

# Brothers in arms

When 'Mighty' Paul Maiden developed a rare disease it looked as if his armwrestling career was over. But he fought his way back. In his bid for world championship glory, he takes Sam Rowe inside the muscle-bound world of arm benders on his long journey from Lancashire to Las Vegas

Photograph **JACOB KEPLER**



Mano a mano: Paul Maiden, right, takes on Bill Ballinger at the World Armwrestling League championships, Orleans Hotel, Las Vegas, June 2016

H

e was staggering towards his mum's house when the heart attack hit. It was Sunday 5 April 2009, and "Mighty" Paul Maiden was in search of sympathy for the mystery illness he thought was flu. With his heart punching his chest at 220bpm, he grasped for a garden wall and collapsed to the pavement. Everything went black.

At 6ft 2in with a shaved head, 19½in biceps and

ham-hock forearms, Maiden was the mirror image of Popeye. At 31, he had a reputation as a fierce competitor with a splash of flamboyance – he'd walk out to an MC Hammer track, dressed as a 1970s pimp, and leave with a prize. A bit like Dennis Rodman, only from Lancashire.

Through a mist of blue lights and squeaking tyres, Maiden arrived at Wigan's Royal Albert Infirmary. Rigged to beeping machines, his vital organs began to shut down. Family said their goodbyes. His condition was so rare, doctors knew of only one other case, in Canada, in 2003. That same year, Maiden placed seventh at the World Championship in Ontario – as an armwrestler. It's when doctors think he might have contracted the illness that then lay dormant until 2009.

Another cardiac arrest. Resuscitation. Nineteen blood transfusions. A tracheotomy. A four-week induced coma. Yet somehow Maiden survived. In many ways, the sport saved him. Without his superheavyweight frame, able to withstand 25kg of weight loss, he'd have died. Maiden's closest rivals were among the visitors, with wife Alex reciting online prayers from Sweden, Mexico, Alaska and beyond, as sons Max, four, and Paul Jr, three, innocently tugged the wires that kept him alive. When he finally woke, Maiden lifted his right arm and burst into tears. "This can't be mine," he sobbed. "I came in with a 20in python, and I'm looking at a lolly stick."

His armwrestling career should have been over. Besides the muscular atrophy, Maiden had a lifetime prescription for flecainide acetate to aid his irregular pulse. His left arm – that had won three British Championships (his right had won five) – was 20% disabled. He left hospital in a wheelchair. But while his muscle had abandoned him, his hunger remained.

"A lot of people said I could just sit on disability for the rest of my life, but that's not me," he said when I met him early this year. "I came out of hospital weak as a kitten, and picked up my missus's 4kg dumbbells. I couldn't even shoulder press them – I was that feeble. But those 4kg became six, and then eight, then 10. I thought, you know what? I'm gonna armwrestle again."

**IN A SHOEBOX** gym, tucked behind a house in Blackburn, three men violently grunt. The first official armwrestling contest took place in 1955,



in the smoke-stained back room of a bar in Petaluma, California, and legend says the sport can be traced to an Egyptian cave painting. Yet to modern pullers (as armwrestlers are known), this is their Vatican City. A hexagonal sign screwed to the varnished door reads "The Freakshop: here comes the pain", and inside Paul Maiden has just grimaced through 35 pull-ups on the "bastard bars". Sweating alongside him is Freakshop founder Neil "Supernatural" Pickup, a multiple world champion, British Armwrestling Federation president and Maiden's co-trainer, and Tom "Lean Machine" Holland, a gifted 24-year-old who Pickup likens to "a honey badger".

Now 38, with cropped hair and inky explosions covering his lean physique, Maiden is gearing up for the sternest test since his miraculous recovery: the World Armwrestling League (WAL) final in Las Vegas. Just 14 months after he left hospital, he achieved right-hand bronze at the 2010 British Championship, and he has won every year since. But the WAL represents a new dawn. Where once pullers would fly to far-flung destinations on their own dime, to compete for a cheap cup and a pat on the back, WAL promises the glamour of ESPN broadcast rights, \$10,000 in crisp notes to the victor and a chance to prove yourself against the sport's most hulking luminaries. For Maiden, the lure lies not in money – he cites £220 Prada trainers as his biggest regret ("They were no better than the Lacoste ones I'd bought from JD Sports") – but prestige.

