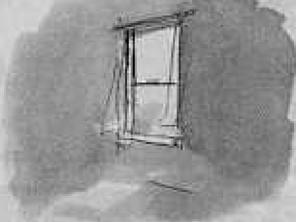
HENRY NISSEN FORMER BOXER, SOCIAL WORKER

Ex-boxer goes hell



MONDAY STORY

Gary Tippet

There's a photo Henry Nissen wants you to see. Taken the night in August 1971 when he took the Commonwealth flyweight title from John McCluskey, it's just a couple of hundredths of a second after he's crashed a devastating glove into the Scotsman's head.

McCluskey is almost flying backwards into the ropes, wide open, bent at the knees and the waist, his heels the only things touching the canvas. His eyes are shut, his mouth open, his thinning hair splaying out from the aftershock.

Nissen is a stark predatory counterpoint: crouched low, his legs spread wide for balance and power, left hand up high and in tight, the right cocked to missile in another. "Lovely shot," he says now, grinning at the memory.

But another picture better sums up Henry Nissen. It's from a year before, after he won the Australian championship from Harry Hayes in his third pro fight. Hugged by his twin, Leon, Henry manages a drowsy-proud smile. There's a nick on the bridge of his mashed nose, a cut under his left eye, purpling in his right, an ooze of blood from his right nostril. You can't see the cut on his crown or the bruising on his right fist.

These days when Henry talks of the Hayes bout, he runs a variant of the old "You should see the other bloke" line. "Looking at Harry and me after that fight, you'd reckon he was the winner and I was the loser," he says. Not true. Hayes looks like he's been mugged. According to *The Age* next morning, Nissen, "crude but powerful", gave the champ "a severe beating", driving him back "for every one of the 45 fighting minutes" — boring in with little care for his own wellbeing, willing to take punishment.

Those last are the qualities you most notice in Henry in his current life as a social worker: Relentless, tireless, with almost blinkered optimism, always on the move, speaking up for people in court, visiting them in jail when it doesn't work, hustling food, furniture, jobs, organising benefits or rehab.

He works six-day 80-hour weeks out of his white ute, supplementing his meagre remuneration with a couple of night shifts stevedoring for P&O. His philosophy is "We're all one family", but he's burdened by guilt about how little he devotes to his wife Liz and sons Robert and James. Practising welfare with scant regard for his own.

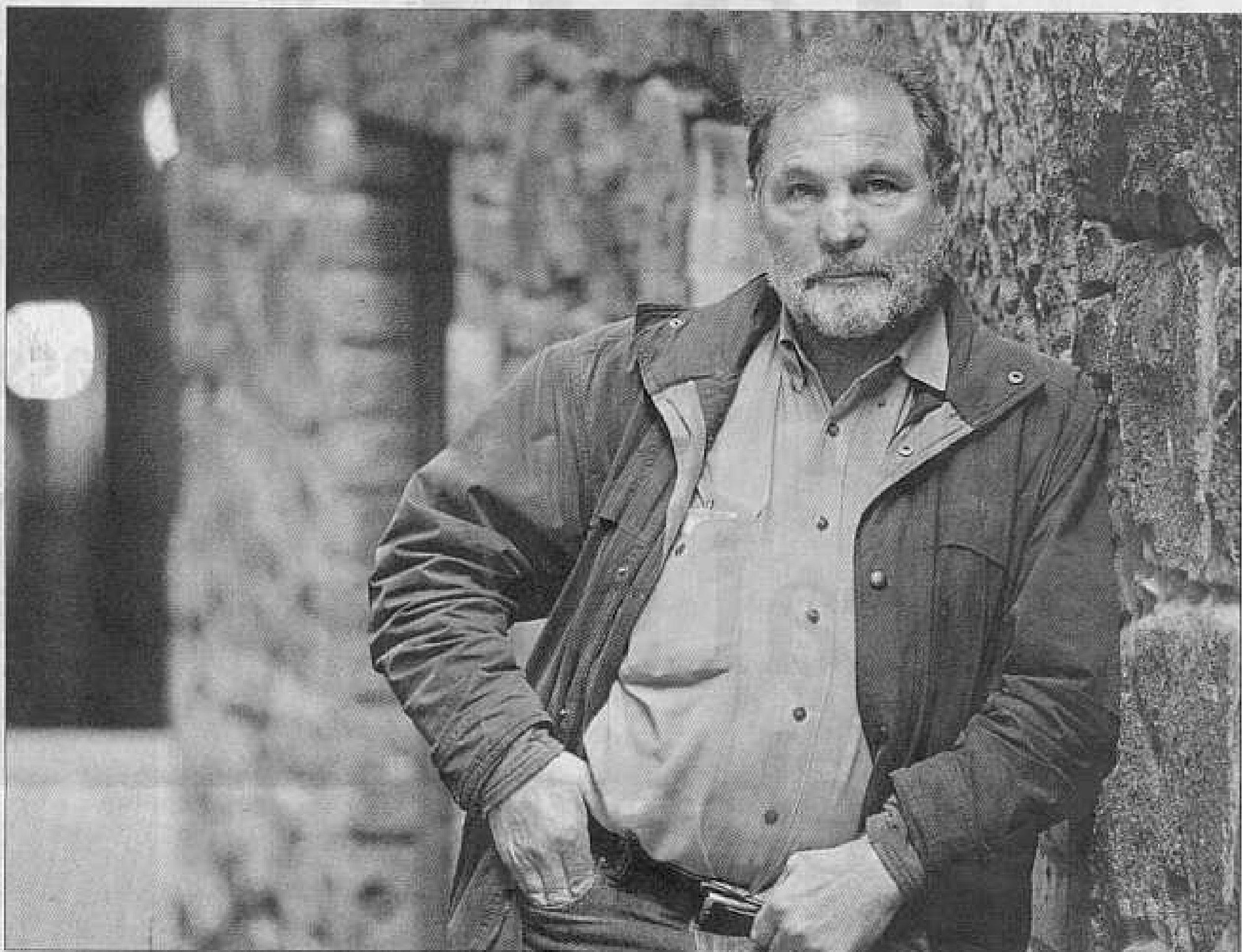
Today it's Snapper and Luke in the truck's back seat. Snapper, on a community-based order, is helping out at the Emerald Hill Mission. Luke, not long out of remand, is trying to get prescribed some bupremorphine to keep him off the heroin, and Henry's ferrying him between clinics, chemists and Centrelink. In the morning he was at bail applications in the Melbourne Magistrates and later they have to collect some donated furniture.

