 23, 2010).

⁸³ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

countries like Niger and Burkina Faso. However, when he realised that some of the trucks were being used to secretly convey contraband goods and smuggle products like diesel and petrol into neighbouring West African countries, he closed the venture and sold the trucks because according to him, such deals “were against my principles of honesty and hard work. . . . I closed it down to save my image [from being tarnished] and the people, who were doing such wrong things, [from falling into trouble with the legal system].”⁸⁴ He also stopped the fishing with boats business of his when he realised that although the business required a lot of capital it was not profitable.

As a burgeoning business person who believed in the truism “make hay while the sun is shining” and was driven by a passion to establish profit making businesses to provide economic support for himself and those that he employed, Azumah Nelson in his hey days ventured into the importation of alcoholic drinks, especially liquor, into Ghana. Scoping the commercial scene he realised that some companies that were producing alcoholic beverages in the country were flourishing and making profit. He then felt that it would be more profitable to establish a firm to manufacture the beverages for the Ghanaian and international markets. He then decided to go into the production of alcoholic beverages in Ghana. Hence he established a distillery in Accra and employed people to produce liquor, the most popular being the Zoom Zoom Dry Gin. Profit seeking, at the time, the entrepreneur did not see anything wrong with his business. However, the operations of the business eventually suffered a closure, when Azumah

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Nelson intentionally shut the distillery down. Why did he do that? Realising that his products were also consumed by under-agers, including the disadvantaged in the ghettos, who belonged to the youths that he had dedicated his life to support and inspire to greatness, his conscience compelled him to stop the production of the drinks. This stoppage was done so that the youth would not be tempted to drink his products. He did not want them to drink and be exposed to the addiction and health hazards associated with the consumption of alcohol. According to him, he

started the distillery as a businessman who thought that the products would be drunk by grown-ups, who could make mature decisions. However, I later realised that young people and kids were also drinking the product, so my mind [conscience] told me that it was wrong and should stop. So I closed it. I did not want to sell the distillery because I felt that in the hands of another entrepreneur he [or she] would have continued to produce the drinks and the small kids would drink them.⁸⁵

Because he was concerned about the future of the younger generation, and even the older ones, he disclosed that: "I felt that I could not make cash and lead people the wrong way into drinking. . . . It did not feel right. That was why I stopped the production of the alcoholic drinks."⁸⁶

Giving to Society: Azumah Nelson and the Establishment of the Azumah Nelson Foundation

As a retired boxer, Azumah Nelson believes and claims that he is not a rich man, but rather a satisfied self-made wealthy man with numerous assets. These assets include land, cars and different landed property like houses. Having dabbled in real estates for some time, he has some

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

residential buildings and office premises, which are on rent and continue to reward him financially. With Peggy's support they direct the Peggy Nelson Hostel, which accommodates students. His restaurants, and teak plantation which produces wood, used in Ghana for furniture and pylons for telephone and electricity cables, and exported elsewhere for the same purposes, continue to give him revenue. These ventures also provide employment opportunities for many people. Beside these material gains and his possessions, he claims that he is psychologically happy and emotionally content. This is because he was able to succeed in boxing. Secondly, he accomplished most of what he dreamt of using boxing to fulfil in his life. He was able to use the sport to redeem himself from financial poverty, and he achieved international recognition. His fame strengthened the reputation and cultural identity of Ga-Mashie as a boxing people, and he invested in society. Thirdly, he has used his wealth to help others through charity and has provided jobs for people, all of which have served as significant assistance to the national quest for poverty alleviation. Moreover, he has managed to financially secure a sound financial backbone for himself, wife, and children.

But most important of all his joys and accomplishments, outside the ring, in the realm of his contribution and work towards social advancement was and has been his ability to start his lifelong ambitious project of a foundation and a sports academy. The estimated U.S. \$23,444,960 venture – the Azumah Nelson Foundation⁸⁷ (hereafter the A.N.F.) and sports academy – would care for destitute and needy young boys and girls. This

⁸⁷ AZNEF also known as the A.N.F.

help would come through instructions in sports, formal academic literacy and numeracy, and mentoring. Such guidance, which would come from the venture to the less fortunate boys and girls, he hopes, would help to sharpen their sports and academic talents, mould their character, and prepare them for different careers in the future. Explaining his intentions about the foundation he stated that:

This is my second but most important and ultimate life journey. This second part comes after the first leg of my life's journey – boxing – which started in the hardships of the slums. It continued and led me through the ring and international limelight of active professional boxing, and ended in retirement. This second phase of my life, which seeks to totally bring into successful fruition an effective foundation – the A.N.F. – and its products, is what I have dedicated my entire out of the ring life to.⁸⁸

The work of the A.N.F. will also be a major support to the enhancement of the nation's human resources and sports potentials. Ghana has a huge potential in sports and boxing as far as talent and human resources are concerned. What have been lacking are proper training and technical facilities, and infrastructure.

As underscored, the huge potential that Ghana has in sports particularly in the area of boxing is proverbial and well known. The call for governmental support to it, through the provision of infrastructure like training facilities and centres for formal theoretical and practical instruction into sports and boxing, has been the concern of national and international experts alike. Speaking on behalf of Ghana boxing in 1999, Miguel Perez Castellanos, the Cuban coach who was in-charge of the Black Bombers, called for the government of Ghana to establish a boxing academy to

⁸⁸ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

harness the talents in young aspiring boxers in the country.⁸⁹ Although, boxers in the localities of Ga-Mashie, especially those in Bukom, through relentless and tireless efforts, improvisation and self-help spirit, have dominated the sports and provided most of Ghana's champions at the amateur and professional levels. Castellanos stated that, "Ghana, [not only Bukom] has great potential in amateur boxing (the necessary foundation in boxing) which needs to be tapped."⁹⁰ He attributed the high performance of Cuban boxers at international tournaments to government support to amateur boxing in Cuba. He then added that: "Although I seem to understand the situation in this country [Ghana], I still believe that there is the need for active support for boxing by the government."⁹¹ Furthermore he said that: "Though boxing ranks second [to football] in international sports in this country, it brings in more medals, than any other sport. . . . Boxing was able to help Ghana place 15th overall at the Commonwealth Games [held in 1998] in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia . . . as [a] result of four medals won by the boxers."⁹²

This concern for boxing which had led Castellanos, in 1999, to call on the government to establish, if not many, one adequately-fitted boxing academy to groom athletes for Ghana had been an important one for Azumah Nelson. The boxer was already preparing towards the setting up of

⁸⁹ Kwabena Agyei-Boahene and Eric Enchill, "Cuban Coach calls for Boxing Academy," *G.S.*, January 22-25, 1999, p. 12.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.* Also note that in 1999 it was reported that Castellanos had helped Ghana to win 13 gold, 16 silver and sixteen bronze, the highest so far in any sporting discipline in the country. See *Ibid.*,

an academy for sports, which would also cater for boxing, and leadership training in Ghana. This he hoped to do upon his retirement.

