



# NEVER GIVE UP THE FIGHT



Journeymen ...  
Sakio "The  
Scorpion" Bika  
and his trainer  
Mark Pitts. Photo:  
Anthony Johnson



## A kid from the slums and a battling boxing trainer make famous - sounds great for television, writes **Andrew Webster**.

**T**HE fighter's story starts like many others: with a girl, in a big city, a glance across a crowded nightclub floor.

The trainer's story starts like few others: in a nondescript gym, in the heat of the Philippines, with street kids trying to punch their way to a better life.

This is about Sakio Bika, a fighter from Cameroon who was born into poverty and then found the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow by winning *The Contender*, the wildly popular reality TV boxing show in the US.

And it's also about Mark Pitts, the self-taught trainer who had been to two world title fights and lost both. He came out of retirement to help Bika get there. It makes *Rocky* seem like *Neighbours*.

So here's Bika, born the fourth-eldest of nine children in the country's largest city, Douala, with no choice but to harden up. Getting bitten by a scorpion as a young boy only made him ill and ensured him a clever ring name later in life.

At the age of 13, he noticed a sign advertising a boxing tournament. The prize: household items such as toilet paper. He entered, won and his preferred sport of football was abandoned forever.

"After that tournament, I never go back to soccer," he says.

"Because I knew I could win prizes for my family."

About the same time, on the other side of the world in the small Filipino village of Catanduanes, Pitts was running a boxing gymnasium.

He'd been a promising rugby halfback for Eastern Suburbs with ambitions of a gold jersey before a damaged sciatic nerve forced him into retirement at the age of 24.

Devastated, he started surf trips to South-East Asia. Always fascinated with the sweet science, he set up a gym. Children were attracted to it like bees to honey.

When local politicians wanted kickbacks after a year, he headed for Manila and there, sitting around a fire at night, he learnt from the locals about how to train champions.

This was a good thing. He'd brought one from Catanduanes with him, Arnel Barotillo, a street kid whose father had died and mother was constantly hunting for work.

In 1993, he brought Barotillo to Australia. In November 1997, his fighter took on South African Buvani Bungu at altitude for the International Boxing Federation super-bantamweight title. He lost.

In Cameroon, Bika was churning through the amateur ranks. By the time of the 2000 Olympics, he'd clocked up 140 fights for eight losses. Early that year, he'd been crowned the all-African amateur champ.

He didn't win gold in Sydney but then, in the days after the Games, at the exclusive athletes' party at a nightclub in Darling Harbour, he was knocked out cold when he met Belinda, an engineer from Newcastle. He asked her to dance.

"I made the move, you know?" he chuckles. They fell in love and Bika phoned his mother to tell her that he wasn't coming home. Then he met destiny again. If he was going to remain on a sports visa, he had to start

training. Someone recommended he start training with Pitts at the North Sydney PCYC. He moved into a cheap room at a flea-ridden motel in Randwick and took a job in a fruit market with 4am starts.

Pitts prepared him for an amateur bout and then his first pro fight, but he had other priorities. He was preparing Barotillo for another tilt at the IBF title, this time against another South African, Lahallo Ledwebava - and at altitude, again. He lost, again.

Pitts decided to get serious. He was a single dad with a daughter about to start kindergarten. Boxing's a tough gig and rarely pays all the bills. He

became a personal trainer. Bika became a glass-cutter and joined Jeff

Fenech. For the next five years, Bika trained like he fought. Fast, furiously, powerfully, with pride. He collected Australian, Orient and Pacific middleweight belts but became the forgotten man of Australian boxing behind the headline acts such as Kostya Tszyu, Anthony Mundine and Danny Green. He and Belinda were happy enough, renting a two-

bedroom flat in Kogarah. They also had a son, Zidane, named after the famous Frenchman. Bika might be a boxer but he was a footballer first.

In early 2005, he phoned Pitts.

He told Pitts he'd split with Fenech six months before. He wasn't getting any attention. No plan. No belief. No love. Pitts became his trainer again. The path twisted again.

"We both have personalities where you don't express much, but we go pretty deep," Pitts says.

"I've respected him as a person ever since I've known him. That's why I came back. I knew he was a good person. There's no mug in him."

A month down the track, Bika's manager Angelo Hyder somehow lined up a world-title shot against Markus Beyer at super-middleweight. It was a step up but when Bika cut the champ under the eye in the fifth round in Germany, his optimism exploded.

Then something shifty happened. Normally, they don't stop fights for a cut under the eye but the ref called it a technical draw.

Had they gone another round,

**'I've come a long way  
in a short period. In  
my mind, in my heart  
- and for my family.'**



Bika believes he would have won on points.

"Everything happens for a reason," Pitts says. "If he'd won that, he mightn't have had the same headlines that he has now."

They went to the US where the tournaments are made for TV and the stakes are high. One day they returned from a sparring session with Bika's right elbow the size of a football. X-rays reveal fragmented bone.

"Maybe this is a good sign," Pitts told him. "Maybe we'll be offered a fight with ..."

Joe Calzaghe was the IBF and WBO world champion. A week later, Hyder was on the phone again and had lined up a shot at the Welshman. He had an operation on his elbow, couldn't throw a right in training until three weeks before he took Calzaghe to 12 rounds.

It was the hardest fight the Italian Dragon had endured.

Over the next year, Bika faded

from the spotlight and the world ratings. He drove up to Coffs Harbour for a bout against a battler from Thailand. Then he lost to Lucian Bute in Montreal. But someone was watching. Hyder told him he was about to become a TV star. . .

**T**OMORROW night, the final episode of *The Contender* will be shown on Fox 8. Bika takes on American slugger Jaidon Codrington in Boston.

"That was something out of a *Rocky* movie," promoter Lou DiBella, who handles Codrington, said afterwards.

Here's a tip: Bika wins.

Who knows where the story goes from here? The \$800,000-plus purse means he no longer has to struggle, his family's future is secure. Back home in Douala, his parents are getting a new house.

Expect some word on his next pro fight before Christmas and the US

beckons. He is so well known there that people would come up to him in restaurants in the days before the fight, peer under the brim of his hat and say: "I thought it was you."

Bika will be watching tomorrow night at an exclusive party at The Loft, a nightclub just down the wharf from where he met his wife. It's been some journey - for him and Pitts.

"When I first opened the gym in the Philippines, I was determined to make a world champion out of it," Pitts says. "I didn't get one. To win this fight is like winning a world title.

"And it's because Sakio has believed in himself for so long."

When Bika speaks on *The Contender* it uses subtitles. But his English is clear when he says: "I've come a long way in a short period. In my mind, in my heart - and for my family.

"This is the man I have wanted to be my whole life."