

Losers!

‘Brooo-noh!’ That was their battle cry.

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To be a Frank Bruno fan these days, you must really take a beating. On a grey Monday morning in the Granary restaurant in Luton airport, five days before the big fight, a large man eating a full farmhouse was explaining to his friends the pleasures of the long-distance package tour. ‘How am I going to last 11 hours?’ he asks. ‘The most I ever done was New York, that was seven. I’m knackered now.’

It is 6am and this is two-seat Bob. About 50, he’s earned his money all his life and now he’s going to spend it. He says they’re going to reserve him an extra seat on the plane on account of him being so big, right at the front, which brings its own problems. ‘Too near the screen to watch the bleedin’ film. They charge £2 to rent the bleedin’ headsets. It’s Road Runner or Mr Bean. On every single plane, I’ve been on they always show you Mr Bean.’

The reality will be even more taxing: a 15-hour flight, £2.50 for the headsets, no empty seat, bleedin’ French & Saunders. Bob will seek solace in a complicated in-flight order for spirits and beer.

Still in the check-in queue at this terrible hour is Peter Stokes, 37, waiting with his two brothers and five friends. They came down in a mini-van from Birmingham at two in the morning and now they’re swapping tabloids, looking for the fight news through crusty eyes, fishing for ‘exit’ and ‘smoking’ seats.

Peter has been to Las Vegas before, five times. He’s a self-made millionaire, has a nice hotel-fitting business, has been all over the world. On his wrist he wears a £9,000 gold Rolex with a very thin strap. He’s a big sports fan. He didn’t really want to do this trip, but his friends said they’d like it if he could show them around. He loves Vegas, knows the best hotels, has a very sensible gambling system: \$100 dollars a day and then that’s absolutely it. He, too, is dreading this flight.

A little behind him is John Ashton, who believes that if Tyson tags him with a left hook early on, then Frank is finished. John should know: he used to be a boxer himself until his eye went, and his brother Reynard was once a potential champion. John trains Colin ‘Sweet C’ McMillan in King’s Cross and knows all of Bruno’s people. The last time he talked to them, they said Frank was in great shape. John has brought his golf clubs and is organising a round with friends the day after the fight. ‘Could be a celebration,’ he says.

And behind John there are 200 others, mostly men, some with wives and girlfriends, a couple with sons. At some point in the last few weeks they saw a newspaper advertisement offering the chance of seeing two black men fight in a hotel in the Nevada desert. The cheapest deal said £799 for the week. They loved the idea, but now the idea is reality: this endless check-in queue, the interminable flight in tiny seats, and no Mr Bean. The things we do for England.

Six miles up, a Monarch flight attendant called Kate explains how they are trained to monitor the passengers' alcohol intake: 'It may not look like it, but we do.' Three hours in, people haven't yet begun to throw things, but a certain attitude has developed, born of the realisation that the seats will not recline and a lot of smokers have been placed in the non-smoking seats. Also, the movie was Babe, not really a fight fan's kind of film. So without warning Kate and her colleagues read the situation and announce that all the beer has gone. The brochure said the flight was 'direct and non-stop', so it is a surprise when we touch down in Bangor, Maine, on the other side of America from Vegas, still five-and-a-half hours to go. Peter Stokes recalls a World Cup Final package in 1990. The flight was fine but the Italian hotel. That was the worst. And the rep. Well... He looks at his expensive watch, but even on a Rolex the flight doesn't pass any quicker. Another plastic snack arrives. Budweiser cans roll down the aisle. The pilot announces a little turbulence. People swap turbulence stories. At the back, one passenger fills his lungs with smoke and says 'Brooo-noh'. Whole seconds pass.

At our hotel, the Excalibur, the bellboy is from Newcastle. He says Frank's fans have been arriving for days and thinks the place might 'go off'. He's been here for two years and misses the football. He says the English are bad tippers. He bids us 'welcome to the Kingdom'.

The Excalibur is a theme hotel, one of many on the Strip. In this hotel you are requested to 'have a royal day'. Here, the King Arthur show – jesters, damsels, jousting – does not happen twice-nightly but twice knightly. You can get spliced at the Canterbury Wedding Chapel, eat at Lance-a-lotta Pasta, and shop for over-priced rubbish in the Wizard's Arcade.

