



THE

PROFESSOR

THE LIFE STORY OF
AZUMAH NELSON

ASHLEY MORRISON

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of Azumah Nelson*

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Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Co.

12620 FM 1960, Suite A4-507

Houston, TX 77065

www.sbpra.com

ISBN: 978-1-63135-220-1

I dedicate this book to the former president of Ghana, J. J. Rawlings, for his guidance and support when I was starting out, and to Dave Harper for his friendship and support today.

I would also like to dedicate it to all the people of Ghana, my home, and the country I love. Hopefully, my story shows that as Africans, we can conquer the world.

Azumah Nelson

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The writing of this book has been an absolute pleasure. I first became aware of Azumah Nelson when he knocked out Pat Cowdell in London, having watched the fight on television with my dad. It was a happy memory of growing up, watching boxing on television with him.

First of all, I must thank Azumah himself for trusting me to tell his remarkable story, especially for the treasured friendship that has resulted. I hope that I have done his life justice and have given people an insight into this special man. I must also thank Dave Harper for having the vision that Azumah's tale should be told and for entrusting me to be the one to tell it. I must also acknowledge the time and help Azumah's mother and brother afforded me.

Along the journey, there have been others who have contributed, and this book would not have been possible without their help. From the boxing fraternity, I would like to thank Brian Mitchell, Joe Cortez, Barry McGuigan, Jesse James Leija, Jeff Fenech, Johnny Lewis, Lawrence Cole, Carl King, Dr. Lou Moret, Jim McDonnell, and Charlie Magri.

My thanks also go to those outside of the ring. Former president of Ghana J. J. Rawlings, lifelong friend Obi Oblitey, Adriana Nelson, Nii Amakai Amarteifio, Peter and Jacob Zwennes, and Yaw Sakyi were more help than they will ever realise, especially in terms of relating what it was like living in Ghana in those times.

There were many old boxing magazines that helped me confirm certain details leading up to and following fights. I would like to acknowledge

the work done by the writers and the publishers of *Boxing News*, *The Ring*, *Boxing Illustrated*, *KO*, *World Boxing*, *Boxing Monthly*, *Boxing Illustrated*, *Boxing Scene*, *The Fist*, and *Inside Boxing*.

Also, it would be remiss of me to not acknowledge the site that has become the first port of call when checking a fighter's record, www.boxrec.com.

Over the years, I have read many books on the noble art of boxing and would like to acknowledge the following books, which were useful sources of information:

I love youse all by Jeff Fenech with Terry Smith, published by Modern Publishing in 1993.

Johnny Lewis: The Biography: The Story of Australia's King of Boxing by Dave Kent, published by Allen & Unwin in 2010.

The Business of Pain by Araceli Martinez-Rose, published by RM Advisors Ediciones in 2011.

Cyclone by Barry McGuigan, published by Virgin Books in 2011.

Heroes Without a Country by Donald McRae, published by Harper Collins Publishers in 2002.

I hope that my words help portray the life of a remarkable man and encourage others to follow his example in and out of the ring.

Ashley Morrison

I

MADISON SQUARE GARDEN

A short, stocky man in a suit enters the convention centre at the Mandalay Bay Hotel in Las Vegas, searching the room for his table. As he snakes his way between the seemingly endless rows of tables, many former colleagues come up to warmly shake his hand. He smiles but maintains his thoughtful gaze into the distance, looking for that elusive table.

As he nears the front of the room, a waiter breaks away from his work and makes a beeline for the man; he stops in front of him and stretches out his hand. The man in the suit stops, takes his hand, and listens to the waiter, smiling. “Azumah Nelson, you were one of the greatest. I was there when you fought Salvador Sanchez—what a fight.”

Azumah smiles and tells the waiter that Sanchez was one hell of a fighter, but before he can move forward, the waiter turns and gestures at some other waiters in the room to come and meet the man.

“This is Azumah Nelson,” he tells them. “The greatest featherweight of them all. He fought Sanchez; he took him all the way.”

“Yes, and at seventeen days’ notice,” Azumah reminds him with a smile on his face. “I wanted a rematch, but sadly he died, so it was not possible.”

“It would have been some fight,” the waiter says, finally letting go of Nelson’s hand. With a respectful nod of his head, he and his fellow waiters return to their duties.

History never feels like history at the time, but when the unknown boxer, Azumah Nelson from Ghana, stepped into the ring at New York’s

Madison Square Garden on July 21, 1982, his name became a part of boxing folklore.

Mexican Salvador Sanchez had been twenty-three years old. He was the World Boxing Council featherweight champion of the world, with an impressive professional record of forty-three wins—thirty-one by knock-out—one loss, and one draw. Remarkably he had turned professional at the tender age of sixteen, reportedly after just four amateur bouts. His only defeat came in his nineteenth fight, at the hands of fellow Mexican Antonio Becerra, the bantamweight champion.

