



WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING IS TRUE ABOUT "LIGHTNING" LEE MURRAY?

- A] He's the meanest MMA fighter ever to walk the streets of London.
- B] He's suspected of masterminding the biggest bank heist in history.
- C] Although stuck in a Moroccan prison, he's a bit tricky to pin down.

Actually, the answer is D]

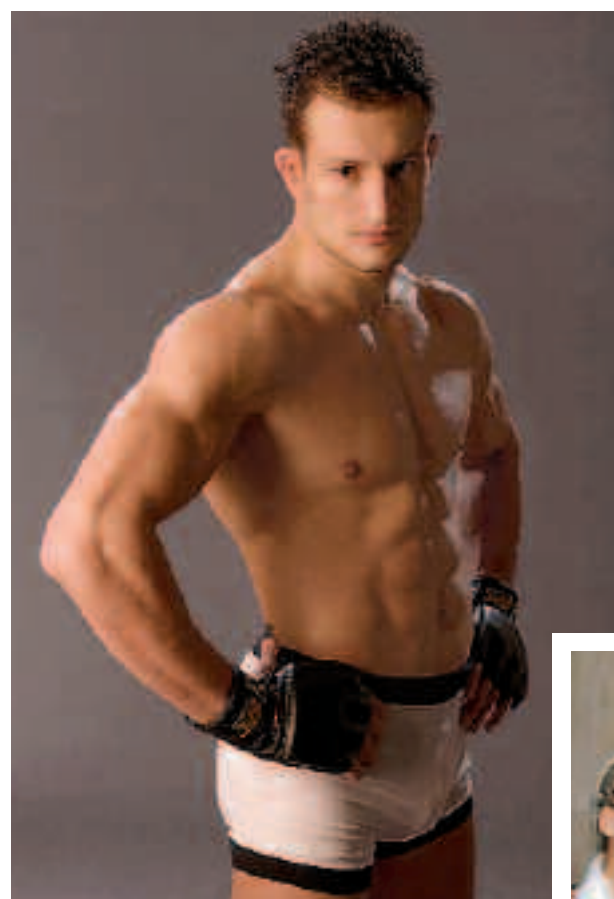
...ALL OF THE ABOVE

BY SHAUN ASSAEL
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IF THE stories are true, Lee Murray is the meanest middleweight ever to come out of the projects of South London. His friends love to talk about the time he single-handedly fought nine bouncers at a disco. “Left ‘em sleeping like babies in the doorway,” says one. Or the night he hit MMA tough Tito Ortiz with five head shots that put him flat on his back. “Then punted him in the head,” adds one witness. And they’ll go on about the night he died not once but three times in an emergency room after being stabbed in the chest.

But if Lightning Lee’s legends often sound far too



I’M TOLD I HAVE ONE QUESTION. I FREEZE. WHAT DO YOU ASK ONE OF THE WORLD’S MOST WANTED MEN?



Murray was as slick on the London club scene as he was tough in the Octagon.

fantastic to be true, there’s one story that British authorities claim is beyond dispute: On a cold February night in 2006, seven masked gunmen raided a high-security bank warehouse outside London and made off with the greatest criminal cash haul in history, more than \$100 million. Police say Murray was the mastermind, but by the time they could link him to the theft, he was living the posh life in Morocco. Never mind that Murray, 30, now sits in a Moroccan prison cell while authorities weigh a British request for extradition. In London’s underground, he’s a hero.

The problem—for me, anyway—is that he’s a reclusive hero who won’t speak to the press. Which means I have to fly to London to learn how a street thug turned MMA fighter gets accused of being the world’s biggest bank robber. Along the way, yet

another improbable tale develops, involving me: Every time I approach someone who knows Murray, he seems to have reached them first, having phoned from his prison cell, 1,000 miles away. “He thinks a movie about his life would be big,” says one of his cronies. Murray, a fan of American mob movies, apparently wants to shape the script.

In interview after interview, I arrive to find Murray has already dictated the outcome. When I ask one member of his crew—a scruffy tough who won’t stop griping about women—if he’ll connect me with Murray’s wife, I’m told that “Lee says the women are off-limits.” Variations on this theme occur repeatedly. It’s exhausting, being messed with like that. So when I meet Mark “The Beast” Epstein, a scowling British cage fighter and Murray confidant, at a kebab joint on my last night in London, I cut to the chase, forgetting he could snap my neck. “I need to speak to him,” I say, “now.” Surprisingly, Epstein calls Morocco. But after some murmuring, he delivers bad news: “Lee isn’t ready to talk. But he says you can ask one question.”

