

BY **STAYTON  
BONNER**

---

PHOTOGRAPHS  
BY **JOE PUGLIESE**





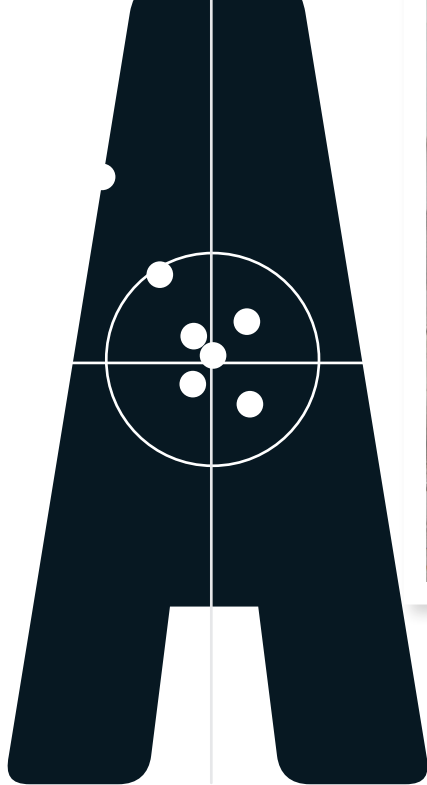


HE'S BEEN  
**SHOT**  
STABBED  
*FOUGHT IN MOB-RUN*  
**DEATH**  
**MATCHES**

HE'S ARRESTED & KILLED SOME OF  
AMERICA'S WORST CRIMINALS AS AN  
**UNDERCOVER**  
**AGENT**  
AND NOW HE'S FINALLY  
COMING CLEAN

— THE —  
**LEGEND**  
— OF —  
**JOHN**  
**ARTHUR**



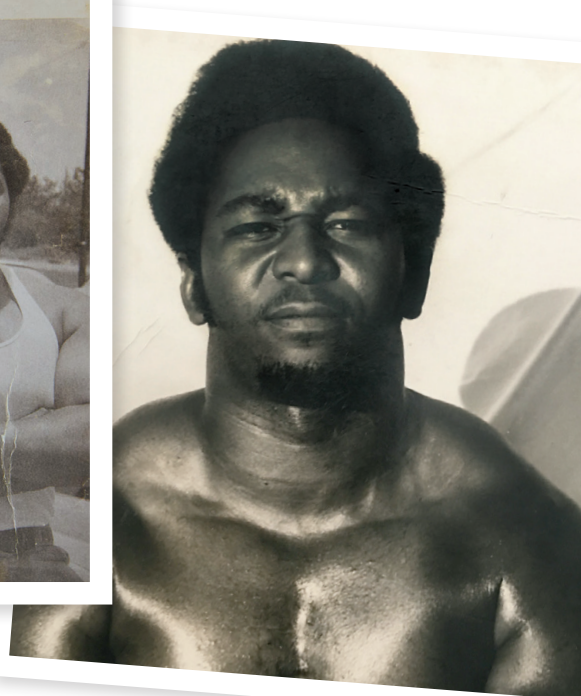


#### AMID THE TOPLESS JOINTS AND SAGGING

taverns of the San Fernando Valley, behind a stucco strip mall with a nail salon and liquor mart, is a bare-bones gym that's home to the toughest trainer in boxing. And today he's tussling with one of his most ornery opponents yet—a 5-year-old kid who won't stop crying.

"Son, look at me," John Arthur says, leaning forward, his eyes level with the child. "This ain't no nursery."

Arthur, 68, runs the Legends Gym, a spartan warehouse filled with punching bags, weights, and a full-size boxing ring. The joint is a sort of boulevard of broken-bodied dreams, with a crew of onetime greats now making rent by showing kids how to throw a right hook. On this muggy afternoon in December, its trainers include Frankie Liles, a former super-middleweight boxing great; Dan Magnus, a U.S. marshal turned pro kickboxing champ; and, most famously, Billy Blanks, the karate expert who created the Tae Bo workout regime in the '90s, making \$80 million in the process and then retreat-



ing into obscurity in Japan. Like most trainers at Legends, Blanks has known Arthur for decades and trusts him completely. Blanks signed on just weeks after the gym opened in April 2017.

Of all the faded legends at Legends, though, no one has a larger reputation than Arthur. It's an incredible feat, considering he never competed as a pro boxer or kickboxer. His bona fides come solely from his years in the illegal bare-knuckle arena and working in law enforcement. "Most managers don't know how to fight, but have you seen John's scars? I've seen him do stuff no one else knows how to do," Blanks says. "I mean, he's fought to the death in overseas matches." Magnus puts it another way. "If John and I were facing off, I think I would just shoot him," he says. "And hope I don't miss."

Brown-eyed with a trim mustache and black tracksuit, Arthur has become a legend in the boxing world for training the hotheads no one else can handle and transforming them into champions. In the '80s, he coached Michael Nunn, a volatile middleweight, taking him from drug dens to Caesars Palace. "A street guy," Arthur recalls. "I had to break into the damn ghetto just to get him so we could go work out." In the '90s, Arthur took on Lakva Sim, an unruly featherweight from Mongolia, leading the 5'7" puncher to a world title. "Ornery little bastard who loved to drink and cuss out promoters," he says. Most famously, Arthur revived the career of James Toney, a world-champion heavyweight who once threatened to pull a gun on his own manager, scaring off everyone in the business—until Arthur donned gloves and entered the ring

While working undercover in the 1970s, Arthur courted danger—and a larger-than-life image.