Apart from establishing businesses, buying cars and houses, taking care of his family, he also saved some of the prize money and financial gifts he raked from the fights. He kept part of the money that he made from his businesses. These were all done with the intention of using the accumulated funds to support his venture in the future. From such funds he purchased a land which he planned to use to tarmac the infrastructure of his envisaged academy which he planned to put under the care of a foundation. The outdooring of the A.N.F. in 2008 formally became the physical manifestation of that cherished idea.

The A.N.F. which was founded and registered as a non-profit humanitarian organisation under Ghana's Company Code, 1963,⁹³ was officially launched alongside a fund-raiser in September 27, 2008, at the State Banquet Hall in Accra. It was originally placed under a six member Executive Council led by Paul Victor Obeng, a former member and administrator in the P.N.D.C. government. Other members of the council included Azumah Nelson, Peggy Nelson, Dorinda Nelson and Freddie Annan.⁹⁴

According to Azumah Nelson, the formation of the A.N.F. was the greatest of his numerous acts of giving back to society and helping social growth. He has made money and fame from boxing. Through government directives to eternalize his memory in Ghana, the Kaneshie Sports

⁹³ "Azumah Nelson Foundation," typescript, Accra, n.d. p. 1.

⁹⁴ "Azumah Nelson Foundation Launched," *Modernghana.com*, Source: *G.N.A.*, Sports News, September 29, 2008, <http://www.modernghana.com/news2/184181/2/azumah-nelson-foundation-launched.html> (Information was retrieved on October 21, 2010).

Complex, in Accra was renamed Azumah Nelson Sports Complex. He has social connections to celebrities and prominent political figures. However, he believes that the A.N.F. is the greatest legacy that he has given to the people of Ghana. In his view it is the biggest gift that he can bequeath to the larger African society. He believes that, ultimately, the enterprise will succeed. If it does succeed then it will be the best credit to his name.⁹⁵

The goal of the A.N.F. is to combine the powerful forces of literate and moral education and sports to advance the moral, physical and career development of the needy and deprived children of Ghana through an academy and its associated programmes. In the opinion of Azumah Nelson,

Not every person can make a successful academic life. Some can do well in sports and others can do very well in other vocations like tailoring, masonry and others. I believe that the children and the school going youth must be exposed to different paths and guided to identify and select the ones that they have special flairs for. The academy that I intend to have shall expose the students to instructions and training in academics and sports. The students will also be trained in other vocations. It will guide each student to select and concentrate in an area that they have talents, and help them to develop their flair for future excellence and a productive tomorrow.⁹⁶

The infrastructure of the Azumah Nelson Foundation Academy, as it is called, would comprise double-floored student hostels, an administration block, a spacious memorial library with internet facilities, a clinic, dining hall, sports hall with indoor courts and arenas, swimming pool, and a swimming changing room. It will also have a two-floored classroom block, for students at the primary and Junior High School levels. The block will also have common rooms and offices for the staff, as well as, science and

⁹⁵ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

computer laboratories. The academy complex shall also possess staff quarters and apartments, a chapel, and a stadium comprising multi-tiered spectators' seats, and courts for basketball, tennis and volley.⁹⁷ The academy will also accommodate a gymnasium, and a conference hall. Additionally, it will also manage its own farm.⁹⁸ Beginning in August 2011, the farm will produce most of the food that the students will consume.⁹⁹

The A.N.F. plans to fit each of these sections within the complex with up to date facilities and utilities.¹⁰⁰ This centre of youth training and learning will offer functional education, mentoring, and effective personal development programs for needy and deprived children aged between five and sixteen. Conceived from Azumah Nelson's conviction

that with the support of resourceful individuals and society, every deprived child in Ghana and the rest of Africa will grow to become responsible individuals and contribute their quota to the development of their respective countries and the continent,¹⁰¹

the foundation has encouraged people in Ghana and overseas to help it to achieve its noble objective. Since it was outdoored under the ambassadorial work and leadership of Azumah Nelson, it has solicited financial and logistical support from different groups, individuals, and organisations worldwide. Launching the foundation and its ultimate project of the

⁹⁷ A document containing the plan and design of the complex was shown to the researcher by Azumah Nelson. Parts of the architectural design can be viewed on the Section on Funding Purpose, "Floor Plans for the A.N.F. Academy," n.d., Azumah Nelson Foundation, <http://www.azumahnelsonfoundation.org.gh/how-you-can-help/funding-causes> (Information was retrieved on October 23, 2010). See also the Computer Generated Imagery supported 3-dimensional graphics image of the Azumah Nelson Foundation Academy, "A.N.F. Project," n.d., Azumah Nelson Foundation, <http://www.azumahnelsonfoundation.org.gh/azumah-nelson-two.html> (Information was retrieved on October 23, 2010).

⁹⁸ See Section on Funding Purpose, Azumah Nelson Foundation, *op.cit.*

⁹⁹ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ "Azumah Nelson Foundation," typescript, *op.cit.*

establishment of an academy, Mr. Osei Bonsu Amoah, the Deputy Minister of Education, Science and Sports for Ghana, commended the idea as laudable and agreed that it would go a long way in complimenting the efforts of government in fulfilling her development projects to society and its duty of identifying and grooming talents in the realm of sports.¹⁰²

The idea of creating this academy to support formal education and development of sports talents in Ghana and Africa as a whole had been cherished by Azumah Nelson since his active days as a boxer. He had been aware of the tremendous potential that Ghana and Africa had in sports and boxing. Because of that he believed that with enough and sustained support from governments and donors, these potentials could be groomed well for the making of healthy persons and career sports persons. Such persons, in his view, will ultimately contribute meaningful quotas to the socio-economic and political growth of Ghana and Africa as a whole. It was in line with helping such a noble cause to materialise that he dreamt of establishing an academy.