I freeze. What question do you ask one of the world’s most wanted men?

“Lee and his mum had it rough,” says Epstein.

To avoid his father’s beatings, Murray started hanging with the Barney Boys in the mid-1990s. Epstein remembers Murray as a “feral little thing, always chased by the police.” The kid devoured books about U.S. mobsters, especially John Gotti. Soon Epstein began refereeing Murray’s fights. “It was MMA on the streets,” he says. “I never saw Lee lose.” When Epstein went to prison in 1997 for selling heroin and crack (he’s since turned his life around), Murray became one of the gang’s leaders. He also discovered a sport that had as few rules as he did.

LONDON SHOOTFIGHTERS, the city’s premier MMA gym, sits under elevated-train arches and behind a garage in southeast London. Even with a GPS navigator, my cabdriver has a hard time finding it. An alley filled with junked cars leads to the sound of pounding fists behind a black door, the same one Murray first walked through in 1999. “He was a little demonic looking,” says the gym’s co-owner, Alexis Demetriades, not the most angelic-looking guy himself. “He had pointy eyes and a pointy head.” Demetriades makes a point of telling me about Lee’s fists—calcified mounds, each finger broken at least once. “Everything Lee touched broke.”

By 2002, Murray had won four of six low-rung MMA fights, becoming a hit in the London beer halls where they were staged. The press loved his mink coats and tight silk shirts. The crowds loved how he seemed to be one of them. “He got in fights with strangers because they saw the way he dressed and thought he was a pushover,” says Demetriades. “They should have looked at the cuts on his face.”

The more famous Murray grew as a cage fighter, the calmer he got about his private life. When I meet a local fight writer in a coffee shop, he drops his voice and looks around before telling me, “I went to one of Murray’s fights once, and I was warned by one of his crowd, ‘Don’t ask too much about Lee.’” In fact, Murray’s private life defied explanation. Though he wasn’t making much money from MMA, he bought a home for his wife and daughter in the tony suburb of Sidcup. “Lee had his fingers in a lot of pies that interested the police,” Epstein tells me, noting that Murray was often followed by the Kent PD.

The unwanted attention grew in July 2002, when the UFC held its first card in London. Murray wasn’t on the card for UFC 38, but he stole the show by crashing the after-party. Pat Miletich, the veteran MMA trainer, was at his side. “One of Tito Ortiz’s friends jumped on my back as a joke. A buddy of Lee’s thought it was a fight and jumped in,” he tells me. “Then it exploded. Lee took off his jacket. Tito did too. Tito threw the first punch and

missed. Then Lee flattened him with a five-punch combo. I told him to get the hell outta there.”

(Ortiz sighs when I call him: “The only thing he made of himself was a fight with me.”)

But Murray couldn’t lay low. At a sanctioned fight a few months later, he knocked his opponent unconscious in four seconds. His posse stormed the ring, sparking a table-toppling riot. “We have to ban Lee,” the promoter said. “His people are crazy.”

Around the seedy gyms and back alleys where Murray’s groupies remain, Jan. 31, 2004, is regarded with reverence—it’s the day Murray finally got a shot with the UFC. He entered the Octagon at

knives outside his favorite London haunt, the Funky Buddha. Murray fought them off but lost his left nipple. Undaunted, he returned to the club a week later to celebrate the 50th birthday of his boxing coach, Terry Carlton. He was ambushed again, and a melee erupted, with more than 30 people trading blows and wielding knives. Carlton tells me that when he spotted Murray in the scrum, blood was spurting out of his chest. “I’m dying,” Murray yelled. With a severed artery, he staggered to a train station, where paramedics



Murray (in white trunks) beat Jorge Rivera in his only UFC fight, a triumph depicted on a wall in his Rabat mansion.

the Mandalay Bay in Las Vegas for UFC 46 dressed in a *Silence of the Lambs* mask and an orange jumpsuit. Early in the fight, Jorge Rivera speared him to the mat, but Murray wrapped his legs around Rivera’s neck and flipped him onto his side, tightening his grip until the veins in Rivera’s head began to pop. At 1:45 in the first round, Rivera signaled submission. “I got the win,” Murray said afterward. “I’ll come back another day and show the KO.”