Above left: Arthur, at right, with a bullet around his neck that was pulled from his body. Above: As a young man, he trained constantly for underground fights.

with Toney himself, sparring daily with the 5'9", 220-pound behemoth until he brought him back to form.

"He's Superman," Toney says of Arthur. "I was young and wild and crazy, and he stayed on top of me. He's different. I mean, he's shot and killed people. I seen his gunshot wounds—you won't see that with no other manager."

Which is why it's so jarring to witness Arthur squared off with Zaven, the young boy who arrives bawling at Legends because he doesn't want to attend his karate lesson. "I don't want to go," Zaven says, snot running down his nose. Seated just a few feet away, the boy's father, Civen Jones, tries to comfort him, but Arthur shakes his head, stopping Jones cold.

"Don't look at your daddy," Arthur commands the child. "When you talk to a man, you look him in the eye. Now talk to me, son."

Zaven looks at Arthur and begins to open up. Soon he calms down, and his father laughs. Jones is studying to be a heating and air-conditioning repairman, but, like most everyone passing through Legends, he's been training with Arthur for years, turning to the gym to flee the streets. "He got me right," says Jones. "He's always been the star that guides me."

Among fighters, Arthur's name isn't John, it's "Pops," and, at nearly 70 years old, this is Pops' first real gym. For years, Arthur groomed champions for star promoters like Don King, but Legends is his attempt, at long last, to start his own enterprise, a gym and boxing management company in the Valley. And today he has a full slate. In addition to working in the ring with a 6'1", 200-pound Ukrainian cruiserweight, he runs the front office, greeting an endless parade of visitors, from bulging trainers to traveling workout salesmen to two middle-aged women hoping to establish an after-school program in the gym.





At one point, a young boxer Arthur hardly knows calls him about a problem involving a match in Mexico. Arthur promises to help him and then sighs, putting the phone on mute as the kid, fresh out of prison, begins to prattle on about injustice. “I’m going to let him drain himself,” Arthur says, scrolling through his emails, his voice the same register of seen-it-all calmness no matter what chaos he encounters. And that’s because he *has* seen it all—from fighting in mob-run death matches to working undercover for the FBI robbing drug houses. It’s one of the reasons, to this day, that he’s so well-respected among fighters.

When I first met Arthur, it was in the bowels of an arena outside Memphis in April 2012. I was working on a story about another fighter, and he’d come into the training room to watch a boxer get his hands wrapped for the fight. As he entered, the entire room hushed, and the grizzled men gathered around him like starstruck teens at a Bieber concert.

“Can you tell us the stories, Pops?” one heavyweight asked. “We want to hear about the death matches.”

Over the years, Arthur’s name would continue to pop up at boxing matches and gyms from the Deep South to the Bronx. Finally, at a match in Philly, I asked former heavyweight champion Lamont Brewster about him. Brewster just laughed and said I needed to hear it from the man himself. “Here’s his number,” he said. “No one’s got a story like Pops.”

When I cold-called Arthur, I wasn’t sure what to expect, but I encountered the last thing I had anticipated: relief. “Funny you should call,” he said, sighing. “For the longest time, I didn’t want to talk about this stuff. But now I’m nearing 70 and want to leave something for my grandkids. Where should I begin?” Over the next two years, in face-to-face interviews and endless phone calls, Arthur began to spin an incredible tale—so implausible, in fact, that I soon began reaching out to well over a dozen former fighters, co-workers, and family members to confirm his stories, every one of them only enriching his saga.

“I should’ve been dead many times,” Arthur says, heading back to the ring in his gym. “Being where I’m from, I’ve had to have balls of steel.”

### THE GREEK

Born one of 14 children to farming parents in Starkville, Mississippi, in 1950, Arthur fled with his family in the middle of the night to avoid a lynching after his father shot a bullying white storekeeper. “My father had been accused of stealing chickens,” Arthur recalls. “He got in a tussle and thought he’d killed the man, so we boarded a Greyhound that night.” After a couple of days in a Chicago bus

station, where the family ended up, a man approached Arthur’s father, Abraham, and offered him a job. “He was this short man with an accent who worked at an Italian steakhouse,” Arthur says, “and suddenly Dad became a dishwasher.”

After a few years living in the basement of a building on the South Side of Chicago, the Arthur family moved into the new Robert Taylor Homes, which at that time was the largest public housing project in the world, a no-man’s-land of poverty and violence and a monument to segregation. One of the youngest children in the family, Arthur was known for being quiet, serious, and a favorite of his churchgoing parents—but also ruthless if backed into a corner.

“John’s got a level head, but you can’t push the wrong button,” says his older brother, William. “He don’t take no mess.”

For Arthur, violence was a constant fact of life. At 8, he sold newspapers for 25 cents a week, and often saw circulation bosses beat up thieves who had robbed their paperboys. At 11, he was taken to street corners, where his gang-running brothers pitted him against neighborhood kids in street fights.