Having personally accumulated funds intended for the academy project, from his savings, including, money from his fight with Fenech in 2008, he has continued to lobby for financial assistance from around the globe. Through the writing of proposals for support to old boxing friends, international sports icons, and sports clubs and groups, he has been accumulating funds for the foundation. The foundation has been using such funds to undertake its administrative work and academic projects.

¹⁰² "Azumah Nelson Foundation Launched," *ireportghana.com*, December 7, 2008, <http://www.ireportghana.com/ghana/sport/boxing/196-azumah-nelson-foundation-launched> (Information was retrieved on October 21, 2010).

Philanthropic agencies, Ghanaian banks, international and local funding agencies, the W.B.C., and some C.E.Os., in Ghana and abroad were also contacted for support. Such sources included David Harper¹⁰³ and his company Geodrill Ghana Limited. Harper, an Australian, is the director of Geodrill, which is a mineral prospecting, drilling, and mining consultancy firm in West Africa. Harper and Geodrill, for example provided the financial assistance required to premier and auction, *Zoom Zoom – The Professor: The career of Azumah Nelson*, a Geodrill-financed and Sam Kissie-produced D.V.D. documentary feature on the boxer. This function took place on April 2010 at the Silverbird Cinema in Accra, and it raised over 20 million cedis for the A.N.F.¹⁰⁴

Additionally, Azumah Nelson has put on sale copies of his documentary feature and book – *12 Rounds of Boxing and Life* – on the Ghanaian and international markets to generate additional funds for his project. In his devotion to the A.N.F. and its enterprise Azumah Nelson has employed fundraising and charity dinners and ceremonies, as additional measures to amass funds for the A.N.F's projects. Some of such ceremonies have taken place in Perth¹⁰⁵ and Melbourne in Australia, and in Accra, Ghana. Moreover, Azumah Nelson, who has promised to introduce

¹⁰³ Through his association with Azumah Nelson he has become involved with the Ghana Amateur Boxing Association (the G.A.B.A.). He has served on its sponsorship committee as a top official, and provided some material support to charitable organisations like Ray Quarcoo's Bridge Foundation, and Azumah Nelson Foundation, which are interested in assisting in the national effort to grow Ghana's infrastructure, capacity and potentials in sports and boxing. Such charitable groups are also interested in using sports education and mentoring to help improve the social and economic well-being of deprived and needy communities and individuals.

¹⁰⁴ Ernest Dela Aglanu, "Azumah Nelson: The Life of a Legend Captured for a Good Cause," *Myjoyonline News*, April 19, 2010, <http://www.news.myjoyonline.com/sports/201004/44940.asp> (Information was retrieved on October 21, 2010).

¹⁰⁵ Jonathan Cook, "Azumah Nelson brings son for WA bout" *op.cit.*

about the A.N.F. and especially the academy, Azumah Nelson mentioned his belief that all children, regardless of their backgrounds and the mistakes of their parents must be given a chance, by the society, nation and world as a whole to make their lives meaningful and positively productive for themselves and society. He declared that: "Children must not suffer for the mistakes of their parents. Society owes them a duty to prepare them for a meaningful future. And with what I have been blessed, I want to do my bit."¹⁰⁹ Revealing his conviction that by nature children and all individuals in general are useful to humankind and exposing how boxing gave him a chance and opportunity to show his usefulness to society, he was of the view that when right opportunities are given to each individual, they can fully bring out their usefulness to society. He added that:

All around the world, children and even adults have proved that given the opportunity, they can make something meaningful in their lives. I was given the chance through boxing, [to shape my identity and future and I succeeded]. Many others have had similar opportunities through sports or something else from well-meaning people. This is, therefore, a proof that no one is useless.¹¹⁰

In addition to the fund-raiser part of the launch, a sod cutting ceremony also took place on the September 27, 2008, on the A.N.F's 50-acre land situated at Akuse in the Eastern Region. The ceremony officially opened it as the location of the envisaged academy. It also signalled the beginning of the construction of the academy and the offices of the A.N.F. Describing the academy project as his "next endeavour," after mentioning the inspiration he has to help disadvantaged children, Azumah Nelson

¹⁰⁹ "Children Deserve The Best – Azumah," *D.G.*, General News, October 8, 2008, online posting on <http://www.ghanatouristvillas.com/news2/185427/1/children-deserve-the-best-azumah.html> (Information was obtained on October 21, 2010).

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

declared that it was his prayer that he would succeed in that endeavour of helping other unfortunate people to succeed in making meaningful lives. Consequently, he stated that: "After all, I [who was less fortunate eventually] made it in my professional life [so I should be able to do my bit to help others to make their lives meaningful and positively productive."¹¹¹

Like the other dignitaries, including the minister of State, who at Accra, praised Azumah Nelson for his contribution to social advancement, Juan La Porte who was also at Akuse, described the initiative as "a laudable idea which deserves the support of all." Pledging his support for the A.N.F. and its academy project which Azumah Nelson had called on all to support, La Porte announced that: "Azumah Nelson is a great man and I am impressed with his vision. . . . I am willing to support him in whatever way I can to make his dream succeed."¹¹²

The launch and the sod cutting ceremony marked beginning of the first phase of the entire project. It is worthy to note that although he was the founder and life patron of the A.N.F. Azumah Nelson realised that he needed to work with a body of experienced and knowledgeable associates, for the effective running of the enterprise. It was in the light of that reality that he added to the A.N.F. a supporting Board of Trustees, which included P.V. Obeng, V. Crabbe, a former Justice of the Supreme Court of Ghana, Kwaku Ansa Asare, a past Director of the Ghana School of Law, Reginald Ocansey, an independent education management professional, Ms. Jamilia Jakalia, a professional lawyer and secretary to the board, Eddie Duplan, a

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*

businessman and former chairman of the G.A.B.A., and Sandy Anderson, an entrepreneur and the chairman of Aquatec Services Limited. Azumah Nelson and his associates clearly defined the various stages which the academy project would go through and operationalize under the aegis of the A.N.F.