Boring ahead. Perhaps the only real difference between now and his boxing days is, as his twin Leon jokes, Henry's gone from knocking people down to picking them up.

"I don't kid myself about what I deal with," Henry says. "I know I'm always a soft touch for people, because I do care about everybody.

"It's a hard old world and it's tragic to see the lifestyles I see. What a waste of human life and potential, what a breakdown in society, and what we realise is there's always going to be a percentage of humanity that's

for leather for youth



Boxing champion Henry Nissen. "I reckon every boxing trainer is a youth worker," he says. PICTURE: SHANEY BALCOMB

not going to make it and the rest of us owe it to them to help out as best we can. It's just about empathy."

If anyone understands the hard world, it ought to be Henry. He and Leon were born in 1948 in a refugee centre in what had been Belsen concentration camp. Their father, Sam, was a Jewish tailor who fled Poland for Russia, where he joined the army and met their mother, Sophie, from Ukraine. Virtually all their relatives were exterminated in camps like Belsen.

After the family, with the boys' older brother Solly, emigrated to Australia, Sophie suffered a nervous breakdown. "She was manic depressive and in and out of mental hospitals. The poor girl had so much shock treatment it was horrible. Dad, the poor bastard, was working day and night to make ends meet, and couldn't look after us kids, so until we were nine or 10 we were in and out of children's homes."

The twins were little fellas and easy targets. Standing in the Brunswick Tech canteen queue one lunchtime, Henry copped a flogging from one of the school bullies. "The best I could do was start crying and hope for a bit of remorse from him, a bit of mercy," he says.

He sought out Peter Read, former Australasian middleweight champ who lived down the street, and began training. Then Leon turned up on the gym doorstep and soon the twins were working their way through amateur titles. Henry turned pro and won the Commonwealth belt in nine fights, rising to third-ranked in the world, but missed taking his only chance at the title because he didn't think he was experienced enough. "I regret that still, I cry about it regularly."

Often asked to speak to troubled youths or prisoners in Pentridge, the experience sparked something in Henry. With the same intensity that he took up fighting, he moved into social work. Since 1980 he has worked with the Open Family and the Emerald Hill Mission.

"I reckon every boxing trainer is a youth worker," he says. "With the boxing discipline comes the discipline to keep your life in order.

"The common denominator for people in trouble is they're all in need of somebody's support — and my job is to give it to them."

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