Outside, under the pastel-shade Bavarian turrets, there is a moat with a mechanical monster that surfaces every hour. Inside, history as nightmare: a shameless clash of mediaeval chivalry, Robin Hood, cocktail girls in wimples, and for a reason too twisted to fathom, Wild Bill Hickock. Every few minutes there is a Tannoy message in the Sherwood Forest Room or Sir Galahad's: "Lord Escobar to table 12, calling Lord Escobar..." Lord Escobar turns out to be a waiter from the San Fernando Valley, first name Rikki.

And at the heart of it, the reason for Las Vegas at all: 3,000 slot machines, blackjack, roulette, horse and basketball betting, keno (like the lottery every half an hour), baccarat, poker. In Las Vegas you can bet on anything, apart from professional wrestling.

The Excalibur has over 4,000 rooms, which for almost two years made it the largest hotel in the world. Then the MGM Grand was chucked up across the road, and that had 1,000 more. The motif at the MGM Grand is the Wizard of Oz, complete with tin men and flying monkeys. There is also a permanent show called EFX, starring our very own Michael Crawford, who this week must content with Brits shouting 'Oooh Betty!' at him as he shimmies through the air on a spaceship.

As the week progresses, the estimates of the numbers of Frank's fans in town for the fight shoots up from 3,000, to four, to five, and by Saturday the number has risen to half the MGM Grand Garden, the arena holding almost 17,000.

The odds on a Bruno victory narrows as we part with our money, from 10-1 when we arrive, to 4-1 at showtime. The Excalibur crowd is convinced we will not see Ye Olde Traditional Shytte performance, but something muscular and

proud, and there is much hope that Saturday evening and Sunday morning will be spent in local fountains. Or possibly the moat.

On the second evening, our eight men from Birmingham are still talking about the first evening; all got plastered. Bobby Burns, one of the three publicans in the party, says he loves the cost of beer here, cheaper than his own place in Erdington, even for Heineken. Burns is the real gambler of the party, and later that night will go on to win \$1,600 at roulette. He says: 'The maximum jackpot on my pub machine is £8! I get about £900 a week from that machine. People come in on a Friday and Saturday and they just throw money at it.'

He says he loves the balls of Vegas, the audacity of the architecture, the much-touted can-do principle that is nowhere more visible than the atriums of these ridiculous hotels. 'Think of the backhanders,' he says. 'In Britain the councillors might get £20,000 to grant planning. Here you must be looking at half a million.'

We are drinking in Tut's Hut at the Luxor, a hotel in the shape of a pyramid. The place is hipper than most, and has more obelisks than any other hotel in the world. They serve a mean Big Kahuna Burger (beef and chicken combined), and the cocktail special is called Vesuvius, but apart from that it's pretty much like all the other joints. Everywhere you hear the same shrill sound: the occasional whoop of delight as someone hits 7-7-7, but mostly the dull clunk of defeat, the low hum of money being drained away, like a river rushing under all the casinos, the golden Nile.

A large man called Roger has travelled from Leigh-on-Sea with his son Scott to drink at the Luxor and weigh their chances. The pair are cautious gamblers, \$10 here, \$20 there. Scott, 22, will bet \$10 for Bruno to win at eight to one, but he believes that Tyson will stop him. His father, who made his money in double-glazing, thinks the best we can hope for is that Bruno gets it on points. 'My honest opinion is that Frank has a small chance. Tyson is only a man. It's Wimbledon versus Liverpool in 1988. It's Sunderland against Leeds in 1973.'

Earlier that day they did the Hoover Dam tour – 'not bad'. The previous night they had ventured downtown, where they were shocked by the begging and the free magazines offering the services of young prostitutes. Every magazine contains hundreds of pictures, each with a number to call. One advert offers something called English Sex, illustrated only by a drawing of a judge's wig.