**'I used to chalk my hands four hours before a competition, because I was so up for it: 'Mighty' Paul Maiden**

“When he woke from his coma, Maiden lifted his feeble right arm and burst into tears

“I’m not motivated by pennies. Money’s money, but arm wrestling is an addiction

> “Other people are motivated by pennies, I’m not,” he pants, gulping cherry-coloured amino acids from a gallon bottle. “Money’s money. Armwrestling is an addiction.”

Maiden has always lived for sport. If he wasn’t riding bikes around Leigh as a kid, he was playing rugby or cricket, or sparring with his elderly neighbour, an RAF veteran. Bullied at school and plagued by random panic attacks, he strived to replicate Arnold Schwarzenegger’s frame from *Pumping Iron*, skipping school for gym sessions. Collecting his GCSEs, Maiden ripped the envelope and tossed away the shreds without looking inside. Then he went to play tennis.

Though he longed to be like his hero Sylvester Stallone in the cheesy 80s armwrestling movie *Over the Top*, Maiden didn’t get his fix until the age of 20, when his promising rugby career was wrecked by a drunk driver’s car bonnet, which left him with nerve damage in his lower back. Having won a pub competition, he began to master the moves (the hook, top roll, hit) and endured the unique rite of passage known as “achy breaky” – a relentless burn that’s “like toothache in your tendons”. Within a year Maiden turned pro, and in 2003 honeymooned on the Isle of Man – to compete in a tournament.

In the Freakshop, pullers massage Voltarol into their joints before tackling custom-built equipment. Veins pulse as a crippling weight is dragged upwards, a sort of bicep curl that replicates a defensive armwrestling move. Watching on with a knowing grin, ex-puller Pickup offers words of encouragement to Holland and Maiden. At 42, with a slight bulge around the middle, he hopes to coach the pair to victory in Vegas. Pre-illness, Pickup remembers Maiden as “the class clown”. While Maiden’s resolve has sharpened since his comeback, so has his sense of humour. “He came back as Jim Carrey,” Pickup admits. “For a few years it was like training with Ace Ventura.”

One Saturday in March, just off the A6 in Garstang, Europe’s foremost arm benders congregate at a hotel most commonly used for weddings. The UK scene is growing – with the arrival of WAL, and Pickup’s *Arm Wars* federation having aired on Sky Sports and Eurosport – yet funding remains scarce. Here at the WAL superqualifier, men and women cluster on the wooden dancefloor, hopping to seal their Vegas berth.

Edging out Joseph Lovei, a smirking Bond villain who plays dirty, Tom Holland weeps upon winning the lightweight final. Paul Maiden, holstering his right limb in a Union Jack arm-warmer, squares off against Swede Niklas “Steel Giraffe” Nannestad, who looks more like a crane fly.

The match unspools into an energy-sapping war, Maiden and Nannestad turning deep maroon before the Giraffe finally prevails. With just a minute’s respite, right arm ablaze,



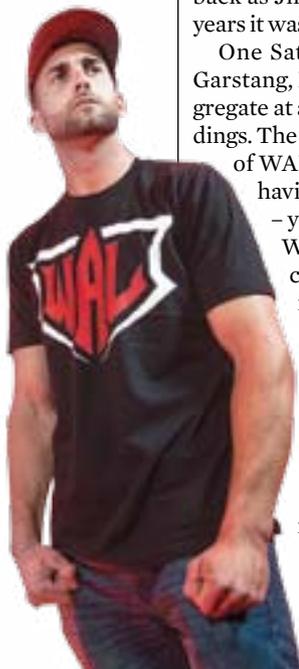
Maiden falls to a speedy defeat in his final encounter with Peter Henderson. Maiden disappears outside, inconsolable. The fairytale is over. He’s not going to Vegas.

**TWO MILES AWAY** from the glamorous Las Vegas Strip, the Orleans Hotel, with its \$28 all-day buffet and frumpy waitresses, is a dusty Sin City relic. Behind a black curtain in the Mardi Gras ballroom, past the chandeliers, magic-eye carpet and vomit-coloured walls, it morphs into Madison Square Garden. Dense stands overlook a bustling pit, with three armwrestling tables trailed by roving cameras. As busty promo girls totter through crowds distributing protein drinks, the seminar portion of “the biggest weekend in armwrestling history” gets under way, like a Ted conference for gym rats. On stage, weather-beaten puller Craig “The Fury” Tullier (who hails from Louisiana and calls the sport “rasslin”) describes how bone fragments once shredded his ulnar nerve, leaving a knot in his arm like balled-up paper. Head ref Bart Wood explains that an arm break “sounds like a bundle of sticks breaking over your knee”.