“I’d fight in back alleys, yards, anywhere,” he says. “I didn’t know what I was doing—I was just fighting for my life.”

In the mid-’60s, with her eldest son already in and out of jail, Arthur’s mother, Katherine, decided to save young Arthur by send-

ing him to work every day after school with his father, now a chef at Gus’s, a high-end Italian restaurant in the city. One night when Arthur was 13, he was staying late to help his father clean up when they realized the buses had stopped running. A host at the restaurant known as “the Greek”—the same man who initially approached Abraham in the bus station—offered to drop them off at the all-night L train. After bidding the Greek good night, Arthur and his father were walking to the train platform when a man approached, putting a knife to Arthur’s throat and demanding money. Frozen with fear, Arthur looked to his father, who stood trembling as well. Arthur then heard a voice from the darkness—the Greek.

“He came out of nowhere holding a wad of money you could choke a horse with,” Arthur recalls. “He said, ‘That old fucker don’t have no money. Here, take mine.’” Holding out the cash, the Greek approached the assailant, then quickly grabbed him by the wrist and pulled him toward him. “All of a sudden, the Greek was on the ground, stabbing the guy in the throat,” Arthur says. “The man’s blood was coming out bright and turning dark. Then the train came, the Greek saying, ‘Get out of here. You and your boy didn’t see this.’”

The next evening at the restaurant, ashamed of his father’s fear and awed by the Greek, Arthur began begging him to teach him how to fight so he could protect his family. “He just grabbed me by the collar and

“ HE’S DIFFERENT. I MEAN, HE’S SHOT AND KILLED PEOPLE. I SEEN HIS GUNSHOT WOUNDS—YOU WON’T SEE THAT WITH NO OTHER MANAGER.”



Arthur has worked with some of the biggest hotheads in boxing, including James Toney, here in a match in 2006.



shoved me inside a freezer,” says Arthur. “Kid, you didn’t see that. Next time, it might be you.” Undeterred, Arthur continued to pester the Greek, finally wearing him down. “I said, ‘I want to be able to protect myself,’ so he started teaching me martial arts.”

Squat and black-haired, the Greek, nicknamed after his home country, was a sharp dresser and good tipper to his busboys, a man of few words but merciless precision. “The Greek was short but had a good physique,” recalls George Williams, a cousin of Arthur’s who worked at the steakhouse. “He dressed like something out of a fashion magazine but carried himself like a man’s man—and John always worked for him.” Between shifts, in a side room at the restaurant, the Greek put Arthur through endless drills, punching, kicking, and training with knives. He taught Arthur how to use his weight against opponents by practicing strikes and roundhouse kicks on hanging hog carcasses sent to the restaurant for butchering. During the day, Arthur continued to attend school, excelling at sports like football and wrestling. While working at the restaurant at night, he often slept there on a cot, his martial-arts training known only to his father.

“Years later, he told me about the Greek, how he taught him to fight,” recalls his brother William, now an assistant preacher in Atlanta. “I heard about those problems on the L train.” For Arthur, the Greek became a new father figure. “The Greek became my mentor,” he says. “He had me hit brick walls until my fists were as hard as damn lead pipes.”

One Friday afternoon, after three years of training, Arthur, now 16, was taken to the airport by the Greek and flown to Athens. In Greece, in a rural village on a small island, Arthur watched his mentor fight a bulging 170-pound opponent in a bare-knuckle match for prize money, one of 17 bouts held that day. “The Greek did a leg takedown and then put the man in a forearm wristlock,” Arthur recalls, “popping his arm over his knee until the whole elbow broke, his forearm hanging at a weird angle.” His opponent maimed, the Greek took his prize money and then brought Arthur back to the airport, asking him his thoughts on what he’d just witnessed. “That was the first time I seen him fight,” Arthur recalls. “I just said, ‘Man, I want to do that.’”

The Greek made Arthur a deal. If he would fight for him, the Greek would put him on a payroll and move his family into a house of their own. Then he explained the truth behind the Italian steakhouse—it was a business front for the mob. “They were mobsters,” Arthur says. “The Greek was a hit man, but he was going to protect my family and help us get out of the projects.”

#### UNDERGROUND FIGHTER

Now fighting for his family, Arthur began his final, most brutal phase of training. Practicing on hog carcasses, he learned how to kill a man, and how to survive the merciless world of underground matches. “In sudden-death



fight, you could kick against the joints, in the groin, sweep somebody, throw them down, stomp them in the back, stomp them on the neck, take two fingers to the eyes,” Arthur says. “I had a mob dentist file my canine teeth to razor points. The Greek even taught me how to fishhook a man, grabbing him by the thin part of his mouth while running your outer finger through his eardrum and busting it, making him lose his equilibrium.”

When Arthur was ready to compete in the death matches, the Greek would arrange it by simply telling Arthur to meet him at O’Hare Airport. On the long flights, Arthur would sleep, occasionally opening his eyes to glimpse ocean or mountains or unknown cities, never having any clue what to expect upon landing. “The Greek spoke seven languages,” he says. “He handled everything for me.”