He didn't look back after that day, and many believed him to be the best featherweight champion the world had ever seen.

He was due to defend his title against Mario Miranda in 1982, but the Argentinean had to withdraw after he was injured in training.

Promoter Don King needed to find a replacement at late notice. Telephone calls were made, and in the United Kingdom, promoter Mickey Duff said he had just the man.

Duff picked up the phone in his London office and called a number in the West African country of Ghana. Azumah Nelson's manager, John Kermeh, answered the phone in Accra, the capital city. As Azumah's life-long friend Obi Oblitey recalls, "At that time, Azumah had fought a Nigerian at the Kaneshie Sports complex. When the phone call came, he was not in the house. Kermeh, his manager, answered and then came to see Ashikwei Tetteh and me. He told us we were going to fight for the world championship. For three days, we had not seen Azumah. We thought he may be at his father's place in Mamprobi, so we looked there."

Azumah had fought Mukaila Bukare in Accra on June 26, and, having won by technical knockout in the sixth round, was taking some time out for himself.

So why Azumah Nelson?

Scouts in Africa had witnessed his impressive victory over Zambian Charm Chiteule in Lusaka for the Commonwealth Featherweight title, and that was how Mickey Duff had come to put Azumah forward for the fight against Sanchez. Azumah had won that fight by technical knockout in the tenth round of fifteen.

It was thought that Nelson would come out with all guns blazing in

the opening rounds and that the champion would toy with him before disposing of him in round five or six.

When his management found Azumah and told him of the chance to fight for the World title, despite having only seventeen days to prepare, he knew that he had to take up the challenge.

When he jumped into the ring in Madison Square Garden for the fifteen-round World title fight, few outside Ghana had ever heard of Azumah Nelson. It was thought that he had little or no chance against a champion many regarded as one of the greatest fighters of all time in his division, and certainly of his era.

Azumah knew this was his chance. He had no intention of letting the opportunity slip. As he waited in the ring for his opponent, he looked focused and far from nervous. Few knew or understood that he carried the hopes of a nation desperate for success. His trunks reflected that hope and that nation.

With both boxers in the ring, the announcer began his introductions: "The man in charge of this scheduled fifteen-round World Boxing Council Featherweight Championship is referee Tony Perez. And now, boxing fans, introducing the principals: First, in the blue corner, wearing the yellow trunks with the red and green trim, he is weighing in at an even 124 pounds. He is undefeated in thirteen professional fights with ten knockouts. He is the Commonwealth champion from Accra, Ghana, Africa. He is Azumah Nelson."

A roar goes up and the challenger raises his arms above his head. The ringside bell began to strike.

The announcer continues. "His opponent in the red corner, wearing the red trunks with the white trim, is weighing in at an even 126 pounds. This young man has a record of forty-two wins, one loss, one draw, and thirty knockouts. From Mexico City, Mexico, the WBC featherweight champion is Salvador Sanchez."

A massive roar followed the announcement of Sanchez's name as the Mexicans inside "The Garden" make it clear who they are supporting.

The referee brings the two together in the centre of the ring for their final instructions. Both boxers then return to their respective corners, and the bell sounds for the fight to begin.

The ringside commentators on the Don King Sports and Entertainment Network had never seen Azumah Nelson fight and are evaluating him as the fight progresses.

Azumah is compact and dominates the centre of the ring in the opening round, landing some telling blows early on. One minute and twenty seconds into the opening round, however, he worries Sanchez with a right hand.

World Heavyweight Champion Larry Holmes, commentating ringside, makes a telling point: “We have a fight on our hands. Nelson has no fear—he’s come to fight.”

The challenger then throws in an “Ali Shuffle.” Was this showboating or trying to show he has dominated the opening three minutes? Whatever it was, the crowd loved it.

Sanchez knows he has a fight on his hands, and in an effort to emphasise that fact, Azumah does not sit down in his corner straightaway, trying to stir up the crowd.

Round two starts almost as round one had finished, with another Ali Shuffle from Azumah, followed by a fast exchange of punches.

Azumah waits for Sanchez to throw and then counters effectively. In five minutes, he has shown he is a very competent fighter who does not fear Sanchez, or his reputation. The challenger is forcing the fight, making Sanchez reach for him, and the touch of gloves at the end of the round, shows that both boxers know this is going to be a tough fight, and that they already respect each other.

Commentator John Condon, despite the opening salvo from Nelson, believes the challenger has to get lucky early to win, as Sanchez has been fifteen rounds before and that experience will tell as the fight goes on.

