

BOXING | JOE JOYCE INTERVIEW

'I was the weakest link' — Joe Joyce and his mother discuss boxing life

Teased at school about his blind mother, the 37-year-old tells Tom Kershaw why she's the reason he is so close to a shot at world title



Joe Joyce may have been a household name if a contentious decision at the 2016 Olympics had not gone against him

JOSHUA AUSTIN/JOSHUA AUSTIN PHOTOGRAPHY

Tom Kershaw

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Long before Joe Joyce was an Olympic medal-winner or a heavyweight title contender, his mother, Marvel Opара, would shuffle into the dusty halls of leisure

centres and sit a few rows back from the ring. She came to recognise the grunt her son made when he threw a punch and the dull thud or piercing smack that revealed whether it had landed on leather or skin.

Accompanied by a friend or carer, whenever Opara heard them gasp, signalling that Joyce had been hurt, she drowned out their concerns by screaming encouragement at the dark outlines in front of her. "At first, it used to bother me," she says. "The sounds are so brutal. It's like I can feel them going through my body."

Opara is registered as 93 per cent blind, but her refusal to let misfortune define her is what equipped Joyce with the willpower to become one of Britain's most successful boxers. In the ring, his style is built on unstinting resistance, stalking forwards even if at his own expense, turning every round into a relentless war of attrition.



Joyce defeated Joseph Parker last September via an 11th-round knockout
ALEX LIVESEY/GETTY

Beyond it, though, he is one of the sport's more intriguing characters, a gentle giant with a fine art degree, who spent time cheerleading in California and has memories of piloting tandem bikes for the deaf and blind in Thailand. "My mum never let any of her limitations get to her," Joyce, 37, says. "She was always this driving force saying, 'Yes, you can do it.'"

It is that sense of unabating enthusiasm, rather than the struggle that underscores so many boxers, that has propelled Joyce towards a fight for the WBO heavyweight title. He is first

in line to challenge the winner of Tyson Fury v Oleksandr Usyk, who are now expected to meet in the spring, and already knows what it is like to share a ring with both.

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“I sparred Fury before, that’d be the toughest fight,” he says. “He’s well-rounded and he could live with me all the way until the 12th round. Usyk [who Joyce fought as an amateur] is faster and a very skilled southpaw. I’d need to knock him out down the stretch.”

Joyce has been frequently written off as clumsy or cumbersome after turning professional in 2017. He is used to those slights and indifferent to the spotlight, though, and is instead celebrating the release of a new documentary, *Absolutely Marvellous*, that focuses on the resilience Opara has passed down. “It must have been quite difficult growing up but Jobey [her nickname for Joe], always saw me wear my heart on my sleeve,” she says. “I never let anyone say I couldn’t do something, and he’s got that trait.”

Opara lost her vision when she was four years old after damaging her optic nerve — she suspects she fell down the stairs but cannot remember the accident. Not long after Joyce was born, his parents split up and by the time he was seven, he says, “I was her carer, helping her to get around, reading out the bus numbers or train stops, going to the supermarket and helping her to memorise the layouts, then they’d change everything around just as she got used to it and we’d start all over again.”

There are also more affecting memories, like the boy who taunted Joyce about Opara’s sight to such an extent that she confronted him herself. “I think it was very difficult for Jobey at

school,” she says. “Children can be cruel and I was the weakest link.”

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It ought to have helped that Joyce was already 6ft tall by the age of 12, but he was reluctant to resort to violence and preferred the thrill of contact sports. “I liked living on the edge,” he says. There was rugby, karate, capoeira and kickboxing, the latter of which Joyce practised with Opara up until she was seven months pregnant with his brother, Torann.

An arts degree at Middlesex University might have seemed an unnatural diversion, but Joyce found painting strangely therapeutic. “Mum can see if she gets really close, like a few centimetres away,” he says, and so he used larger canvases and vivid colours.



Joyce's win over Parker was the first time that the then-WBO champion had been stopped in a fight

ALEX LIVESEY/GETTY IMAGES

He then spent a term in Sacramento, California as part of an exchange programme and joined the cheerleading team, performing stunts at college football and basketball games. After graduating, there was a two-month stint at a Shaolin temple in China, where he lived a monastic lifestyle and trained

four times a day. “The adventurous side comes from my mum’s influence too,” he says. “As early as I can remember, we were going to sports activities for the blind or on music holidays. We even went to Norway to do cross-country skiing.”

Boxing came late. Joyce wanted a means of keeping fit while training to become a firefighter, but his talent became evident quickly and it wasn’t long before he faced Anthony Joshua in the final of London’s Amateur Boxing Championships in 2011. “I lost. He likes to bring that up,” Joyce says. “We were friendly but I haven’t seen him for years. It would be a tough fight, he’s got strength in both hands but his chin is a bit suspect and his mindset, I’m not sure what’s going on with him mentally recently. I’ve come on a lot more since the Olympics than he has.”

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Joyce might have become a household name too had he not lost a contentious decision in the final at Rio 2016 — the bout was later highlighted in an independent investigation over “corruption, bribery and the manipulation of results”. He turned professional aged 31 to no great fanfare, and even Opara missed the fight as she fulfilled a lifelong dream of climbing Mount Kilimanjaro. “When we got to the hotel after reaching the summit, a buddy in the group found a website with updates,” she says. “He goes, ‘Oh my God, your lad has won’, and then Jobey rang from the dressing room.”

It was only last year when he defeated Daniel Dubois, a rising star 12 years his junior, that he burst into boxing’s mainstream. Joyce remembers the bout best for Dubois’s attempt to taunt Opara at a press conference. “Because you can’t see your son, after he’s been knocked out, you’ll be spared the heartache,” he said.

In the tenth round, Dubois retired after suffering a broken orbital bone and nerve damage to his right eye. "It was poignant," Opara says. "I always pray that Jobey and whoever he's fighting come out safe, but there's a saying: 'don't play expensive jokes'. It came back to bite him." Dubois has recovered and continued boxing, which might explain Joyce's unusual malice when describing the ending as "an eye for an eye".

Theirs is an endearing dynamic; the mother who can only imagine the pain her son is enduring and the son motivated to conquer it by his mother's own unflinching spirit. "I think it inspired Jobey being around disabled people, doing stuff people said they couldn't," Opara says. "The limitations in this world always seem to come from other people."

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