Down for the Count

The savage ballet that is boxing confronts AIDS, deception and shattered dreams

June 1, 1995 By Bruce Shoenfeld

I hear the rhythmic drumming of a speed bag as it echoes through a shabby basement gym. It sounds like a poverty that only boxers know. Inside the Phillis Wheatley Community Center, on the backside of the quiet Southern city of Greenville, South Carolina, mismatched lengths of carpeting have been laid across wooden planks and randomly set on the bare concrete floor. Two young African-American men shadowbox there, circling silently around the makeshift ring in balletic pantomime. In the far corner, another boxer throws lefts and rights against a heavy bag in booming syncopation.

Lamar "Kidfire" Parks, formerly the world's No. 1 middleweight contender, learned to box here. His skill and hunger brought him all the way to the top. Almost. "He was strong, the strongest I'd ever seen," says Silas Epps, who taught Parks boxing. Epps, a bear of a man with a ruddy complexion, shakes his head slowly. He knows he'll never come across another boxer with Parks' ability again. "All we had to work on was speed," he says. "When his daddy came down here, I said, 'You got yourself a champion.' And it would have happened. That's what he would have been."

Today, Lamar Parks lives in a small town near Greenville and, I suspect, never sees the inside of a gym. At 25, Parks should be approaching the best years of his boxing life. Instead, he has tested HIV positive and won't fight again.

Parks was in New York City training for a bout in June 1993, when his live-in girlfriend called with news that she had tested HIV positive. Samantha Clark, then 22, has said that Parks told her to ignore the results, to tell no one and continue going about her business as though nothing had changed. Clark feared for her life. Parks feared for his career.

Parks and Clark had been dating for more than two years. By then, Clark referred to him as her fiancée, even though she occasionally saw him around town with other women. Parks had been her first lover; that's what she told Silas Epps one day in the gym while he was taping his gloves: "I know she's a good woman because she was a virgin when I met her." She didn't use drugs and she was hardly likely to have been exposed to infected blood. If Samantha Clark had AIDS, Parks knew, it meant that she probably got it from him. But he had pulled himself up from poverty through boxing. And he wasn't going back to that other life unless something dragged him back. As long as Samantha's condition remained secret, his career was safe. Winning the boxing bouts, that was the easy part.

He kept fighting. On August 10, two months after Clark's call, Parks defeated Gilbert Batiste in Greenville. Two months later, he knocked out Joaquin Velásquez. By then, Parks had a 28-1 lifetime record with 21 knockouts and, most important, a signed contract for a $150,000 title bout against Gerald McClellan, the World Boxing Council (WBC) middleweight champion. He was a local hero in Greenville, a city that doesn't get the chance to celebrate the success of one of its own too often. Lamar "Kidfire" Parks had come that far.

"I started from nothing," Parks said to me during a brief telephone conversation some weeks ago. "I came up from nothing." At the time, Parks was visiting his father's auto repair shop. I was sitting in a hotel room a few time zones away, trying to figure out how to get him to talk. I wanted to hear his side of the truth. He hadn't let me see him while I was in Greenville and he never kept any of the telephone appointments we subsequently made. Our conversation that day was a preliminary to a follow-up that never came.

More than a year after his last fight, Parks has yet to discuss whether he may have exposed Samantha Clark to HIV. And he has yet to acknowledge that he is HIV positive, although his father has confirmed it. The facts indicate that Parks knowingly hid his condition and continued to put opponents and handlers at risk (however small) by boxing, but he won't answer those charges. He refuses to give out his phone number or say exactly where he is living. "If you had lost your lifelong dream, your profession and your girl," he said to me that day, "you wouldn't have anything to talk about either."

Boxing, though needing skill, is a blood sport, brutal and dangerous. Cuts that gush blood from eyebrow and nose are commonplace. This is not comparable to Greg Louganis dripping his blood into a chlorinated pool in a freak accident or the famously exposed Magic Johnson suffering an occasional cut; here, violence is the point of the matter and blood is the currency of a boxer's success. While the risk of blood-to-blood AIDS transmission is always small, it remains possible. In no state is it legal to box after testing HIV positive. But boxers are also the most desperate of athletes and many are among the most desperate of men. In their hunger to get a championship belt and a big-money fight on HBO, to finally break-out of their obscurity and poverty, many boxers, trainers, handlers will allow nothing to get in their way, not even AIDS.