Comprising a number of events and activities, the first major phase is supposed to be completed by 2014/2015. Azumah Nelson and his associates planned that the A.N.F would continue to search for more funds and complete the building of the academy complex during the duration of that phase. Additionally, they arranged that the A.N.F. would pursue of a nationwide programme to identify and select brilliant but needy sports talented Ghanaian youths and admit them into the academy. The selection in particular would take into account the equal needs of all the administrative regions in the country. It would maintain a regional balance to ensure Azumah Nelson's conviction in fairness and the true belief of the A.N.F. that equal opportunities should be given to all qualified Ghanaian youth in the ten regions of the country. In pursuance of the selection process a number of activities and programmes would be held in different parts across the country.

Additionally, the A.N.F. planned that yearlong preparatory programmes constituting street clinics, street festivals, street sporting camps and other activities would be organised in different locations in Ghana to engage and identify prospective candidates to become the first batch of students to be admitted into the academy. In line with Azumah Nelson's plan to commence operation of the academy in 2014/2015, these

nationwide preparatory activities would, in the scheme of the A.N.F., start in January 2011. And to give the whole A.N.F. enterprise a national appeal Azumah Nelson intended to bring on board and engage the voluntary services of all well-meaning people, especially Ghanaians, to contribute their skills, resources, and knowledge towards the agenda, work, and efforts of the A.N.F to build the academy.¹¹³ It was in the light of this intention that Azumah Nelson planned and advertised that for the maiden edition and future series of clinics, camps and festivals, the A.N.F. would and must depend on the voluntary services and active participation of teachers, coaches, trainers and experts for support. Such volunteers would provide instructive training to the youth participants in the basics of sports like football, boxing, basketball, athletics¹¹⁴ and maths and reading lessons.

These activities in the regions and cities in Ghana would become the traditional forms of exercises that would be used to get students from Ghana to enrol in the academy when it is in full operation.

A street clinic would be a single day of organised multisport events that would be run at various locations throughout a city or town to attract the participation of the youth. The street camps would be basically focused on street children under the age of 12 years. Instructions at the camps would include an introduction of the participants to the basic skills and rules of different sports disciplines. The children would also be instructed in and exposed to some purposefully designed mathematics and reading aptitude lessons. Street cups, which would be a day mini sports tournament

¹¹³ Azumah Nelson, personal interview. *op. cit.*

¹¹⁴ See information from Azumah Nelson Foundation on "Street Clinics and Sports Camps," June 17, 2010, online posting, <http://www.azumahnelsonfoundation.org.gh/azumah-nelson-with-larry-king-tonight.html> (Information was retrieved on October 24, 2010).

for the participants of previous street camps would be organised in different cities. A single day street sports festival and social fête of eating, drinking, awards, games, matches, quizzes for the youth, and exhibition soccer and boxing matches by professional and notable persons, would also be organised to bring to a close a season of street camps and cups in the country.

For the youth in rural areas, sports camps, which would feature organised multisport activities, similar to those run in the cities, would be held weekly or fortnightly in rural localities. These are intended to psychologically and physically prepare the participants to become equally confident and fit, as the other candidates from the urban centres, for selection and enrolment into the academy.

Without neglecting the needs of other African youths as well, the A.N.F. which has a national character and a continental vision, hatched the plan that the academy, upon completion and operationalizing for some time, would, as part of its medium plan, expand its admissions to the youth of other African countries. As part of its long term vision it planned to expand its admissions and services to children of other countries of the world through exchange programmes, which would be designed to integrate the cultures and sporting abilities of the youth of Africa and the rest of the world.¹¹⁵

Interestingly, once the building of the academy and its infrastructure are completed the same plan of the academy, in the long term vision

¹¹⁵ "Azumah Nelson Foundation," typescript, *op.cit.*

Azumah Nelson, would be used to initiate the building of similar model academies in other parts of Ghana and then Africa.¹¹⁶

Existing within the wider context of his philanthropic and activist social life in Ghana is Azumah Nelson's desire and commitment to see and bring about the positive materialisation and growth of the laudable vision of the A.N.F. It was in the light of these that he devoted his post-fighting life to the task of establishing the A.N.F. and working towards its goals. Consequently, he revealed that:

I don't like it when I see people suffering from financial and material poverty because of ignorance, illiteracy [and]/or because they don't have vocational skills which could have provided them with employment for them to have money to live well. I don't like to see people suffer, especially children and teenagers.¹¹⁷

Stating that he suffered from poverty and hardships "in my early days, and I know how painful it is. I did not finish school. This should not have happened and should not happen to people" he has been of the view that "we must contribute to stop such situations from happening. That is why I am into social activism to contribute to the positive shaping of the future of the younger generation in Ghana and Africa."¹¹⁸

Referencing a philosophical aphorism of his foundation that "the greatest good you can do for another is not just to share your riches but to reveal to him his [or her] own," which is similar to the Chinese maxim "Give a person a fish and you feed him [or her] for a day. Teach a person to

¹¹⁶ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

fish and you feed him [or her] for a lifetime,”¹¹⁹ he further explained an inner logic for his devotion to the academy project. He affirmed his conviction that through the establishment of a model academy:

I believe that my ideas, vision and the institution's goals can significantly help in the [apparent] on going search by Ghana and Africa to find ways to provide useful education, effective personal improvement techniques and positive counselling to disadvantaged Ghanaian and African youth to show them how to become self-assisted, industrious, and well-inspired adults. I also believe that my efforts would inspire African governments and philanthropists to start similar projects.¹²⁰

With the support from a Board of Trustees, family, friends and Ghanaians, and God, Azumah Nelson, believes that the academy would see the light of day and stand the test of time. “This work is what the rest of my life has been dedicated to and I hope that my work will be meaningful, sustainable and successful,”¹²¹ he has claimed.

