

Cameron is the Tory Muhammad Ali

Irwin Stelzer gives his ringside scorecard on the young contender versus Gordon 'Tax 'em' Brown

The fight is on. In the blue corner, painted green for this event, is Dave 'Kid' Cameron. His seconds are John Redwood, advising him to lead with his right, and Zac Goldsmith, urging him to lead with his left, but not so violently as to affect the wind currents in the arena.

In the red — very red — corner is Gordon 'Tax 'em' Brown. His seconds are Ed 'Endogenous' Balls, telling him to ignore the blows he is taking because theoretically they don't exist, and Shriti 'The Confiscator' Vadera, who keeps score but doesn't count any hits by Cameron so that Gordon is never in deficit when the judges add up the punches.

These fighters have wildly different styles. Cameron slips and dodges, moving first right and then left, trying to feint his opponent out of the centre of the ring, and off to the side. Brown plunges straight ahead, clearly the fighter with a vision not of each round but of the entire match, and of matches to come. He uses his right only to feint, before delivering with his left. Cameron's style is the flashier, making him a crowd-pleaser, except for those who follow the fight game closely and wonder if he is capable of both delivering and taking a punch when the serious hitting starts.

History of the game matters. The Kid is more like Muhammad Ali, who floated like a butterfly and stung like a bee. Well, at least the floating part is right; when he attempted in a preliminary bout to sting 'Tax 'em's' partner and the reigning champ, Tony 'Regular Guy' Blair, he got swatted so hard that he lost his stinger, at least for a while. Brown is more like that old American champion, Joe Louis, who famously said of one

adversary, the fleet-footed, slippery and aptly named Billy Conn, 'He can run but he can't hide.' Conn was last seen flat on his back after being introduced to a Louis uppercut.

Cameron trained for the event by riding his bicycle wherever photographers were present; Brown trained by rereading Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Cameron knows that the referees are sometimes influenced by crowd noise, so he panders to whichever set of fans are within earshot. He told one audience that he is a real fighter who will take on anyone, in the ring or out, and then went north to tell another that he really is quite pacific, and would never get into a fight without polling all of his friends — and, if in a fight, would announce a schedule for getting out, even if that meant leaving the ring before the final bell. Never mind that this would allow his opponents to gear their strategy around his known departure plans, and save their best shots for weaker opponents.

Brown, too, is aware that the crowd's reaction counts with the referees, something he has had to take into account ever since he made them independent, although retaining the edge a fighter gets from being able to appoint the refs to their job in the first place. So he promised that he would make available to all of them the medical entourage that hovers in his corner, and would allow them to pay for it in a way that is painless. Or at least not obvious. But he has a problem with his fans: those who live in his neighborhood have begun booing him.

The proprietors of the arena are not sure which fighter they want to see carried out on his supporters' shoulders, and which carried out on a stretcher. Because they try to turn an honest profit, Cameron has called them extremists. He wants them to stop selling chocolate-covered oranges to the fans, and replace their heating and cooling system with a windmill, no matter what the cost. No fan would be admitted who had arrived by car.

The arena-owners also have their doubts about Brown. He has raised their taxes and regulated everything from the size of each seat to the wattage of the lights and the quality of paper in the loos. He has also insisted that all tickets be priced the same, so that high earners can't snap up the best seats. They lean towards Brown, however, mainly because these rather earthy gentlemen find him more agreeable company than the posher Kid.

Besides, they like to take cheap flights to Spain for a bit of sun now and then, and in a recent post-fight interview Cameron said that those flights impose a greater burden on the environment than do the same aeroplanes when loaded with him and the tonier crowd from his stamping-ground in 'Nothing' Hill. Brown would eliminate the difference between cheap and ordinary flights by insisting that there be only one class of service — except that he needs extra space for the pile of books he takes on board when he flies off to any place he can find a poor person with whom to share the donations he regularly extracts from the crowds who have made him the champion he is.

Both men have a taste for politics. Cameron wants Britain to become a greener, kinder, cleaner place . . . somehow. He won't say how, but then again you can't expect a professional fighter with no political experience to have any ideas about how to realise his laudable ambitions. Brown wants Britain to become more British, although he has not protested at the government's decision to allow children to take school tests in the language of their native countries . . . such as Scotland.

And both have strong sartorial views. Brown wouldn't be caught dead in a dinner jacket, much less white tie, and at the many dinners at which he is presented with awards for eliminating still another opponent, he shows up in lounge suits, lately dressed up a bit with a pink tie rather than the red he once wore to warn of the sort of ink he planned to use when recording his finances. Not to be outdone in the dress-down battle, Cameron won't even wear a tie; he wants his fans to think he is really one of them. Which, of course, he isn't. But then again, neither was 'Tax 'em's' buddy, 'Regular Guy', and he won the crowd over, and the championship, by taking off his jacket whenever the television cameras rolled, or by posing in tight jeans.

Brown has been too busy spending his — well, his fans' — money to take on Cameron himself, and has left that job to Blair, who has scored some real hits to Cameron's mid-section. But the Kid has made a good fist of it so far, and hopes that his experience in matches with the 'Regular Guy', plus the help of a gang of advisers, will set him up for his eventual face-off with Brown. Meanwhile Brown, more the long-distance runner than the sprinter, to mix my sports metaphors, is counting on his experience, ring savvy and deep understanding of the fight game to enable him to land a series of jolts that will put Cameron on the ropes, rather than in the centre of the ring. And, when the fans get to vote, he expects to put the Tory out of the ring altogether, especially since — thanks to the British electoral system — 'Tax 'em's' home-town fans are allocated a lot more seats than the Kid's.

Irwin Stelzer is director of economic policy studies at the Hudson Institute and a columnist for the Sunday Times.



'A knife! How sweet and old-fashioned!'