The bouts’ rules were simple. Competitors would fight until a man dropped. If the loser stayed down, he would then be covered by a fishnet, meaning the fight was over. But if he stood again for a final round, then it was a fight to the death. “If you went down, you better just lie there until you feel people picking you up,” Arthur recalls. “Because if you tried to stand, chances were you’d get stomped right in the back of the neck, leaving you paralyzed.”

For his first fight, Arthur took on a blond,

muscle-bound opponent in a small boxing club somewhere in Europe, arriving to find himself the only black man in the room. “It was strange being over there as a man of color,” he recalls. “They were more scared of me than anything, and I was nervous as cat shit.” During that first fight, after an initial back-and-forth, Arthur knocked his opponent to the ground and jumped atop him, choking him until a net covered them both. Breathing heavily, Arthur was shocked by the reservoir of anger he had tapped to nearly kill his opponent. “I had won, but I felt strange,” Arthur recalls, “a nervous energy like I had done something wrong. But the Greek explained that if the other guy didn’t want it to happen then he never would have entered that ring. He told me to leave it all behind, to never look back. After that, I loved the feeling of fighting.”

For the next couple of years, while attending high school and working at the restaurant, Arthur would be periodically summoned to the airport, flying with the Greek to bouts across the world, competing everywhere from warehouses to bullrings to bars. “I fought in Africa, Italy, Russia, Japan, Thailand,” Arthur recalls. “The fighting was taking my family out of the projects—it was a way out of poverty.”

In the underworld, Arthur gained a reputation by shocking opponents with his skin color



THE BARE-KNUCKLE FIGHTING NEVER BOTHERED ME. BUT THE FIRST TIME I SHOT A GUY—THAT STILL HAUNTS ME.”





and then crushing them with his skill. He even developed a signature outfit: red karate pants, black driving gloves, and a red Lone Ranger mask he would take off after entering the ring. “It was a gimmick,” Arthur says, “something that made me more different than I already was, to scare them.”

After two years of alternating fight-

looking at the horses,” he says. “Cooking and horses are the only two things that relax me.”

When I visited him in December, he was laboring over baked chicken, a pot of collard greens, and mac and cheese—lunch for his third wife, Shirlyn, an aspiring actress over a decade his junior. “I don’t know where I’d be without her,” Arthur says. “She’s my angel.” Like Arthur, Shirlyn is originally from the

the Clark football team, even traveling west for a training camp with the Denver Broncos at one point. But he blew out his knee during his senior year. Devastated and with nowhere else to go after graduation, he followed his then girlfriend, Jeraldine, a cashier at a local pharmacy, to her hometown of Griffin, Georgia, where they were soon married. Located amid the rolling hills and loblolly pines of the Appalachian valley, Griffin was a notorious stronghold for the Ku Klux Klan, the county seat in a state where at least 600 lynchings occurred by the mid-20th century. In 1965, Griffin and its sur-



ing with classes, Arthur graduated from high school with a football scholarship to play offensive guard for what is now Clark Atlanta University, an all-black college in Georgia’s capital. Encouraged by the Greek to get an education, he left Chicago and drove south, thinking he was leaving the violence behind. Instead, it was only about to ramp up.

“The bare-knuckle fighting never bothered me,” Arthur says. “But the first time I shot a guy—that still haunts me.”

#### ON THE BEAT

For a man as steeped in violence as Arthur, he’s also one of the most caring people you’ll ever meet, with an unwavering sense of right and wrong. These days he spends most of his downtime at his home in the Valley, preparing meals or staring at old cowboy films on TV—the sound, as always, on mute. “I just like

▲ Above: Arthur still trains fighters six days a week, including boxer Ming Freeman. Opposite: Legends instructor Chico Jones working out with Arthur.

South—a small town in the coastal plains of North Carolina—and loves it when he cooks his old family recipes. Yet Arthur’s cooking is not so much a legacy of his birth in Mississippi, but of his second stint in Dixie, when he worked undercover as an agent for the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. How he ended up there is another saga in its own.

After leaving Chicago for Atlanta in 1968, Arthur became a standout offensive guard on

rounding counties were even investigated by Congress for their Klan activity. Everyone from local mechanics to public-office holders were found to be members, some carrying weapons as powerful as Thompson submachine guns. Arthur, hailing from the North, had never seen anything like it.

“There was so much damn racism,” he says. “Communities around there would have signs that said, ‘Nigger don’t let the sun set on your black ass.’”

Early one morning in 1972, Arthur was jogging in the white part of Griffin when a patrol car pulled up behind him, flashing its lights. Arthur told the two white policemen he was







out for a run, but they didn't believe him, so they cuffed him and threw him in the back of the car. After running a background check, which came back clean, they drove Arthur to his apartment. When they walked him inside, they found a room full of football trophies.

"One of the old boys loved the game," Arthur says. "He turned to me and asked, 'Want a job?'"

For the next two years, Arthur, then 22, worked as a policeman for Griffin, one of only five African-American officers for the 22,000-person community. From the beginning, he was given the unofficial rules: He was not allowed to arrest whites or enter certain establishments in the white part of town. "It was a culture shock to me," he says. "I was in college and all of a sudden I couldn't go to a neighborhood because I'm black? Shit, that wasn't my world."