On retirement from boxing and immersed in a life of strong devotion to social activism and charity work, the person of Azumah Nelson, continued to command respect and admiration from the public. His name became a household name in Ghana, and when his being was recognised by the public in the cities, especially in Accra, either in the streets and/or corners of Ga-Mashie, it naturally engineered a strong “Azumahphilia” from individuals and among groups of people. Such admiration and

¹¹⁹ This Chinese proverb is commonly credited to Lao Tzu (Tsu) (also Laozi, meaning old master), a mystic philosopher of ancient China. Lao Tzu, who is an older contemporary of Confucius, is a central figure in Chinese culture. According to Chinese tradition, he lived in the sixth century B.C., and is considered the founder of the philosophical path called Taoism (also spelled “Daoism”). He is attributed with the writing of *Tao-Te Ching*, (*tao* meaning the way of all life, *te* meaning the fit use of life by men, and *ching* meaning text or classic). See for example Lao Tsu, *Tao Te Ching*, Gia Fu Feng and Jane English, (trans.), New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1997.

¹²⁰ Azumah Nelson, personal interview, *op.cit.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

affection inspired and do inspire from portions of the public, especially school children, and the street proletariat of hawkers and peddlers, and market women, joyful cheers, smiles, and greetings to their champion, folk and national hero, and legend.

Defocusing and de-exoticising it from mythical, supernatural beings and/or events, and, refocusing the term “legend” in the context of human history and real life situations to construe a noted celebrity, whose significant excellence and accomplishments in an area or areas of human endeavour, have profoundly impacted on human society, Azumah Nelson, considering his fame and excellence in boxing, iconic status, and impact on society, is a legend. Against all odds and difficulties he excelled in a significant and phenomenal way in his chosen field of social endeavour – boxing. Furthermore, his career has been a source of reference and benchmark for excellence in the field and society of boxing both on the Ghanaian and international scenes. Legendarily, his iconic image has been a source of hope and inspiration for many within the different spheres and circles of what constitute social groups (society). Moreover, his person and social work, during his active days as a boxer and during his retirement, have continued to provide opportunities for people in Ghana and Africa to improve their social and economic lives and situations. For example in November, 2008, just weeks after he launched the A.N.F. and embarked on activities to establish the academy, he was nominated to receive another important international recognition to celebrate his legend. The Commonwealth Boxing Council (C.B.C.) chose to honour him as a Dennie Mancini Awardee, at an awards ceremony which was to be jointly held by

the C.B.C. and the British Boxing Board of Control in London. This prestigious trophy, sculptured by artist Tanya Petersen of Creative Spiral, in England,¹²² was in the form of a bronze bust of the renowned Dennie Mancini who died at the age of 71 on September 10, 2004.¹²³

Mancini was one of the most respected figures in British boxing. He had a role to play in the careers of some of the greatest Commonwealth champions from the 1960s onwards. These included Lotte Mwale and Chisanda Mutti of Zambia, Lionel Rose, and Johnny Famechon, Lester Ellis and Paul Ferrari of Australia. He also worked with Franco Wanyama of Uganda, Lloyd Honeyghan, Billy Hardy and Billy Schwer of England, Gary Jacobs of Scotland and Howard Eastman of Guyana. Apart from Britain and the rest of the Commonwealth he also had strong links with Italy, Holland and Germany.¹²⁴ For over fifty years, he worked as a manager, promoter, trainer, cuts-man, and agent. He made champions out of Johnny Clark and Tony Humm and worked with Mickey Duff, in the 1970s, and boxers Joe Bugner and Frank Bruno. Yet it was perhaps in his role in the specialised job of patching the wounds of fighters' in-between rounds in the corners of world champions such as Britain's Richie Woodhall, Chris Eubank and Nigel Benn and the German fighters Sven Ottke and Henry

¹²² Commonwealth Boxing Council, "The Dennie Mancini Trophy" *The Commonwealth Boxing History*, n.d., <http://www.commboxing.com/history.html> (Information was retrieved on November 26, 2010).

¹²³ "Dennie Mancini," *Telegraph*, Obituaries, September 16, 2004, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1471820/Dennie-Mancini.html> (Information was retrieved on November 26, 2010).

¹²⁴ Commonwealth Boxing Council, "The Dennie Mancini Trophy" *op.cit.*

Maske that the Londoner was best-remembered.¹²⁵ He was also the director of the famous sportswear company, Lonsdale.

To mark and eternalise his contribution to boxing and Commonwealth boxing in particular, the Directors of C.B.C. instituted the Dennie Mancini Trophy. The trophy is awarded each year to the person deemed to have achieved the most in that year to the aims of Commonwealth Boxing.¹²⁶ It was in the light of such aims that the C.B.C. decided to award Azumah Nelson in November, 2008, in recognition of his inauguration of the Azumah Nelson Foundation and determination and work to give to others opportunities that might otherwise not be available to them.

Stating the intentions of C.B.C. for Azumah Nelson, Simon Block, honorary secretary of the C.B.C. explained that the trophy “is awarded to the person who, in the relevant year, has done the most to represent the interests of or raise the profile of boxing in the Commonwealth.”¹²⁷ Moreover, Block added that:

By the inauguration of the Azumah Nelson Foundation, you [Azumah Nelson] bring great distinction to the sport of

¹²⁵ “Dennie Mancini,” *Telegraph*, *op.cit.*

¹²⁶ In 2006 Tshifhiwa Munyai of South Africa won it. He was a Commonwealth bantamweight champion who came to Britain as an unknown and achieved a world ranking because of his success in Britain. Bradley Pryce of Wales won it in 2007. He was the Commonwealth light-middleweight champion. He won the trophy for his achievement of capturing the Commonwealth title, after a number of earlier career setbacks, and having made his fourth successful defense in the previous 12 month period. Azumah Nelson won it in 2008 for setting up of his charitable organisation in Ghana to assist disadvantaged youngsters, and in 2009, Amir Khan won it. He was the W.B.A. light-welterweight champion and former undefeated Commonwealth lightweight champion. He won it for his activity as Commonwealth champion, for re-building his career after a shattering one round defeat to capture one of the recognized World championships, and for the example he has set to young people in Britain. (See Commonwealth Boxing Council, “The Dennie Mancini Trophy” *op.cit.*)

