

British Strongmen's 'Tough Talk' Make Them Convincing Evangelists

Even tougher than their talk are these London ex-underworld characters who delight in pumping iron and preaching Jesus

A group of strongmen who include a former East London mob enforcer, an ex-bouncer and a one-time incessant fighter—who all moved in a world that was the film inspiration of the British-gangster crime-thriller *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998)—are now converting thousands of people to Christianity through exhibitions of powerlifting.

This year, Tough Talk—as the born-again tough guys call themselves—has given an uncompromising message of faith in Christ to an estimated 25,000 people in the United Kingdom and seen at least 7,000 come to faith, according to their records.

Also this year, Arthur White, a four-time World Champion and now one of the group, will be lifting weights in unlikely places: churches across Britain.

The guys pump iron in the streets to draw a crowd, who are invited to an evening service in a local church. The church meetings then provide more feats of powerlifting and the men's thoroughly unstuffy testimonies.

"It's a good witness," White said. "We can appeal to 6-year-old kiddies and 60-year-old ladies. It's just one of them things that God's given us."

Because of the men's hardened, streetwise backgrounds, the group has "a closer link with Jesus and His group of friends than most Christians," White said.

Their combination of fast talking and heavy lifting certainly makes an impact on those who see them in action. During one of their recent evangelistic events at Riker's Island jail in New York City, more than 1,000 inmates expressed interest in becoming Christians after seeing the Tough Talk presentation.

That response is a far cry from the kind the three men used to get-back in the days when they used brute force to enact control in East London's organized crime and party scenes.

White was a "debt collector" who had a cocaine and steroid addiction. He once employed the underworld gangster Lenny MacLean, who was a subject of the crime drama, which released in the United States as *Two Smoking Barrels* a year after it opened in Great Britain.

"The worst thing I ever done was trying to cut a bloke's ear off," White said. "My speciality was to 'throat somebody.' Being a champion 'deadlifter,' my grip was like a vice—I would grab someone by the throat, which would cut off their air supply, causing them to faint. Their arms would go limp and just before they passed out, I would give them one powerful smack, which sorted them out good and proper."

Ian McDowall, a former finalist in the British Bodybuilding Middleweight Championships, also was addicted to steroids. Working as a doorman in nightclubs, he "wouldn't think twice about sticking the spike of my knuckle duster [brass knuckles] and then giving them a good kicking," he said.

When he became a Christian—at 4 a.m. one day while driving through London—McDowall said he had weapons everywhere: “I had a gun in the boot. I had my cosh [wooden club] under the seat, and I had my knuckle duster on—and I asked God if he could change me.”

The third member of the team, Steve Johnson, was an alcoholic who drank about 100 pints of beer a week. In his view, church was “a horrible, boring place full of boring people.” He’s since revised that opinion and now says: “Jesus is the proper geezer, and all His pals men.

“I would rather have been dead than be a Christian,” he added. “But, I prayed to God to take away the desire for drink and desire for a crazy lifestyle—getting arrested and being permanently angry.”

Now, the three men, who all have been arrested many times, hold regular worship meetings at Highpoint Prison. “The boys have some songs and they do really enjoy it,” White said of the outreaches.

A Tough Talk New Testament is to be published this fall. In September, 5,000 copies were given away to U.K. urban youth-gangs and prisoners.

“God doesn’t put condemnation on us,” White said. “We are not fools. We’ve got a bit of street credibility. We tell the truth, and we talk about our lives. It’s the truth and honesty that comes across.”

Hazel Southam in England