Arthur soon made enemies. On traffic duty, he pulled over the police commissioner's brother for drunk driving. The man put on a Klan hood and challenged his authority. Arthur slapped the hood off the man and threw him in jail. Having broken the Griffin PD's unwritten rules, Arthur was then given the ultimate punishment—the graveyard shift. Paired with a sullen older white partner who refused to talk with him or even shake his hand, Arthur roamed the city streets from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m., arresting drunks while sleeping through his mornings, barely seeing Jeraldine and Jonette, their newborn baby daughter. Isolated and lonely, Arthur began raising Tennessee walking horses on a small farm outside of town, riding for hours through the hills. The horses were the only thing that helped calm him. Still full of anger, however, he began competing in weekend kickboxing tournaments and soon came across the last person he had expected to see—the Greek.

"The Greek had heard I was fighting and came down for it," says Arthur. "Afterwards, he asked, 'You want to make some real money?' So I started going back to the death matches every now and again, flying overseas to make \$5,000 in a weekend."

But back home in Griffin, Arthur's situation with the police force was becoming increasingly dire. He was unable to trust his fellow officers, so when a local drug dealer threatened his family, Arthur called up Harry Reid, a childhood friend who had once been the leader of the Black Rebels street gang in Chicago. Reid, 6'0" and 230 pounds, with an Afro and gold earrings in both ears, arrived the next morning. "That little redneck town wasn't too far from slavery," Reid recalls. "Some old guy told me to cross the street or he'd horsewhip me. I told him to go to hell—I'm from Chicago." Nabbing the dealer, Arthur, Reid, and another gang member took the guy to a secluded country road.

"John told him, 'This is my friend from Chicago,' and that boy got freaked out, looked at me like I was Al Capone," Reid says. "We did

some things we probably shouldn't talk about." Arthur is more direct about the outcome: "They beat the shit out of him."

Finally, after enduring eight months of silence on the graveyard shift, Arthur arrested some black teens in a Waffle House and his partner, John, who apparently approved, suddenly opened up. A Korean War vet with a flat-top haircut and trim mustache, John was a crack shot who began teaching Arthur how to shoot by taking him spotlighting, where he'd hold a bright light with one hand and a .357 Magnum with the other, blasting white-tailed deer from the open window of their patrol car.

"Shoot upside down, shoot sideways, everything," says Arthur. "Those ol' boys love shooting deer in the South."

For months, Arthur and John forged an unusual friendship until one night when the older vet said he had a secret to share and invited him back to his house, where he pulled out the last thing Arthur would have ever expected—a Klan robe. "John was in the damn KKK," Arthur says. "I said, 'Whoa, shit.' He took that robe and two Klan cones outside and burned them in a 50-gallon drum. Then he turned to me and said, 'You're the first black man ever set foot on my property, and you're gonna be the first black man to ever walk off of it.'" Stunned, Arthur rode in silence all the way back to the station. "Come to find out they'd put us together as punishment—me for arresting the commissioner's brother and

remained with the department for an awkward few months—until he got a call from the FBI. While in college, Arthur had applied to the bureau when they visited campus, thinking little of it. Now, with his name in the headlines, they had come calling.

"Word had gotten out I was a good cop," he says. "The bureau was looking for minorities, and I wanted to get the hell out of Griffin."

#### UNDERCOVER IN THE UNDERWORLD

"You got to remember you're his daddy," Arthur says, driving down L.A.'s De Soto Avenue in his battered Buick sedan on a late afternoon in December. He's talking to a young fighter on speakerphone. "You got to discipline him and then walk away."

"OK, Pops."

"OK, baby."

Arthur hangs up, rubs his eyes, and makes a hard right toward his gym. The fighter on the phone was Razvan Cojanu, a 31-year-old heavyweight from Romania brought to the U.S. by a different promoter and then summarily dumped. Cojanu was living with his wife and young children in their car until Arthur picked him up, seeing talent. Cojanu had a temper, but Arthur stuck with him, eventually working him up to a fight with champion Joseph Parker for the WBO world heavyweight title last year. Cojanu lost, but he is still at Legends.

"He got in the lights and just stopped listening to me," Arthur says of the defeat, shaking



## MY DADDY ALWAYS TOLD ME: 'BETTER TO GET TRIED BY 12 THAN BURIED BY ONE.'

him for beating up on blacks."

Although he was promoted to Griffin's narcotics division in February 1974, busting dealers in plainclothes undercover stings, Arthur still refused to toe the good ol' boys line. Two months later, he was suddenly suspended, the commissioner claiming he had stolen a 10-speed bicycle from the impound lot. According to Arthur, however, he had been framed. "That was the biggest bullshit in the world," Arthur says. "I had busted the mayor's son with 875 hits of THC and they wanted me to drop the case. When I told them, 'No, I don't do this for anybody,' they put me on the blacklist and fired me." Incensed, Arthur turned around and sued the police department, the commissioner, and the entire town of Griffin in U.S. District Court—making headlines as one of the first African-Americans to file suit against an entire community for racism.

After the case made the state news, Arthur says his bosses pulled him over one night and attempted to plant marijuana in his car, then claimed he was high. "I said, 'Man, get the fuck out of here,'" Arthur says. "I don't smoke no weed." The case was dismissed, and Arthur

his head. "You've got to develop fighters emotionally, spiritually, physically—and I think he's got another world championship run in him."