¹²⁷ “Azumah to Receive C.B.C. Award Tomorrow,” *modernghana.com*, Source: D.G., November 17, 2008, <http://www.modernghana.com/sports/190966/2/azumah-to-receive-cbc-award-tomorrow.html> (Information was retrieved on November 26, 2010).

professional boxing, and this has only added to your long list of achievements as a champion of both the Commonwealth and the world.¹²⁸

On November 18, 2008, Azumah Nelson, Peggy and Yoofi Boham attended the function, which was organised to celebrate the icon's accomplishments. Other important dignitaries like Ghana's Deputy High Commissioner to the U.K. and Ireland, Mr. Zed Grant Essilfie, and the Chairman of the C.B.C., Professor Ingram Singh, were also in attendance to grace the occasion. Mentioning that although Azumah Nelson had retired, he was worthy of being celebrated because of his innovative work to help the less fortunate in society, Ingram Singh paid a glowing tribute to the awardee. He also praised him for his long list of prestigious achievements and bringing distinction to boxing both as a Commonwealth and World champion.¹²⁹ He encouraged him to do more in his service to humanity. The awardee accepted the trophy. Naturally, he implored his listeners to support the enterprise of the A.N.F. and took the opportunity to talk about his humble beginnings. He stated that many of the children that the A.N.F. intended to help were those who may not get the opportunity which some of the people, present at the ceremony had, to develop their God given talents. He then emphasised in his address that:

So for the rest of my life, the focus will be to create opportunities for them [less fortunate children] to acquire skills through formal education and sports and for them to be useful to the society.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Nana Sifa Twum, "Azumah Receives Dennie Mancini Prize," *Modernghana.com*, Source: *D.G.*, November 21, 2008, <http://www.modernghana.com/sports/191751/2/azumah-receives-dennie-mancini-prize.html> (Information was retrieved on November 26, 2010).

¹³⁰ "Azumah Nelson Presented with 2008 Mancini Award," *ghanaweb.net*, Boxing News, November 20, 2008, online posting, <http://ghanaweb.net/GhanaHomePage/politics/artik>

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

This academic study has produced a social history of boxing, which is an aspect of the history of popular culture, especially sports, in and of colonial and postcolonial Ghana. Moreover, it is chiefly significant because it has precisely placed Azumah Nelson within the context of that social history by particularly exploring the biographical contours of the life and career of that boxer and national icon. Additionally, this scholarly exposition is of intellectual worth because it has interrogated the inner social, economic, ideological and cultural significance of that aspect of popular culture – boxing – in Ghana. Furthermore, it is worthy to note that this study is also an educational material that can serve as a tool for the inspiration of the emergence of a new generation of sportspersons in Ghana and Africa as a whole. Such a generation, learning from the life of Azumah Nelson, should be able to defy all odds, distractions, hurdles and hardships, and strive with dedication, focus, honesty, and hard work, to succeed in their chosen fields of endeavour and use their success to improve society and themselves.

As this study has revealed, Azumah Nelson has shown that boxing, and sports in general, can be more than entertainment. This window on Azumah Nelson, his life, and boxing, has shown that sports can be cultural events and careers, filled with the power to make meaningful impacts on and positive changes in the lives of individuals, and human communities, and affect social values. Azumah Nelson demonstrated not only clean energy, power and athleticism, but gallantry, reliability and goodwill that

transcended boxing, ethnicity, nationality, race, politics and religion. In addition to his fame in the ring he dedicated his person to, literally and metaphorically, fighting for his life and those of others, whether inside the ring or outside of it. He has shown that no person is useless. On the other hand he has shown that each person, under the right conditions, guidance and in the face of the right opportunity, has the natural potential to succeed and contribute their quota to the growth and advancement of their community.

This study, therefore, advocates that governments of Ghana should endeavour to continue to show massive interest in boxing and sports in general. More importantly, it asks for the governments to commit greater financial and material resources to boxing and sports as a whole to ensure their commendable growth at the individual, group, community, regional and national levels. This clarion call applies and goes to all African governments.

Apart from the benefits of good mental and physical health, which sports can give to many people in Ghana, the country can also derive much more benefits from sports. The quest for poverty alleviation and the creation of sustainable employment opportunities in the country can also yield positive results, if massive support from government is given to boxing and sports in general. The country can derive more international glories from sports, through the country's excellent amateur and professional sportspeople. However, they stand to excel more if the conditions for sports growth and the state of infrastructure in the country receive further upgrading. That is why the governments should endeavour

to improve the infrastructural, organisational and educational sectors of sports and boxing in the country.

The history of Ghana is replete with other interesting examples, apart from that of Azumah Nelson, about persons whose involvement and excellence in sports, either as players, organisers, and promoters, have had their lives and socio-economic statuses positively transformed. In the area of football, for example, persons like Abedi Pele, Samuel Osei Kuffour, Stephen Appiah, and Michael Essien, all of whom have played for the national teams at different times, have had dramatic transformations in their lives and statuses. Such persons have all profited in different degrees because of their participation in and rewards from the sport of football. Such transformations and rewards have also benefitted their families, close social associates, communities, and country in diverse ways. Evidence by such changes in their lives and social conditions, as well as those of their associates, these personalities, whose youthful days were dedicated to football, have demonstrated that sports are professional endeavours which hold a major key to the social and economic emancipation of the country's population, especially the youth.

It is apparent that one of the prevailing issues of the country in the postcolonial era is unemployment. This especially affects many of the country's literate and unschooled, virile and active, and employable population. This situation has unfortunately led a huge number of that population into the engagement of all sorts of very perilous and shameful activities with devastating consequences, because they want to make ends meet. These include the hazardous practice of illegal mining locally called

galamsey, internet fraud, which has gained notoriety as *Sakawa* in local lexicology, and armed robbery.

The country, through its numerous governments, has continued to be in search of remedies for poverty. The governments have applied various strategies for job creation in the country in an attempt to minimise and curtail joblessness. Yet the unemployment situation, generally, has remained unabated.