This is a dirty underside of the AIDS pandemic, unseen and unremarked. This isn't Larry Kramer or Randy Shilts -- articulate men with access to vast support networks, holding court in the literary bookstores or the pages of *The New York Times Magazine*, raising consciousness among the educated. Boxers are far more likely to be raised in poverty, often misinformed or uninformed, pressing hard against their ambitions. Nobody talks about them. No AIDS quilt is likely to bear their names. Until now, nobody has bothered to catalogue their existence.

There are six boxers known to be HIV positive, and probably many more who haven't been discovered. The Danish Boxing Federation barred a Togolese fighter named Abdoul Amidou after he tested positive. An anonymous Zimbabwean has revealed his test results to the boxing authorities and ended his career on condition that they don't mention his name. A promising fighter named Proud Kilimanjaro from Zaire is said to be HIV positive and has retired from the

sport. As far as we know, none of those men continued to fight after learning he had been exposed to HIV.

But Eduardo Castro did. A junior featherweight from Mexico, he is a professional opponent, having fought seven professional bouts and lost them all. October 11, 1991, aware that he had tested positive, Castro fought against Eddie Lee Croft in San Francisco using an assumed name. One month earlier, Castro fought Joel Díez in Indio, California billed as himself. This was possible because boxing, like most sports, doesn't require HIV testing. Of the half-dozen important boxing states, in fact, only Nevada tests for HIV at all. The feeling is that it is too costly. At the local level, boxing is an enterprise with a very small profit margin, and the 15 to 20 tests a night, at reportedly some $400 for the night's card, would make many fight cards financially prohibitive.

London is one of the few cities that regularly tests boxers. Last April, World Boxing Organization (WBO) featherweight champion Ruben Palacio was making a defense of his title there when his pre-fight test results came back positive. Palacio seems not to have known of his condition until then. He returned to his home in Medellín, Colombia, distraught, uncertain as to what to do next. The WBO stripped him of his title because he could not defend it; due to the risk of HIV transmission, Ruben Palacio was no longer allowed to fight.

"He thought his life was over," said a man I met in Bogotá who knows Palacio. Small and thin, with the small eyes of a ferret, this man spoke to me as we sped through the city in a car, on our way to nowhere in particular. The man didn't know how to find Palacio's family, which I wanted to do, but he had spoken to Palacio a month before and told me about the conversation. "He was ashamed," he said. "He didn't want anyone to know about the AIDS."

In Colombia, a society heavy in machismo, AIDS is equated with homosexuality. In boxing, the subject is taboo. It is not surprising, then, that Palacio -- married with two children -- refused to discuss it with reporters in Medellín. Perhaps he refused to admit it even to himself. At the same time, he clearly understood the ramifications. Late last year, he was arrested attempting to enter Miami with a large quantity of heroin in his possession. "The cartel convinced him," said the man who knows him, who claims to have connections in the Colombian underworld. "They said he might as well die a rich man and leave something for his family." The car stopped and I stepped out into a bright sun that didn't carry the heat it promised. A lot of what I found in Colombia was that way: Not what it appeared at first. Perhaps Ruben Palacio's story will turn out the same way.

He is currently being held in the Miami Correctional Center, awaiting trial on smuggling charges. If convicted, he is likely to spend the rest of his life in prison. He is still refusing interviews. The public defender who has been assigned to his case told me that Palacio is not comfortable talking about AIDS and holds out hope that the positive test result was a mistake. The word I got on the street in Bogotá is that his family is being cared for by the drug cartel.