He pauses, the engine idling. "There are endless people in the fight game who will con you," he says. "You've just got to have that sixth sense to tell the good ones from the bad. It's the same thing as when I used to arrest guys for the bureau—I could just tell if they were going to pull a gun."

After his stint in Griffin, Arthur arrived in Atlanta in 1973 to begin working as a special agent for the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, one of 36 state detective bureaus in the U.S., a local version of the FBI. Just as in Griffin, Arthur soon learned he had entered another entrenched good ol' boys club. "Back then, everyone was requesting black agents as part of integration, but there weren't very many of us," says Carl Neely, a former GBI agent who worked the Olympic park bombing in Atlanta and drug cases with the DEA. One of only six African-American agents on an 800-person force, Arthur was an outsider, selected for his unusual background as a tough cop from the streets who could infiltrate

continued on page 110



Hispanic and African-American gangs. “They needed a streetwise undercover agent,” Arthur recalls, “and I could get in and bust anyone.”

After setting up his wife and daughter in a house in a middle-class neighborhood on the southern edge of Atlanta, Arthur began working GBI cases from organized crime to anti-terror squads, sometimes going undercover for a month or more without a break. Working under the guise of a local DJ, Arthur spent weeks in clubs, gaining leads, and then, once he found his target, earning a reputation in the most direct way possible—holding up another drug dealer.

“I used to rob drug houses for a living,” he says. “It was my way to get in.”

One of his first busts was a dealer named Rico, a local kingpin who tried to sell Arthur some fake cocaine. Knowing he couldn’t afford to lose face on the streets, Arthur retaliated by grabbing a trench coat and a sawed-off 12-gauge shotgun and waited outside Rico’s drug house alone one night. Catching the dealer by surprise, Arthur shoved him through the front door, entering to find a group of men cutting cocaine at a table. “One of them said, ‘Who the fuck is this?’” Arthur recalls. “I hit Rico in the face with the butt of the shotgun and said, ‘Man, I’m here to get your goddamn dope—and I’ll kill everybody at the damn table.’” Caught off guard, the men obeyed, filling a duffel bag with all their cocaine. Arthur grabbed the bag and ran out the door, dropping the dope at a crime lab, knowing he’d made his entry into the Atlanta underworld.

“Nobody had balls enough to go there and do that,” Arthur says. “From that point on, I knew a contract was out on my life—but I was in with the other dealers.”

In the GBI, Arthur soon gained a reputation for getting the job done while operating on the fringes of the law. “John was a rough character,” recalls Gary Lovett, a former cop in Atlanta who worked drug cases alongside Arthur. “The first time I met him was in a drug shoot-out. He stormed the top of a hill with us in a crossfire against a guy with a rifle. I mean, his type of street was a lot different from everybody else’s. Being from Chicago and knowing martial arts put him at the top, but he beat up guys so bad he got in trouble.” Neely says Internal Affairs never understood Arthur’s methods. “They never worked the streets,” he says. “Robbing a drug house is extremely dangerous—and a court looks at it negatively—but it gets you on the inside. You have to be a bigger thug than the dealers. I mean, these were top-level guys who would cut your throat and throw you in a ditch. But John had been shot and stabbed and knew how to survive. John was tougher.”

For protection, Arthur turned to an African-American squad commander named D.T. “Cap” Adams, a soft-spoken Morehouse College grad and Green Beret fresh out of Vietnam who watched over the black agents. “Back then, the Klan could be the police chief, the mayor—you

couldn’t even trust some of the people in the GBI,” recalls Neely. “Cap brought a sense of closeness to our group. You could talk to him about anything.” Recalling his former superior, Arthur just smiles: “Cap kept my ass from getting fired.”

Knowing he was under tight watch and not sure who was on his side, Arthur once again started calling in his Chicago friend, Reid, as the only backup he could trust. “He felt like all eyes were on him, waiting for him to screw up, so he’d call me down to help on stings,” says Reid. “It was totally illegal, but then again John was dirty—all cops are dirty.”

As an undercover agent, Arthur took no chances. At all times, he wore a .357 Magnum under his shoulder and a snub-nosed .38 on his ankle, paying extra for hollow-point bullets that would expand upon entry, ensuring anyone he shot stayed down. Along the way, he suffered his own injuries. He got shot in the back, hit in the chest with a shotgun, and stabbed in the hamstring. Breaking up an armed robbery one night, he shot a victim in the back, becoming the target of a prolonged IA investigation. In a movie theater shoot-out, he took a bullet to the head while killing the perpetrator. He walked out drenched in blood and was immediately rushed to the hospital for emergency surgery. Instead of hiding, Arthur embraced his outlaw reputation. Muscle-bound with a thick mustache and gleaming Jheri curls, he wore a bullet around his neck—one a doctor had dug out of him. He dressed in boots, belt buckles, and a cowboy hat, retreating to his farm and horses near Griffin whenever possible to keep some semblance of normalcy.

Just as in Griffin, Arthur refused to apologize for his methods. “My daddy always told me, ‘Better to get tried by 12 than buried by one,’” he says.