Azumah stops and smiles at Sanchez in the third as Sanchez thrusts his jab into the face of the challenger, but he keeps coming forward. No one had seen Azumah fight before; none of his fights were on film. Sanchez can only attempt to work him out, round by round, while trying to avoid getting hurt at the same time. At the end of the round, Sanchez lands two good rights over the top of Azumah’s left, revealing a possible chink in the Ghanaian’s armor.

Sanchez sits in his corner, waiting for the bell for round four. When it

sounds, he crosses himself as he does before every round and rises to his feet.

Once again, though, it is Azumah who takes the lead, landing a good flurry of punches at the start of the round. After another Ali Shuffle, he manages to avoid most of Sanchez's punches. At the end of the round, both boxers stand toe-to-toe, belting each other with blows to the body and to the head, prompting the commentator Holmes at ringside to say, "He is the champion in his country, and the way he is fighting, he's trying to prove he is the best in all countries."

When the bell sounds, Azumah smiles at Sanchez, and once again, the two touch gloves. Azumah is raring to go at the start of round five, so much so that he comes out from his corner early, and referee Tony Perez sends him back to wait until the bell sounds. Once it does, he chases Sanchez around the ring and lands four or five good blows, including a telling right. "A warrior down to his toes" was how commentator John Condon saw the challenger.

Azumah lands a series of good body punches and is starting to hurt Sanchez. His expression has changed and he is beginning to take more blows than in previous rounds. Early in round six, Azumah is caught by a left hook as Sanchez starts to move and jab, attempting to control the fight. He circles Azumah, holding him off with his jab and restricts him from being able to move forward and get in close. As good as Sanchez is, he cannot avoid being caught with a right in the dying seconds as Azumah keeps plugging away.

The seventh round sees Sanchez continue to jab, and when he unleashes a powerful left hook, he has Azumah stumbling backwards. He manages to stay on his feet, but Sanchez moves in for the kill. Azumah tries to fight back but eventually hits the canvas when another short left hook lands flush on the side of his head. He is up at the count of five, and standing in front of Tony Perez, taking the mandatory eight-count.

Azumah comes forward, knowing the best form of defence is to attack. Sanchez is patient and not prepared to risk being caught by one of Azumah's powerful hooks. That caution gives Azumah time to recover, but at the end of the round, it is apparent that all is not well with the challenger when he goes to a neutral corner, rather than to his own.

Early in the eighth round, a left hook rocks Azumah, and he wobbles as if drunk. As he tries to steady himself, a right hook catches him. He stumbles again but somehow manages to stay on his feet.

There is no doubt that Azumah is hurt, but when a warrior is hurt, pride kicks in and he comes forward rather than retreats. Azumah throws a flurry of punches that lets Sanchez know he isn't finished yet. The salvo has the desired effect. Sanchez eases up the attack, deciding that caution is the best option rather than getting caught by one of Azumah's powerful swinging punches. Sanchez then plays a patient game, knowing there are still plenty of rounds left to take out the challenger. The courageous Azumah keeps fighting, but the momentum of the fight is starting to shift, and Sanchez's experience is starting to win out.

Again, Azumah is up early and out of his corner, waiting for the bell to start the ninth. Sanchez, however, remains seated in his and doesn't rise until he hears the bell. A close exchange of blows sees Azumah rocked again when the champion lands a left hook over the top of his guard. A minute into the round, Sanchez circles his opponent and neither boxer throws any punches. Suddenly, Azumah launches an attack, but unlike in the early rounds, Sanchez fights back. Both fighters land a flurry of punches, and when they are separated, Azumah is bleeding from his mouth. But being the warrior that he is, he can only go one way: He continues to move forward. At the end of the round, the evidence is clear that Sanchez has again troubled the challenger when Azumah bizarrely goes to Sanchez's corner rather than his own.

As the bell sounds for the tenth, many are surprised that Azumah is still there, especially after accepting the fight at the eleventh hour, but the ascendancy is definitely with Sanchez. Azumah keeps moving forward, but Sanchez is picking him off and manages to slip in his dangerous, swinging right hook. Azumah keeps forcing the champion back, concentrating his attack to the body and landing some hard, powerful blows. When the bell sounds, Azumah does a little dance, but rather than showboating, he looks to be trying to reinvigorate his undoubtedly tired body.

Between rounds, World Champion Larry Holmes announces that the fighters are now entering championship territory. "This is where the champions show their class and overpower the challenger," he declared.

Azumah is up from his stool early again, ready to get on with the fight. Sanchez lands a good right, but Azumah continues to move forward. The Mexicans in the crowd start to find their voice, hoping to cheer their champion home in the last five rounds. The two stand toe-to-toe, head-to-head, as Sanchez begins to throw to the body, Azumah to the head. Azumah then backs Sanchez into the corner and lands two powerful left hooks, which hurt the champion.