The youths can be encouraged to fill vacancies in factories and offices in the civil service sector, but it is clear that these are limited places. Furthermore, such vacancies alone cannot guarantee decent living, self-actualisation, sound and sustainable wealth for the ever increasing population of the active employable members of the Ghanaian society. With its attendant environmental problems, which oppose the notion of sustainable development, the country cannot afford to continue to destroy its forests to get timber, and make space to grow cocoa to produce beans for export in the name of wealth and job creation. It cannot also continue to degrade the environment through mining activities, as a strategy to generate wealth and create employment for the employable in the country.

The creation of factories, and through its mechanism of salary, may be viewed as one way of curtailing the unemployment problem and bringing about the alleviation of financial and material poverty among employees. However, the creation of factory jobs and related salaries alone cannot absolutely guarantee decent living and sustainable wealth accumulation, for all the mass of employable job seeking active population in Ghana. This is because factory work and salary require certain skills and

qualifications on the part of employees and prospective ones. Since a huge number of the unemployed masses are unskilled and not literate, many would not be able to access jobs in most factories. This means that many might remain unemployed and their social and economic conditions would remain unchanged.

What is notable is that the country still has a pool of sports talents to exploit to make the nation prosperous and to make its youth useful to themselves and their communities. That transformative “magic” of sports is there, and when tapped, can enhance social growth in Ghana. An aggressive governmental effort to support the development of sports in all aspects – financial and material – and in all of its sectors – infrastructural, organisational, institutional, and educational – is necessary for this magic to work effectively. A greater investment in Ghana’s human resources by improving upon sporting facilities will give a tremendous boost to sports, its growth and attendant benefits to the country.

Up to now Ghana, has largely relied on the natural talents, determination, and competitive spirit of its young men and women for international glories and laurels in football and especially boxing. Over the years, particularly since 1957, the effort by governments to support sports and add any scientific grooming to its natural talents, particularly through the provision of infrastructure and facilities, has evidently been insignificant. The country abounds in raw talents in the field of sports. These talents are there to be tapped. They are there and need to be discovered and groomed. These can be achieved and done well if the governments radically, aggressively and sustainably, and actually make

sports a cornerstone of its youth development policy and quest for sustainable positive socio-economic transformations of lives and communities. Boxing, football, and other easy-to-participate-in sports, which have been popular in Ghana, can be improved and enhanced to produce more skilful players from the country. This can be realised if governments raise such sports and the talents for them to more scientific levels by establishing and/or supporting individual entrepreneurs to put up or establish more academies in many parts of the country. This approach and centres of training would go a long way to unearth and effectively shape the talents that abound in the country. By grooming them, such talents would be nurtured and used to nourish the national leagues and sports scene. In addition some could ultimately be exported to participate in international leagues, which would bring in foreign currency financial returns and rewards to the players and the country. In addition, jobs would be provided for the different actors in the sports order, especially the players, coaches, trainers, and managers. Such a development has the potential of bringing wealth and social security to many people in the country. Governments should invest by expanding existing sports facilities and adding more at the regional and district levels. Such a commitment would encourage the talented youth to take to sports, and it could and would easily make them competitive on the local and international markets. The establishment and maintenance, by the government, of at least a standard basketball court, tennis court and boxing gym in every neighbourhood could fight joblessness and economic vulnerability among the active youth population. Many could have their natural talent for sports

shaped and transformed into money making gifts; and the same could provide such people with careers by turning them into occupational sportspersons, coaches and promoters. The establishment of academies, a strong government support for and promotion of amateur sports competitions for such academies, and junior and senior high schools, colleges and universities, and the renovation and maintenance of old public sports stadia, could be and should be used as positive starting points for an aggressive sports development policy in the country.

For the whole of Africa, this study also advocates for African governments to show and give stronger support to the institution of sports and its actors and organisers. This would collectively help Africa to produce more sports icons who, like Azumah Nelson, would have the drive and economic and celebrity wherewithal and, potentially, serve as social activists, philanthropists, and contributors to social advancement. Azumah Nelson is just one person. His life is inspiring and his work is valuable to popular culture in Ghana especially, and Africa in general, and the world as a whole. Imagine what hundred or two hundred of his kind in Africa would do for the continent and the world as a whole!

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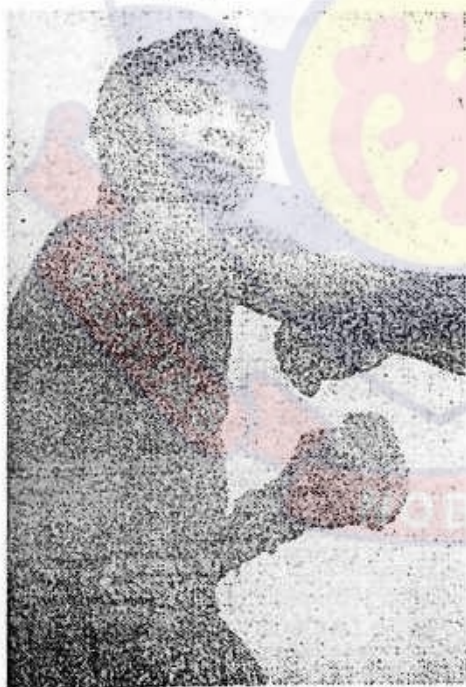
APPENDIX



*Roy Ankrah as a small boy
going to school. n.d.*



*D. K. Poison in his prime.
n.d.*



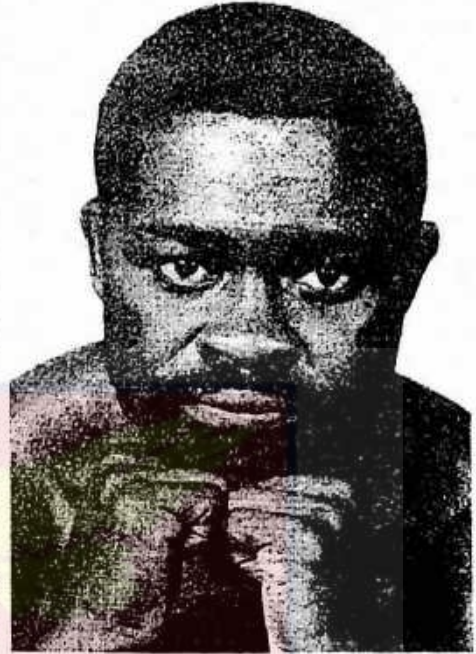
*Attuquaye Clottey in his
prime. c. 1951*