Back in Greenville, all kinds of people keep telling me that Lamar Parks is selling drugs. I heard that from some of the athletes and others who spend time in and around the Phillis Wheatley Center, which is an oasis of hope in a dilapidated part of the city. Jesse Jackson was raised no more than a mile from there, but Jackson's soft silk ties and impressive suits would seem incongruous

and almost obscene when set against the houses I saw walking around the neighborhood.

From under a velvet-blue sky, I walked back inside the gym as darkness fell. I headed downstairs. I wanted to talk to Silas Epps about where Parks had come from and what his life has been like when they had met, figuring the more I knew about the boxer's background, the more I might understand. But that day I couldn't find Epps. Someone I hadn't seen before was bench-pressing weights along one wall, sweating hard, grunting with the effort.

Never a physically strong person, Samantha Clark grew ill in the autumn of 1993. She weighed less than 100 pounds. Parks must have known by then that she was fighting a losing battle against time -- and that, in a different sense, so was he. The fight against Gerald McClellan, the same man who later went to the brink of death after smashing heads with Nigel Benn in a bout this year, was set for March 4, 1994 in Las Vegas. Had Lamar Parks won it, his next fight would have earned him more than $1 million.

Carl Moretti, a promoter at Garden State Boxing, confirms that Parks first tested HIV positive in Fort Pierce, Florida, while training for the Gerald McClellan bout. It is not clear to me why Parks agreed to take that test knowing it would come out positive, but he did. It proved his undoing. According to Moretti, one of the boxing people who had helped administer it heard the result and called promoter Lou Duva. He had been under the mistaken impression that Parks belonged to Duva's stable of boxers. Duva gave the news to *Ring* magazine, the self-proclaimed "Bible of Boxing," which printed the story as a blind item.

Parks now knew his title fight against McClellan -- and his future as a fighter -- was at risk. He asked to have another test taken at home in Greenville; then, according to Moretti, contrived to have a friend take it for him (which, unfortunately, remains easy enough to do). He ran to Epps with the new slip that showed him negative and convinced him that the Florida test had been a mistake. Epps, who had seen the original with his own eyes, was more than happy to believe that Parks was uninfected. So was Carl Moretti. It seemed to mean that Parks would get his chance at the title. Everyone had a vested interest in Lamar Parks by then.

But the Nevada State Athletic Commission announced that Parks would have to take yet another HIV test. "There were persistent rumors about Lamar Parks," explained Marc Ratner, executive director of the commission. "So we said, 'Fine, we want you to be tested in Nevada." When Moretti told Parks this, Parks suddenly stopped training. He knew if he tested positive in Vegas his career would end, so he apparently pretended to have injured his shoulder. Soon after, Samantha Clark saw him digging in his yard to install a sprinkler system, which wrecked his hurt-shoulder alibi. She took it as a sign that he was certain he was HIV positive, although he refused to admit it to Clark or anyone else. By then, she was dying. I have seen a photo of her that shows a fawn-like woman with sad, hollow eyes and skin stretched tight. She didn't believe Parks anymore, but perversely she still wanted to make the relationship work with the man who had exposed her to HIV.

Later, Clark called a newspaper and said she had a story to tell. Part of her reason for speaking out, with death near, was to warn any other prospective sex partners that Parks was HIV positive.

“He was going around with a slip saying he was negative, waving it in front of all the other girls,” Epps says. Nine days later, last August 27, Samantha Clark died.

Because Parks has remained silent, we can’t say for certain that he exposed Samantha Clark to HIV. That is one of the reasons for his silence, I’m told: His fear of a lawsuit by her family. “How come none of the other women I ever went with have died?” he asked me, but he wasn’t ready to follow up his questions with any answers. He had been telling his version of events, however. “I remember he told me that Samantha’s last boyfriend died of AIDS the year before,” Carl Moretti says. “Now whether that’s true, I have no idea.” [*POZ* was unable to verify Parks’ allegations as told to Carl Moretti.]

Some medical experts say the best way to fight AIDS is to immerse yourself in your life. Channel the aggressiveness you use against the disease into what you are trying to accomplish and make your work that much stronger. Boxers, among the most innately aggressive of men, have no way of doing that if they become HIV positive. They’ve lost access to the only world they know. Ruben Palacio believed he had nothing to live for, so he smuggled drugs. Lamar Parks kept chasing his ambitions, evidently not caring if he was putting others at risk. When his career had to end, he fled.

