

Why Did "Nitro" Kill Himself?

A contestant's suicide provides a grim prelude to NBC's boxing reality show

By JAMES PONIEWOZIK

THE PARALLEL WASN'T LOST ON ANYONE: the kid was Rocky. Najai (Nitro) Turpin, 23, was one of 16 boxers chosen for *The Contender*, an NBC reality show featuring Sylvester Stallone as a co-host. Like Sly's character, Turpin had come up against the odds in a rough part of Philadelphia. The show's producers even taped Turpin running up the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art in triumph, just like Rocky. "They always told me, 'You're gonna have to fight your way out of the ghetto,'" Turpin says in a voice-over. "That's what I'm going to try to do."

So he did. Then he went back to the ghetto to be near his girlfriend, Angela Chapple, and their daughter Anje, 2, to await the show's airing. But three weeks before his prime-time debut, on the morning of Valentine's Day, Turpin parked his car near Chapple's house and shot a bullet into his head.

Was Turpin killed by reality TV? Friends, family and police saw little evidence of that. Those who knew Turpin say he was excited about *The Contender's* launch but frustrated about not being able to box until the end of the series—which was pushed back four months after Fox launched a copycat show—and had been partying and putting on weight. (Because of the delay, NBC gave each contestant a stipend to continue training.) "He felt like he was training for nothing," says his sister Launita Turpin. Still, she says Turpin seemed upbeat when she saw him last. Chapple, who had been with Turpin in the car just before he shot himself, released a statement saying the two had had "issues" but offered no explanation. Turpin left no note.

Whatever the reason, Turpin's suicide morbidly underscored the way NBC had been promoting *The Contender* (previews March 7, 9:30 p.m. E.T., and March 10, 10 p.m. E.T.; regular time, Sundays, 8 p.m.

OUT OF THE RING
Those who knew Turpin, including Burnett and Stallone, say he was sweet but quiet—maybe from a lifetime of staying out of trouble



E.T.): as a reality series with high emotional stakes. Executive producer Mark Burnett (*Survivor*, *The Apprentice*) says Stallone, whose co-host is boxing legend Sugar Ray Leonard, advised him to watch *Rocky* again before making the show. "It's not Rocky's story," Burnett says. "It's [Rocky's girlfriend] Adrian's story."

So Burnett focused on the boxers' personal lives, moving wives, parents and kids to Los Angeles to live with them. Turpin doesn't figure heavily in the debut, but there's a brief scene in which he cuddles Anje. "He lived a guarded life," says Stallone, "but when he was with his daughter and girlfriend, he became incredibly childlike." Says Burnett: "He wouldn't sleep in the bed we provided. He'd sleep under the bed, or in the closet, because he was so used to doing that in case there was shooting outside." The 16 middleweights are divided into two teams that compete in challenges each week; the winning team gets to choose a boxer from each side to fight. In the live finale in May, the last two standing will box for \$1 million. But the makers are betting that the draw will not

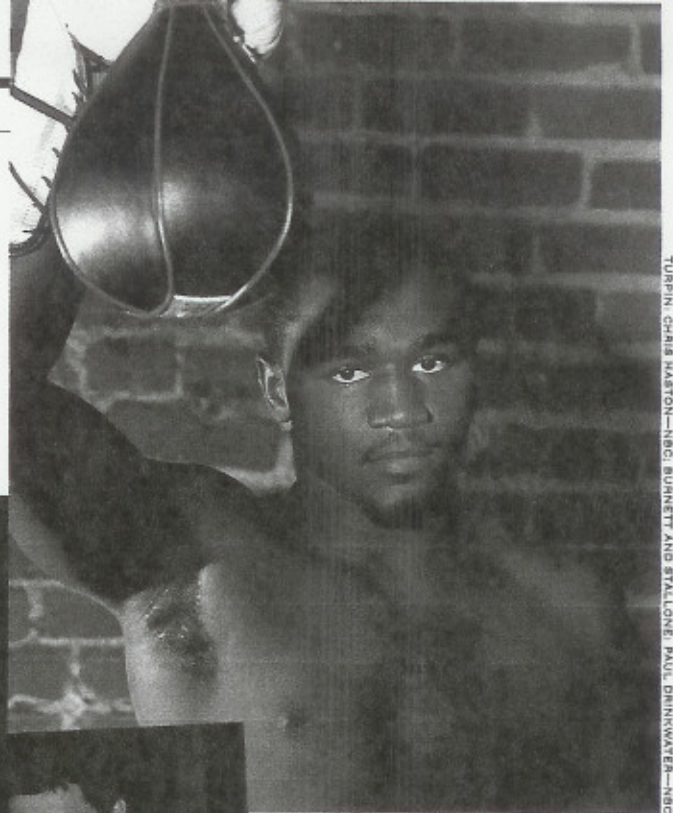
be the purse. "If you have a heart," Leonard says, "you will fall in love with one of these boxers."

The Contender is craftily made and more affecting than the campy *Survivor* and *Apprentice*. And the boxers seem more earnest and less cynical than most reality shows' camera hogs. The loser of the first

fight doesn't seem as if he's about to laugh it off and book a Hollywood agent. "I've been fighting since I was 5 years old," he says. "Where do I go from here?"

But the scene, though moving, makes Turpin's death all the more disquieting because it reminds us that the show is dangling a million dollars in front of young men often from troubled, even desperate, backgrounds. Of course, sports do that too. Call it exploitation or opportunity: they depend on young men—often minorities—who come from little or nothing and are willing to literally fight for a better life.

Najai Turpin lost that larger fight, though producers will not reveal how he did in the ring. Burnett is not going to edit Turpin's scenes—it would be disrespectful, he says—but the producers are creating a trust fund for Turpin's family. Starting next month, millions of people will watch *The Contender* and feel they know Turpin. Yet his life ended in an act that not even those closest to him can explain. It turns out that in reality—actual reality—people don't reveal all in a soliloquy. And Rocky does not get a sequel. —With reporting by Sean Scully/Philadelphia



TURPIN: CHRIS HASTON—NBC; BURNETT AND STALLONE: PAUL DRINKWATER—NBC

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—NAJAI TURPIN,
Contender boxer