Increasingly in demand for cases throughout the South, Arthur began working on exchange programs with the FBI, DEA, and ATF, traveling constantly below the Mason-Dixon line to nab everyone from gunrunners to mobsters to killers. While working undercover, Arthur was often gone for weeks at a time, his only communication a brief call to his wife, Jeri, from a public pay phone. Supportive and strong-willed, Jeri was the bedrock for Arthur, the one constant he could hold on to amid the criminals. Rattled from his time alongside crooks, Arthur would always ensure he cooled off for a few days at an apartment he kept in southern Atlanta or at his farm with his horses before returning home. He never wanted to expose his burden to his family.

“My daddy was a black cowboy,” says his daughter, Jonvette. “He lived in the world of gangsters, but he always protected me.”

But one case would ultimately involve Arthur’s family, nearly killing them all. In 1978, Arthur got a lead on an organized crime family from Miami who were trying to establish a new cocaine operation in Atlanta. Using his street cred, Arthur became the personal bodyguard for the head of the family, a Cuban immigrant known as Sanchez who favored

custom-made suits, rarely spoke English, and always traveled with his two nephews. At one point, Arthur was accompanying Sanchez on a debt-collection run at a pawnshop when the store owner pulled a gun, shooting a nephew and then training the pistol on the old man. Thinking fast, Arthur talked the man down, made him lower his weapon—and then shot him three times. “I tore his ass up,” Arthur says. “Then I was in deep with those guys.”

Having now earned their trust, Arthur began accompanying Sanchez everywhere, driving him to pick up cocaine shipments flown in from Miami on planes that landed in rural fields. The deeper Arthur got, the more dangerous the stakes became. Another undercover agent was killed by Sanchez on suspicion of being a cop. Finally, perhaps tipped off by an inside informant, the Miami kingpin discovered Arthur himself was working undercover. Arthur’s apartment was firebombed in the middle of the night, so he took his family and disappeared. The FBI made it appear as if he was dead, and Arthur only came out of the shadows when the Miami don went to court.

“Sanchez stared at me, whispered something to his lawyer, and then he approached the bench, changing his plea to guilty,” Arthur recalls. “I didn’t even have to take the stand.”

By 1982, Arthur was one of the top undercover agents for the bureau, renowned across the South, but the long hours were fraying his family, a toll that only worsened when Jeri was diagnosed with breast cancer. Undone and overworked, Arthur began to lose his grip while struggling with the grief. “I’d go rob drug houses with a shotgun, saying, ‘It’s a good day to die,’” Arthur recalls. “At that point and time, I didn’t care. I didn’t want to be here without my wife.” While working on an undercover sting for the FBI in Nashville, Arthur received word that Jeri had been moved to intensive care in Atlanta. Not allowed to leave the case, Arthur got himself arrested and then conned his way out of jail by using another prisoner’s ID. He called Reid and told him to come down from Chicago and drive him to Atlanta. Arthur arrived just in time to see his wife pass away. Returning to their apartment with his little girl after the funeral, Arthur lost control.

“My daddy broke down,” Jonvette recalls. “He’d come up against all these tough guys and now he was scared: How was he going to raise this girl?”

For the next eight months, overcome with depression and unable to step foot in his home with its reminders of Jeri, Arthur took leave from the GBI to move into his safe-house apartment in south Atlanta. “I didn’t want to talk to nobody, didn’t want to see nobody,” Arthur recalls. “It was crazy, but I didn’t want to do anything—I was in a very dark space.”

After nearly a year of self-imposed solitude, Arthur was visited by an agent of the GBI: He was wanted on the job. “He said, ‘Hey man, you’ve got to move on,’” Arthur recalls. Leaving Jonvette with his sister, Arthur returned to his work as an undercover agent. He began asking for the most



dangerous cases, which soon led him to a sting operation in the small Georgia town of Albany. Grappling with a rise in crime, the local police had requested help to nab traffickers moving drugs, prostitutes, and guns. Walking into town without knowing a soul, Arthur settled onto a barstool at a seedy local lounge—and was immediately pickpocketed by a prostitute on an adjoining stool. He asked her to come close, then shoved his hand down her pants and grabbed his wallet back. “I said, ‘Look here bitch, don’t you ever try to roll me,’” Arthur recalls. “She said, ‘You better leave. I’m going to get Big Red.’”

Waiting at the bar, Arthur called in for backup from the GBI, telling them something was about to happen. “I knew these guys were coming in to kill me,” he says. “But I didn’t care if I lived or died. I really didn’t give a damn. If I got killed, I just wanted somebody to know where I was.” A large African-American man with freckles and reddish hair arrived with a gang in tow, everyone surrounding Arthur. “Big Red said, ‘You fuckin’ with my ho? Motherfucker, you’re in the wrong neighborhood to be talking shit,’” Arthur recalls. “I just took out my gun from its holster and put it in my front waistline, where everyone could see it, and said, ‘Listen, we can walk outside and talk like gentlemen or we can goddamn shoot it out here and act like goddamn fools.’” Arthur and Big Red stared each other down, the entire bar still, until the local crime boss ultimately blinked and backed down. “He said, ‘Come on, partner,’” Arthur recalls. “‘Let’s talk.’”