The men shadowboxing in the Phillis Wheatley gym saw it all happen. Berry Butler is a 24-year-old aspiring light heavyweight who trains with Epps. He’s no Kidfire Parks, and he never will be, but he’s an earnest puncher and a hard worker. I never saw Parks fight, but Butler has the look and physique I imagine Parks had when he was fighting. He’s taller and some 15 pounds heavier, two weight classes up, and he doesn’t seem to have the same untrammeled desire to succeed. But when I think of Parks and close my eyes, I see Butler’s face. Butler knows Parks from boxing, and also because Greenville, South Carolina isn’t that large a place. When I mention Parks to him, he sounds more sympathetic than I had expected. “I think he’s just dumfounded, which is fairly understandable,” he says. “All that he has worked for, shot to hell in a second. He was a terrific fighter, a hard puncher. Of course, now all that doesn’t matter.”

The first thing Butler did when he found out that Parks had tested HIV positive was try to figure out if he had sparred with him after Parks was exposed. Butler is concerned about HIV positive boxers getting access to the ring but he won’t stop boxing because of that. “It’s a risk you take,” he says, in a voice that reveals nothing.

Epps, who smeared Parks’ blood all over towels and shirttails for years without a thought because that’s what cut men and trainers do, says his wife made him take an HIV test as soon as she heard about Parks. Epps says if he had contracted AIDS through contact with all that blood, he wouldn’t have held it against Parks. “It just would have meant we’d gotten on the wrong boat together,” he says. “It could happen to anybody. It doesn’t mean he did anything wrong.” Unless, of course, Parks had known that he was carrying the disease and had tried to hide it and continued fighting, as seems likely. If that had been the case and he had been exposed, I asked Epps, how would he feel? His face darkened, and for the only time since I’d known him I saw a flash of anger. “In that case,” he said, “I would have never forgiven him.”

There is evidence that Lamar Parks is still trying to hide his condition. Shortly before I went to Greenville, he had called Moretti after more than a year out of contact and tried to convince him to dig up old records from a Las Vegas bout in 1990 that listed him as HIV negative. He wondered if a negative test from back then might mean that he could fight again.

“There’s a little bit of me that thinks he still doesn’t admit to himself he has it,” Moretti says. “I mean, he’s feeling fine, he hasn’t experienced weight loss or anything else, so he convinces himself that he is fine. Until he starts experiencing some of the symptoms, it may be hard for him to get beyond his denial and get his life going in a positive direction again.”

When I talked to Parks, I started out by trying to set up an interview. I finished, no more than five minutes later, feeling for him as someone resembling a friend. I tried to convince him of the importance of accepting that he was HIV positive and perhaps even using the knowledge and his celebrity status in his community to do others some good. His response made me realize that you don’t always understand a situation until you see it from the inside.

“Look, I never wanted anything else my whole life but to be a champion,” he said. “And now I can never have that. It isn’t just a question of accepting what has happened -- I’m long past that. It’s that I can never have what I want. I have nothing left. How would you feel?”

Not long ago, Parks’ father told someone at *The Greenville News*, the local newspaper, that his son was beginning to get treatment for HIV, which seemed a good sign. Later, the father told me that the doctor his son had been seeing told him to go away and not come back until he felt sick.

From time to time, Lamar Parks comes to Greenville and hangs out at his father’s auto repair shop. I have that number and the beeper number, but he won’t return my calls. Maybe he’s waiting to tell his story in his own way, at his own time, when he figures it will do the most good. Or maybe he holds out hope that he will fight again because hope is all that gets him through. He’s 25 and apparently healthy. Maybe he fools himself into thinking that, somehow, the world won’t know. But somewhere deep inside, Lamar Parks knows the truth. He *knows* the truth. It’s a truth he’s not yet ready to face like the champion he was destined to be.

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