Suddenly, questions are being asked as to whether the challenger can really take the fight and the title from the champion. With less than thirty seconds left in the round, Azumah is knocked off-balance. He stumbles but then throws a left hook that visibly hurts Sanchez, who looks to be hanging on in the final seconds of the round. This time, it is Sanchez who dances at the bell, but it is a dance to try and convince his fans that he still has control of his legs. The determined Azumah is still standing, and in unknown territory in terms of rounds fought. But as he proved in that round, if he can land his punches, he can hurt the champion.

Azumah is again up early from his corner, wanting to get down to business. He starts the twelfth as the aggressor, throwing punches from all angles, while Sanchez keeps snapping his jab into Azumah's face.

The challenger is looking for a knockout and is trying to set Sanchez up for a right hook. He manages to force Sanchez into the corner, but cannot land a telling right. As they come back out into the centre of the ring, Azumah forces his opponent back again and lands a left hook that skims off Sanchez. But as the champion backs away, his right foot slips in the wet patch in his corner. He takes a right as he tries to get up. Meanwhile, Azumah keeps landing punches and scoring points, and ringside observers consider the fight even at this point, with just three rounds to go. For once, Azumah is not out before the bell, and his corner have worked hard on the swelling around his left eye. Both boxers are fighting like champions.

Still, the two fighters go at it, with referee Perez peripheral. Azumah is still forcing Sanchez back and lands most of his punches. With one minute and thirty seconds to go, a left and then a great right hook rock Sanchez, as does another combination seconds later. The champion looks tired and is suddenly taking a lot of punches. As the round comes to a

close, Azumah staggers by him with a right, followed by an uppercut, and then a right hook. It looks to be Azumah's round—that is, until a left hook rocks him just after the bell sounds. Courageously, he dances in the ring to say, "I'm okay."

The left hook appears to be the one weapon Sanchez has to save himself from defeat. There are two rounds to go, and there was little doubt his corner has told him he has to step it up. Sanchez is more purposeful at the start of the fourteenth; he is constantly thrusting his jab into Azumah's face. He then lands two jabs in a row, followed by a good right. Halfway through the round, though, Azumah starts chasing Sanchez and lands some good blows. Once again, the two stand toe-to-toe and both land powerful punches.

At the end of the round, both boxers are still standing there, throwing punches with little movement, and fail to hear the bell. For the first time in the fight, referee Perez has to step in and separate them. As they break apart, Azumah looks like he is out on his feet, while Sanchez slumps heavily onto his own stool.

No one had expected the fight to go the distance. Sanchez was regarded as one of the truly great champions, and no one had heard of the Ghanaian Azumah Nelson. But one thing was sure: Few were going to forget him.

Again, Azumah is up and ready before the bell, while Sanchez waits on his stool until it sounds. The two warriors come to the centre of the ring and touch gloves as the crowd shows its appreciation of a great fight. Azumah goes on the attack early; many still believing he needs a knockout to win.

His opening flurry looks impressive. However, in looking for that much-needed knockout, he opens himself up and is caught by a right hook, and then another follow-up right. Azumah keeps fighting back, the right side of his jaw is visibly swollen and blood is pouring out of his mouth. His breathing has become difficult and his mouth is hanging open. He is noticeably tired, and his punches have become wilder.

With just under two minutes left, Azumah finds himself on the ropes in his corner. Suddenly, a short right and two follow-up punches force his legs to buckle. He falls to the canvas. As he did in round seven, though,

he bounces up and takes a standing eight-count, but the spring in his step has gone. Perez lets the fight continue with just under a minute-and-a-half left. Two swinging lefts from Sanchez and Azumah's resistance is non-existent; his legs wobble and the referee moves in to stop the fight.

The fight ended after one minute and forty-nine seconds of the final round. Azumah had lost in cruel circumstances. He had tried to stay on his feet and fight back, but the lack of time to prepare for a fight against a great world champion had taken its toll in the very last round.

Commentator John Landon showed his respect for Azumah when he summed up the fight by saying, "I salute you for a great performance. You're a great fighter, and you are going to be greater as you go on." Prophetic words, indeed.

As it turned out, the judges all had Azumah behind when the fight was stopped, and only a knockout would have seen him take the WBC featherweight championship from Salvador Sanchez. The judges' scores were: Castelano 135–131, Reid 132–133, Aidala 134–131.

They say that life is about seizing opportunities when they come your way, and Azumah Nelson certainly did that against the great Salvador Sanchez. No one had given the young unknown from Ghana a hope of lasting the distance, but he had stood toe-to-toe with the champion, and even dominated him at times. With just seventeen days' notice, he had almost weathered fifteen rounds with one of the greats.

He woke up that day unknown outside of Africa, but his name was now indelibly stamped in the minds of fight fans the world over.

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