Arthur’s cover as a crime boss now secured, he stayed on to work the Albany case for months, ultimately busting a trafficking network extending across the South. But his heart was no longer in the job. Knowing he couldn’t continue as an undercover agent and be there for his daughter, he began looking for other options. A childhood friend from the projects in Chicago, Laurence Tureaud, had remade himself as the feather-boated Mr. T in Hollywood, finding fame and fortune on TV. Arthur began wrangling freelance security work on *The A-Team*, flying west on weekends, and quickly realized this was his chance for a new life.

“I was making more money in Hollywood in a week than I made in a whole year at the bureau,” Arthur says. “All for my daughter.” After securing a full-time security job, Arthur quit the bureau and drove west, determined to start over. “I was ready to go,” he says. “I wanted to try something new, and I always loved cowboy pictures.”

## BACK IN THE RING

“The people here can be as plastic as credit cards,” Arthur says while biting into a hot pastrami sandwich at a deli in the Valley last December, motioning to the surrounding restaurant, its photos of celebrities, and the whole of Los Angeles. “But I never did mind. It’s always been about the job.”

In 1986, after moving to L.A., Arthur worked security for everyone from *The A-Team* to the production companies on Burt Reynolds’ films. He founded his own company, J. Edward Protective Service, staffing it with former cops. In truth, Arthur had been working part-time gigs on film sets for more than a decade, moonlighting with other GBI agents as bodyguards on locally shot films like *Smoky* and *The Bandit* and *Sharky’s Machine*, a 1981 Reynolds film about a vice detective in Atlanta. “They hired John because of his narcotics background,” says Neely. “Burt was fascinated with him.” For Arthur’s part, after moving to L.A., he soon found the work less than compelling. “It was pretty calm,” he says. “Mr. T was the flavor of the month, so we’d have to push away the occasional irate fan, but that was about it. It was easy.”

Still depressed over the loss of his wife, Arthur remained withdrawn, eventually finding solace in a new relationship with Margaret Lewis, the mother of child star Emmanuel Lewis of *Webster* sitcom fame. Arthur had first met Margaret in 1984 in New York while working security on *A Christmas Dream*, an NBC special featuring Mr. T as a street-corner Santa Claus alongside Emmanuel. When Arthur later moved to L.A., he and Margaret reconnected, in time getting married and wrangling their combined family of four for a few hectic years until the relationship ended.

Distraught and alone for the second time in his life, Arthur finally turned his back on Hollywood in 1997, going to work for another fighter he’d met on the circuit, Billy Blanks. He gave boxing classes and ultimately became a full-time trainer, one day taking on a washed-up outlaw fighter brought to the gym—Toney. “He looked terrible,” Arthur recalls. “Out of shape, with a fat stomach like he’d just swallowed two watermelons.” For months he worked to bring Toney back to life, their sparring sessions drawing crowds. Eventually, Arthur earned a new reputation, one that would bring him more boxers: the toughest fight trainer in the business. “I told James what I tell every fighter,” Arthur recalls. “You’re not living in your house—you’re living in the house of John Arthur.”

These days, working with young fighters and troubled kids gives Arthur deep satisfaction. “If it wasn’t for the Greek, I’d probably be

in jail or dead,” he says. “I was headed to a bad place and he turned me around, saving my life. So when I look at a fighter, I look at him as a human being—I try to see him as I must have been at 14, back when I had attitude.”

Today, even outside the ring, Arthur uses his incredible network of contacts to help friends and family in danger. When his daughter was 18 and got pulled over in Atlanta in a friend’s car with alcohol and drugs, Arthur called up a local judge to take care of the charges. “The judge took me back in his chamber, lit a cigarette and said, ‘Your daddy once took two bullets for me,’” Jonvette recalls. “I was like, ‘Who the hell is this?’ He then drove me home in his Mercedes Coupe and threw out the case. My daddy is a respected man.” Billy Blanks tells a story about a woman whose son was taken by the Mafia. “He made a call, and within 24 hours she had her son back,” Blanks says. “Pops don’t play around.”

Now, with Legends, Arthur is ready to take his own crew of elite fighters to the top, but he feels the clock ticking. In recent years, he’s overcome a heart attack and encroaching arthritis—not to mention a lifetime of injuries that never fully healed—but he exercises daily, working to keep one step ahead of his boxers. “I’m slower now, but staying in shape,” he says. “Even now, I can still turn it on.”

Sometimes, he thinks about the men he shot in the line of duty, their faces still vivid in his mind. “I still wonder, could I not have shot him?” he says of one victim. Other times, he gets worked up over politics and Donald Trump: “Racism’s coming back around in America.” But, in the end, Shirlyn always soothes him. Most nights they just sit around and watch old westerns. “I don’t care about the plot,” says Arthur. “I stare at the animals. I miss the country sometimes.”

Arthur’s connection to violence has been a hallmark of his life, yet he never revels in it. It’s just a fact of his existence, like growing up poor and black in the South Side of Chicago. He feels an appreciation for what fighting has brought him—the only undercover case he ever turned down was one busting an illegal fighting ring in Georgia—but also knows it has caused plenty of pain. Sitting at home watching westerns is never going to be anything but a temporary salve. “I’ve been to some dark places,” he says, rubbing his face, the scar from a bullet that entered his head still visible above his right ear. “That’s why fighters trust me. They’re in some dark places, too. I’m always damn straight with them. In life, there’s good and there’s bad—but don’t ever take your chances with anything in between.”