Then, through the swirl of pullers and fans slurping Muscle Monster drinks, Paul Maiden appears. Like that day on the Lancashire concrete, fate smiled on Maiden – WAL offered him a wildcard spot. He is gaunt and wrinkled, having cut water and carbs to weigh in at 88.3kg. He proudly informs me that for the past fortnight he has abstained from sex. “There have been times where I’d chalk my hands up four hours before a competition, because I’m so up for it,” he says. “But now I’m trying a couple of new things, to see if it makes a difference.”

The next morning, Maiden snaps awake at 4am. He chews on some peanuts and drinks Vitargo carb powder mixed with water, to help swell >

**Arms and the men: Maiden secures a hard-won victory in Las Vegas. Below left: up-and-coming Tom ‘Lean Machine’ Holland, who trains with the Slough Slammers in Berkshire**



JACOB KEPLER



**Fight night: Matt 'Iron Horse' Mask takes down his opponent at the Orleans, Las Vegas, June 2016. Below, Craig 'The Fury' Tullier, whose ulnar nerve was once shredded by bone fragments**



> the 9kg he packed on since yesterday. Maiden gives thanks to God – he’s not a church-goer, but believes something mightier than medicine saved him from death – then spends 15 minutes meditating. Breathing deeply, he visualises himself at the table, opposite his enemy. He doesn’t allow himself to picture a win, but does see his arm lifted.

In the Orleans, a Nickelback track booms from speakers, the air thick with Deep Heat, heavy-duty aftershave and plumes of chalk. “I feel sick,” says Kirsty, Maiden’s 28-year-old girlfriend (he and his wife separated in 2009), as pullers’ names are called bingo-style and up to three matches ensue at once. Maiden sips coffee, listening to a single hardcore track on loop and bouncing from foot to foot, before locking up against Bill Ballinger, a tubby, spectacle-wearing puller who looks more IT technician than athlete. Maiden wins but suffers a shock defeat to Daniel Mosier, a big-muscled ironworker with a blond goatee, who crushes Maiden’s hand like a hydraulic press. “He wasn’t strong,” Maiden growls, “I got caught napping.” With double elimination rules, he is still alive, but only one more loss before death.

Composure gathered, Maiden roars to victory against Darryl Baideme, before a punishing duel versus hirsute New Yorker Brandon Ellesor. Maiden squeaks to victory, regaining enough showmanship to gyrate his backside to a TV camera, but during the pull bangs his right thumb violently against the table. An x-ray will later reveal ligament damage and, as the next bout is called, against arm-wrestling stalwart Mike “The Chemist” Selearis, it has already begun to swell.

A teacher from Connecticut whose facial hair verges on art, Selearis approaches the table with his mammoth right arm raised, bald head aglow under the lights. Last year’s

runner-up on his left arm, Selearis shakes non-competing hands with Maiden, and they wish each other good luck.

Both men place their elbows on a pad as the referee negotiates a fair grip, their left hands clutching the table pegs. The ref barks “GO!” and their hands slither apart. A strap is produced. It is looped, pulled through and fastened, but Maiden looks concerned. He wants the strap tight and low on his wrist, to lever his arm and apply force against Selearis. But, as the ref releases his hands, Selearis employs the same tactic, scalding Maiden’s engorged thumb. In one motion he rotates his wrist, rolls sideways and drives Maiden to the mat. It is a controlled explosion. Maiden blinks slowly, nods and graciously pats Selearis on the hand. “Well done, pal,” he says. “Well done.”

Having finished ninth, it’s not long before Maiden is back on duty as armwrestling’s resident jester. He drowns out “U-S-A” chants with booming renditions of “Eng-er-land”, cider in hand. Neil Pickup has seen this before. He recalls Maiden’s anguish at placing third at the 2010 British Championship, the first stop in his extraordinary comeback tour, as it was he who beat Maiden to the trophy. “I saw the pain and upset in his eyes,” says Pickup. “All that desire, all that want, all that effort – he thought it was written in the stars that day. He took it on the chin, said ‘Congratulations mate,’ but he was filling up.”

**A FEW WEEKS LATER**, I find Maiden in a philosophical mood. He’d have loved to have conquered WAL but knows his war was won long ago. “I now value life, I know it can be snatched away at any moment,” he says. “I do feel like my best years were robbed, and I was bitter for a while, but these days I’m just thankful to be alive.” Maiden’s story isn’t over. He swears he’ll be world champion one day. He’s had visions – of his arm being lifted – and vows to stage an open-bus tour through Leigh to celebrate. Sometimes, like “Mighty” Paul Maiden, the human spirit cannot be killed. ■

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