When daylight comes, we may walk the Strip past Caesar's Palace and Treasure Island, past all the rubble that will soon be the New York, New York Hotel and the Stratosphere Hotel, to a place they call Fashion Show Mall. Here, by the Greek food stall (serving doner kebabs – 'the food of ancient times'), we find two Newcastle shirts with drunks inside them. They are so drunk that they're not sure where they are, or how they got there. They'll have another Bud. One of them is called Wayne, and his favourite Newcastle player is the Frenchman David Ginola. Consequently, in two-inch letters between his shoulder blades, he carries the name Waynola.

They have bought Vegas T-shirts, Bruno T-shirts, Bruno vs Tyson posters, and all sorts of vulgar souvenirs to take home. Wayne says that what he really wants to buy is a crossbow. A friend told him that you can get them here, and cheaply. Why does he want one? 'Useful,' he reckons. Might be trouble at Customs, I suggest, but Wayne says it won't be loaded.

At the Excalibur pool, duty-free sweats through pink skins. As the sun sinks below the turrets, the belltower plays a tape of Big Ben. 'It's only 3ft-friggin-six deep!' a man observes of the pool. Like the hotel windows that do not open, Las Vegas has found many ways to stop visitors killing themselves.

The pool is a good place to come when you've lost money, and not a bad place to brag if you've won. One Welshman is telling new friends how he arrived on the Sunday, couldn't sleep that night because of the jetlag, and so stumbled down to the casino at three in the morning. 'I only bloody got three diamonds! \$2,500!' He said he was going to put it away to take home, and the people around said 'good on you'.

There are a lot of British women lounging here, sipping cocktails in huge silvery goblets. They carry fat books and coconut sunscreen and their men are going until sundown. They are pool professionals. 'I'm here for the sun first, then the shopping, then the food.' Barbara Hurst has come from Croydon. 'I like steaks,' she says. She's got her \$200 fight ticket next to Peter, her husband. 'I like Frank,' she says, and if he wins 'it will make my life easier. Peter would be a far, far happier man.'

Opposite, three men in Manchester United shirts have just heard that a Cantona equaliser has put them top of the league on goal difference. They are talking to three American girls, telling them they know Ryan Giggs. The American girls say: 'Who?'

The weigh-in takes place at the MGM Grand on Thursday evening, and our people are present in vast numbers. 'They got to let us in,' one of them says. 'It's the law.' Most are left outside, with their football chants, with their extra Os. For a while they are led by Frank's wife Laura: 'We are the champions,' she offers, her fists high. 'Laura Brooo-noh,' our boys moan.

Outside the theatre, a boxing commentator from BskyB is asked to sign autographs. Anything or anyone with the remotest British connection is greeted with unbridled joy. Even Bruno is genuinely thrilled to see so many from the old country. 'I will not let you down, I promise,' he says, from behind dark glasses.

In the Betty Boop Bar, knocking back lager and champagne, Alan Guest and six of his outsize friends have flown in from Manchester, another lousy charter flight, and says that if Bruno wins he will go back scheduled. Club class. Alan runs the Workout Warehouse gym in Halifax, Billy's a businessman, Dale works for Nigel's gym in Bradford, Paul manages a Halifax wine bar, Adam plays rugby with St Helen's. Average age: 35. They drink together whenever they can. Alan wants to win the red viper sports car, the jackpot prize on the 25-cent slot machine. He has his wristwatch set on English time. 'I like to know what my wife's doing.'

Last night they scuffled with bouncers in a bar called Beaches when a barman short-changed them. They think the only way it will all go off on Saturday is if it goes the distance and Bruno loses. 'We like a few drinks,' Alan says. 'But we're not yobbos. We've come for a holiday. Lad's out together. The fight's a bonus.'

When Saturday comes, the mood has changed. This isn't just the British on holiday any more, not your average piss-up in Majorca. Now we are the menace, the reputation, steaming in from all the hotels on the Strip and downtown, over the walkways on Las Vegas Boulevard to the MGM Grand, all

these British football and rugby shirts and general Union Jackery, a crowd pumped by cheap beer, a few cells short of the prison cells, a crowd that believes. There comes a song not heard in these parts since the first Tyson-Bruno fight in 1989: Ing-er-land, Ingerland, Ingerland, Ingerland, Ingerland, Ingerlaaaaand, Ingerland, Ingerland, Ingerland, Ingerland, Ing-er-land! On and on through the mouth of the MGM lion, past Dorothy and the Emerald City to the Betty Boop Bar again, an ugly scene with the God-given right to get uglier.