Actually, he wouldn’t. The summer following his UFC triumph, Murray was indicted on charges of “grievous bodily harm with intent,” stemming from a road rage incident months earlier. On Christmas Day 2003, he was driving with his pregnant wife and young daughter when a car hit his Range Rover. Derek Parker, Murray’s London attorney, describes the incident bluntly: “Lee disabled the vehicle, then disabled the driver.” A judge threw out the charge, but the incident torpedoed Murray’s UFC career. With a reported \$78,000 contract on the table in the U.S., the State Department denied him a visa to enter the country.

My chat with Parker confirms what I was starting to suspect: Murray was a target for all sorts of nasty types. “He was flashy and mixed with people the police didn’t like,” says Parker. In fall 2005, two men attacked Murray with

found him. The legend only grows from there.

Carlton: “At the hospital, his face was bloated like a rugby ball. I knelt beside him and said, ‘Boy, this is one fight you have to win.’”

Epstein: “Nurses sprinted blood up the halls. He lost eight pints and had to be resuscitated.”

Mehmet Kavez, another friend: “He died three times that night. When he came to, he asked for a pen and wrote one word on his chart: Warrior.”

By early December, Murray was back in the gym, just not as fierce as before. “Being to death and back changes a man, you know?” says Kavez.

TONBRIDGE IS a sleepy town outside London. In early 2006, few paid much attention to the unmarked building on its outskirts run by Securitas, a global security firm. But to Lea Rusha, a mixed martial artist with a rap sheet who lived a few miles away, the structure represented a dream score.

On the drive to Tonbridge, I find the abandoned church where Rusha trained. I walk inside and meet a helpful trainer who remembers him. “Rusha knew Lee from the London fight club scene,” he says. Rusha kickboxed at the church for a few hundred bucks a match, but as he

later testified under oath, he made his real money buying marijuana from Murray for \$1,600 a kilo and reselling it for twice that. According to police, Murray and Rusha concocted an elaborate plan to loot the Securitas depot after Murray recovered from the stabbing. It hinged on kidnapping the depot’s manager, Colin Dixon, and his family.

At 8:40 p.m. on Feb. 21, 2006, two men dressed



as Kent police knocked on the door at Dixon’s home in Herne Bay. When Dixon’s wife, Lynn, answered, the men told her that her 52-year-old husband had been in an accident; she and her 7-year-old son, Craig, needed to come with them. In fact, two other conspirators, who police allege were Rusha and Murray, had kidnapped Dixon as he drove home from work. They reunited their hostages at a farm in the English countryside shortly before 10 p.m. Lynn Dixon says that when she saw her husband blindfolded and handcuffed in the back of a van, she didn’t think “we would survive the night.”

At 1 a.m. on Feb. 22, the men piled Dixon into a Volvo and drove toward the depot, trailed by a seven-ton truck ferrying his wife and son. The vehicles hit Tonbridge around 1:30 a.m., when the police station was closed and the streets were empty. One kidnapper piloted the Volvo to the depot’s entrance and walked Dixon through the front door, holding him tight. As Dixon’s kidnapper forced the watchman to open the gates to the vault, six accomplices followed in ski masks, weapons drawn. Fourteen Securitas employees were inside, counting cash. “Do what they say,” Dixon pleaded. “They have my family.”

With help from an inside man—a guard who took photos of the vault with a belt camera—they had crude blueprints of the depot. In 40 minutes they looted steel cages full of pound notes, using a forklift and a shopping cart to move the cash into the truck. By 2:34 a.m., the truck was full. Two robbers drove it away while the remaining five locked the hostages in empty cages and left in the Volvo and a Vauxhall. Nobody was hurt.

It took 30 minutes for Craig Dixon to escape his cage and sound the alarm. When the police arrived, they realized they were dealing with the

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biggest cash crime in history. They posted a \$4 million reward, and three days into the investigation a tip led them to Rusha's home, where they found depot blueprints and keys to a garage with £8.6 million (about \$17 million) inside. A week later, Rusha was nabbed while trying to leave the country in a Volkswagen.

After finding traces of Murray's DNA at the depot, Kent police realized they'd been sitting on crucial evidence. Weeks before the heist, Murray had been

To rob Securitas, the conspirators entered the depot (1) dressed as Kent cops, then accessed steel cages (2) full of cash and rolled them (3) into a seven-ton getaway truck.



