The commentary on last weekend’s Tyson Fury-Deontay Wilder heavyweight rematch in Las Vegas was the usual mix of hyperbole, banality and grating repetition. The commentators were spot on in one regard, though: few, if any, sporting events generate the electricity of a major prize fight.

But as always with big-time boxing, there was a jarring contrast between the absurd theatrics intended to inflate a contest into a show and the raw, gladiatorial drama of the bout itself.

Fury, the self-styled “Gypsy King”, entered the arena in a pantomime outfit and on a throne borne aloft by several women who, judging by their expressions, were wondering what on Earth possessed them to sign up for the gig. Rather than the traditional fanfare, Fury made his grandiose entrance to the strains of Patsy Cline’s *Crazy*, singing along in a manner that suggested he was blithely unconcerned about what lay ahead. For his part, Wilder was decked out in regalia, including crown and mask, that recalled the giant rabbit in the movie *Donnie Darko*.

Wilder is renowned for his punching power but, before the first round was out, wore a similar expression to the women who’d carried Fury to the ring. Alarm and bewilderment are entirely understandable reactions to being trapped in a confined space with a violently inclined giant, but it seemed a little late in the day to discover the downside of being the defending heavyweight champion. After watching their man being bullied and battered for six rounds, Wilder’s corner threw in the towel in the seventh.

It’s conventional wisdom that athletes are becoming blander and more robotic. Fury may be the exception that proves the rule. He really is a Traveller, a distant relative of Bartley Gorman V, who was known as “the King of the Gypsies” by virtue of being the undisputed bare-knuckle fighting champion of Britain and Ireland from 1972 to 1992.

In 2015, Fury took the world title off Ukrainian Wladimir Klitschko, the longest-reigning heavyweight champion in history. He then proceeded to stake out a position on the lunatic fringe with remarks such as, “I’d hang my sister if she was promiscuous”, and sabotage his career and...
A less turbulent sporting journey, but a compelling one nonetheless, is that of Australian cricket captain Tim Paine, who has gone from prodigy to forgotten man to sacrificial lamb to saviour.

A wicketkeeper-batsman from Tasmania, Paine was the youngest Australian player to be awarded a contract (he was 16 at the time; he's now 35). After captaining the Australian under-19 side, he made an instant impact on the first-class scene and duly progressed to the national team. A glittering career seemed a matter of course.

But a complicated finger injury took him out of the game for two years, and sport, like nature, abhors a vacuum. By 2017/18, having been talked out of retiring, Paine was playing for the Tasmanian 2nd XI as a specialist batsman.

Then, in a left-field call that, with the benefit of hindsight, warrants the description “inspired”, he was recalled to the Australian team after a seven-year absence, equalling the record for the most tests between appearances.

When the “Sandpapergate” scandal erupted in March 2018, Paine was handed the poisoned chalice of leading a demoralised team deprived of its two best players. In practice, that meant retaining his dignity while the rest of the cricket world revelled in Australia’s humiliation and lost of income, Smith and fellow miscreant David Warner had to grin and bear relentless abuse from English spectators during last year’s World Cup and Ashes series.

The English team, though, got on their high horse recently when a South African spectator mockingly compared talismanic all-rounder Ben Stokes to pop star Ed Sheeran – a comparison some might think does Sheeran no favours.

Said Paine: “You cannot react to the crowd [like Stokes in South Africa] but then always encourage the Barmy Army to do exactly the same and worse – abuse players. They clap [the Army] at the end of the day’s play and make a point of thanking them.”

He could have added that, unlike India’s Virat Kohli and Pakistan’s Sarfaraz Ahmed, England captains Eion Morgan (World Cup) and Joe Root (Ashes) studiously declined to call on their fans to give Smith and Warner a break.

Poisoned chalice no more
Calling out England’s thin-skinned cricketers shows Australian captain Tim Paine is finally comfortable at the reins.

Well-being by sliding into addiction, ballooning to 180kg and succumbing to mental demons.

He still has a penchant for bizarre and outrageous statements, although one suspects his primary motivation is seeing whether the media is daft enough to recycle them. For instance, he claimed to have prepared for the fight by engaging in marathon oral sex sessions to strengthen his jaw and, somewhat contradictorily, masturbating seven times a day “to keep my testosterone pumping”.

He also vowed to unwind after the fight by bingeing on cocaine and prostitutes, although the presence at ringside of his wife, the mother of his five children, suggested otherwise. A po-faced op-ed on CNN accused him of bringing boxing into disrepute. Hello? Since when has boxing not been in disrepute? The piece actually contained a link to a story about three boxers dying, within the space of a few weeks last year, of injuries sustained in the ring.

Given how far Fury fell, his second coming is a remarkable achievement. The media, boxing fans and, most of all, rival heavyweights will now watch with keen interest to see if he has the ambition and reserves of self-discipline to make the most of it.