There is an extensive undercard, with many minor world championship belts at stake, but we are not very interested in these (though there is a little perk-up during a women's match). During the early bouts we like to sing a newish song: 'Frank, Frankie Bruno, Frankie's walkin' along, singin' a song, walking in his winter wonderland.' After an hour of this, even Jack Nicholson looks up from the \$1,000 seats.

Before the main event, there is a roll-call of visiting celebrities: Jack, Kevin Costner, Jim Carrey, Drew Barrymore. Our guys approve of George Michael and Pierce Brosnan. We belt out our national anthem, boo while an O'Jay sings The Stars and Stripes.

You can only feel a little sorrow at what happened after the bell. The annihilation stuns even those who only ever fancied Tyson. Frank freezes and crumples, and we head for the exits in a mournful crush. There are taunts from Tyson's mob, and the odd scuffle. Along with anger, there is humour born of disbelief. British people say to their mates: 'I put money on the right round. But it was the wrong guy.' They say: 'So it's back to pantomime.' A couple of blokes whistle Always Look On The Bright Side Of Life.

Vegas does not go off: the menace has succumbed to exhaustion and shame. Having talked Frank up all week, they wonder if he was worth fighting for at all. 'I did my best,' Frank says on the loop of news over the bars at the hotels. But his fans are unforgiving; no one talks of what a nice bloke he is. Back over the walkway to the Excalibur, a man with 'Ipswich' stencilled in the middle of his Union Jack looks out at the Strip and says, 'I hate this shithole.'

At the pool the next day, the light hurts everyone's eyes. In the afternoon, one man stands out. 'Bruno was unlucky,' says Rob Marshall, a young salesman from Leeds.

Unlucky? I figure he must be talking about another fight, or joking. I explain that 'unlucky' is when you bet on red and it comes up black.

'He could have had him in the first,' Rob reckons. 'He had one great jab.' This madness is refreshing amidst so much gloom. 'Bruno will never be champion again,' he says. 'I hear he's decided to stay in Vegas, waiting for his next chance.' I tell him that Bruno has checked out of the city at 11am, mumbling about his family, jilting journalists and fans at the press conference.

'Not Frank,' he says.

No one shares this crackpot optimism on the plane home. It is exactly a week since this British cargo last gathered. 'I've seen many, many championship fights,' says Peter Stokes, 'and I can honestly say that this was the worst fight by a champion there has ever been.' Stokes forked out \$1,000 to sit two rows behind Jack Nicholson. 'Bruno had the biggest support of any British fighter abroad, and he shamed us. With two month's training I could have done better. Bruno's the only boxer with sponsorship on his boots. He's the only boxer with a cauliflower arse.'

Across the aisle, Paul Manison, another of the Birmingham lads, concludes: 'Bloody useless, Bruno. Widow bloody Twankey.'

One row ahead, a Richmond cab driver called Jimmy Byron says that this was his first time in America, and he's missed his wife Jayne and two young kids. He tells us that every time Bruno comes on the television, Jayne goes, 'Ooh, he's lovely.' Jimmy realises that you can't have a champion like that. He says he enjoyed the weigh-in best – more exciting than the fight, and it lasted longer. Soon he will go to the pub 'and exaggerate it all'.

Most of us have lost money, but behind me the former wrestler Mick Borg reckons he's many thousands up. His wife Maureen nods in approval. They've been up since five for a champagne chopper ride to the Grand Canyon. They laugh as Peter Stokes tells them the story of his vasectomy.

And in this vein we roll along. Victoria Wood videos and ghastly peanuts and musty breath, all the way back to the London fog. The journey home takes so long that by the time we land another two hotels have gone up in Vegas. Somewhere above the streets of Luton, Peter Stokes winks to a friend and tries it on one more time: 'Brooo-noh!' The name tumbles down the aisle, to a place where only a week before some English people had gathered with wild dreams.