*A stylish Roy Ankrah.
c. 1951*



*Azumah Nelson – The Rex of the
WBC Featherweights, c. 1994*



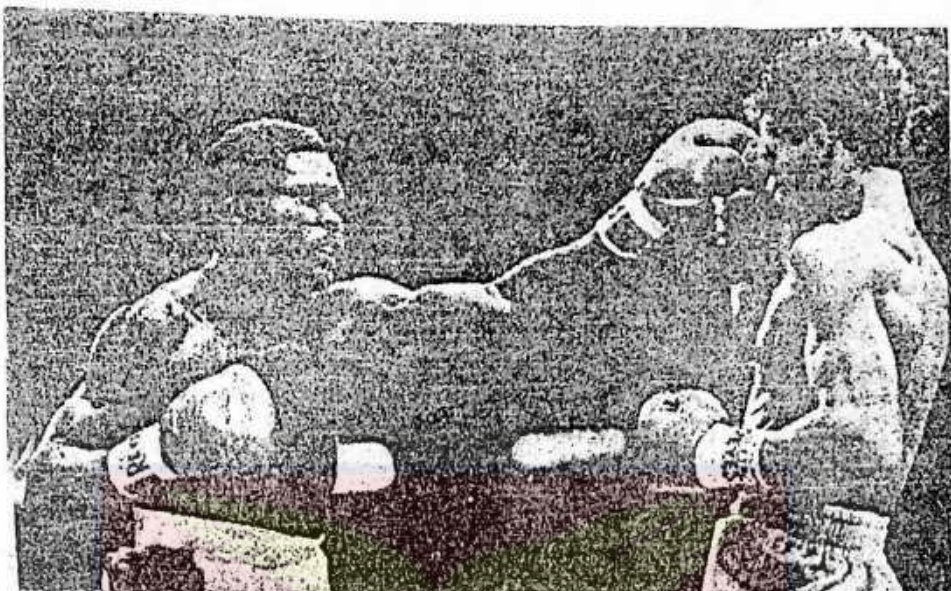
*Azumah Nelson in a pensive mood,
c. 1990*



*A smiling Roy Ankrah, "The Black
Flash", c. 1952*



*"On the Punching Bag", Ebenezer
"Surpriser Sowah" Laryea. c. 1993.
He was about 81 years old*



*Azumah Nelson hands a left jab enroute
to victory over Marcos Villasana, c.
1987*



*Floyd "The Real" Klutei Robertson, c.
1960s*



*"Mohammed Ali visits Ghana".
World Heavyweight champion
Mohammed Ali (second from left
in Kente) and Kwame Nkrumah (in
white) in Accra, c. May 1964*



*President J. J. Rawlings (left),
Champion Boxer Ike "Bazooka"
Quartey (middle), and D. F. Annan,
displaying another world boxing title
for Ghana, c. 1992*



*Azumah Nelson about to unleash
an upper cut blow to an opponent
at the Commonwealth Games in
Edmonton, Canada, c. 1978*



*"A Champion." Azumah Nelson is
lifted up high by happy fans after a
victory at the Commonwealth
Games in Edmonton, Canada, c.
1978*



"The Champ" – Azumah Nelson in his prime, c. 1980s



"Getting ready for a fight." Azumah Nelson training in the cold outdoors in the U.S.A. n.d.



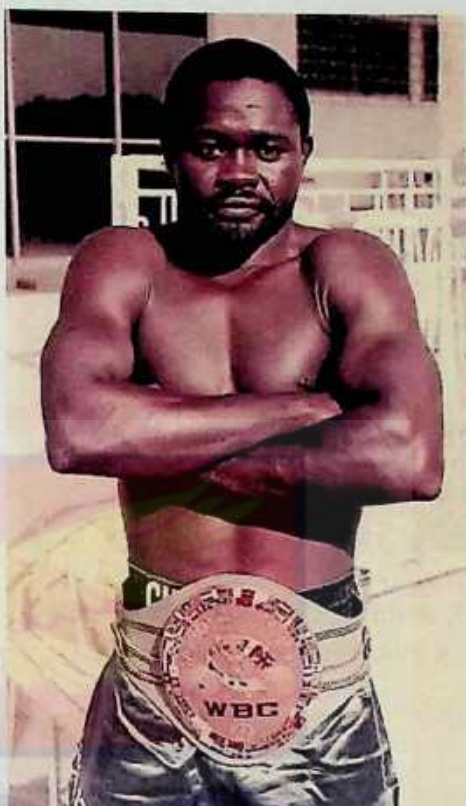
"Father and daughters." Azumah Nelson and two of his daughters displaying his title belts, n.d.



Azumah Nelson at a ceremony to honour him. He is flanked by his wife Peggy and an Associate, c. 1998



*Stylish Azumah Nelson
applauding something with a clap
at a social function, c. 1995-96*



*"A proud Champion." Azumah Nelson displaying his beautiful
title. n.d.*



*"The proud father." Azumah Nelson relaxing at home with four of
his children. n.d.*



Azumah Nelson displaying some of his awards, n.d.



*"The Boxer and the President"
Azumah Nelson and President J. J. Rawlings at the President's residence, c. 1996*



A proud recipient of the prestigious Mancini Trophy



Azumah Nelson being honoured by the WBC. Mr. Jose Suleiman (left) approves with a clap, c. 1998



The King and Queen of England having a chat with Roy Ankrah (second from left holding the Empire Featherweight Trophy) at the Gold Coast Stand, London, the day after his victory over Ronnie Clayton in 1951



Surpriser Sowah in his prime, c. 1951. He is holding the punching bag with which he trained Roy Ankrah, the Empire



Open sports at the Accra Sports Stadium. The Chairman of the P.N.D.C. Flt. Lt. J. J. Rawlings (on white horse) participate in the Horse Riding contest, c. 1982-85



The Proud Champion, Azumah Nelson displaying his title belt, n.d.



The Author (De-Valera N.Y.M. Botchway) and Azumah Nelson. 2011, Accra, Ghana

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