1



3



2

WHEN POLICE ARRIVED AT THE DEPOT THEY REALIZED THEY WERE LOOKING AT THE BIGGEST CASH CRIME IN HISTORY, SOMEWHERE NORTH OF \$100 MILLION.

pulled over on suspicion of drunken driving after he ran his yellow Ferrari Spider off Old Kent Road. Murray was released, but the car was impounded. Now the police searched the Ferrari and found a cell phone under a seat. In the cell's memory was a recording of a call in which two men discussed the robbery. Cops identified them as Rusha and Murray. Details of the recording are few because of U.K. pretrial publicity laws, but I'm able to convince someone with access to the transcript to let me see it. "I don't give a f— who goes to the door," says Rusha.

"I can't show my face in there," replies the man cops think is Murray. "Been in the newspapers and on the f—ing telly."

It was a major break in the case, but there was one tiny problem: Murray was already in Morocco.

Little is known about how he got to Rabat, which is why I'm stunned when I find a guy at a bar Murray used to frequent who says he fled the U.K. with Murray and an alleged co-conspirator, Paul "The Enforcer" Allen. This gent is a wannabe gangster whom, for my own protection, we'll call Owen. Shouting over the din of a dance club at 2 a.m., Owen says, "Paul was chain-smoking the whole time we was in the car to the ferry. He was nervous." But Murray was cool. Too cool. "Lee put 'Diamonds Are

Forever' on the CD player," Owen says. "He looked at me and said, 'We've done it.' God's honest truth."

STANDING IN the kebab joint two days later with Epstein, I wonder if Owen's story is even remotely true. Hell, I'm wondering if anything I've heard is true. Five members of the heist crew, including Rusha, were convicted in January after a six-month trial and sentenced to a total of 140 years. A sixth, Allen, is awaiting trial. But Owen was never called

He must be watching too many movies, because lately he's been telling an unbelievable story about how the Brits extradited his sidekick, Allen. According to Murray, Allen was placed in manacles and taken to the Rabat airport, where Kent PD flew him to the U.K. in a Learjet. When it landed, he was taken by helicopter to Maidstone, where an armored Range Rover took him in a six-car convoy to the police station. Murray claims the roads were closed to traffic,

with sharpshooters on roofs.

It sounds a little too much like *Silence of the Lambs*. So I call Parker, who's also Allen's attorney. "It's all true," he tells me.

The Moroccan Supreme Court has, so far, denied extradition. But the legal code there allows the Brits to try Murray on Moroccan soil using local sentencing laws. Aissaoui believes a guilty verdict would get his client no more than 10 years, meaning Murray could be free at age 40, with more than \$60 million of Securitas loot unaccounted for.

as a witness, and no one backs up his claims. "Lee says he had nothing to do with this robbery," Murray's Moroccan attorney, Ben Aissaoui, tells me.

Still, Murray's friends talk about his dramatic exit. When he arrived in Amsterdam, four days after the heist, Murray told Epstein he was being protected by a hit man who worked with the Dutch mob. As cops closed in, Murray fled to Morocco, where his father's Moroccan citizenship extends to him, protecting him from extradition since Morocco has no agreement with the U.K.

At the request of the British government, police in Rabat tailed Murray as he rolled around in a gold Mercedes and moved into a \$1.5 million villa in the posh suburb of Souissi. Within months, the jig was up. On June 25, 2006, police crafted a raid on Morocco's biggest mall, where Murray and Allen were shopping with two friends. Fifty officers jumped the fugitives and, after a struggle, arrested them. After finding cocaine in Murray's villa, police lodged drug charges and threw in counts of battery. In February 2007, Murray and Allen were convicted and sentenced to eight months in lockup. Murray has been incarcerated 26 months while Morocco has fielded British appeals to extradite him. Aissaoui says Murray passes the time watching movies on a DVD player in his cell and reading books about the mob.

IT'S BEEN 30 seconds since Epstein asked what I want to ask Murray. Then it hits me.

"Ask him what his favorite movie is," I say.

Epstein nods, as if I've done well. "The bloke wants to know your favorite movie."

He listens to a voice on the other end of the line. "Lee has three," Epstein says.

"*Scarface*."

"*The Bank Job*."

"*Gotti*."

Looking out the restaurant's steamy window, I suspect Epstein is feigning ignorance when he tells me he's not sure if Murray is behind the heist. "But if he was, I'm mad he didn't invite me," he says. "You dream about work like that." Most of Murray's friends concede that a \$100 million robbery is just the kind of over-the-top heist he would pull. But why? Money? I doubt it. He could get rich through simpler illegal schemes. I think he did it because he knows it's the kind of story Hollywood loves, assuming the blokes in Hollywood get wind of it.

And I've just followed his script.

If Murray goes free, should he get another shot at the UFC? E-mail us at post@espnthemag.com.