



LOSE YOUR TEMPER,

LOSE THE FIGHT

There are easier ways to sweat, but Keith Bain finds that Woodstock's The Armoury Boxing Club takes physical and mental fitness to a different level.

It's electric. The atmosphere supercharged. Listening closely, I can make out the theme from *Rocky*. We're gathered, expectantly, around The Armoury's boxing ring, heart of a slick gym for Capetonians taking their lives – and their fitness – to new levels. When they come during the week, it's to skip, learn to punch, duck, hit the bag, lift kettlebells, to move in a whole new way, and then to spar.

And tonight, a select few have come to fight. Strangely, on this particular Fight Night, the smell of sweat is absent. Nor do I detect any fear. Rather, it's a robust party atmosphere – a typical Friday-night gathering. The bar is open, beer is flowing, beautiful people are buzzing around. Only there's nothing typical about the planned entertainment.

The crowd – from all corners of the city, and many from Jo'burg – are here to watch braver individuals going head to head in what George Foreman called 'the sport to which all other sports aspire'.

BLOOD, SWEAT AND A LITTLE VIOLENCE

Like most of the boxers I meet, I find violence really isn't my thing. Perhaps I'm drawn here by something else – a desire to see if I can handle the sight of the pummelling. But it's the boxers themselves I find compelling. Perhaps because it's so real – because it makes such demands of its combatants. It's a sport, but it isn't a game... A boxer steps inside the ring utterly alone. There are no teammates to bail you out; your trainer can only guide you and help stem the flow of blood between rounds.

Regularly seen in the ring is The Armoury's co-owner Steve Burke, who came to South Africa after having been a British paratrooper. He found city life a little boring, however, missing the edge and action of army life. His father was a boxer, but when he tried boxing as a teenager he hated it, thinking it was best left to someone else. It was only after 'waking up' much later in life – in his mid-40s – when he realised he'd lost contact with some part of himself and gotten caught up in the rat race, that he felt the pull to do something 'real'. He found himself drawn towards white-collar boxing.

There's long been a noble tradition of boxing in England, but in South Africa it hasn't really had a high profile, and certainly hasn't been viewed as a 'gentleman's sport'. Armoury seeks to raise the profile, bringing boxing into the ambit of urban cool. You see it in the way the club is put together – it's a slick, stylish space, yet it's one you come to sweat in, not pose. Their mirrors are there to check your form, not your hair.

THE EYE OF THE TIGER

However, this isn't the story of how I overcame my fears, climbed into the ring and became an overnight boxing sensation. This isn't even a story about boxing giants and heroes. As yet, there are no Muhammad Ali behemoths raging in the boxing rings of Cape Town. But there are plenty of local



Clockwise from left Title-holding boxer Johannes Salie is a trainer at The Armoury; Owner Steve Burke in the ring during one of The Armoury's Fight Nights; The professionals make it look easy, but even the boxing stance is a little counter-intuitive

heroes giving it a go. Steve maintains that you can go from your first boxing class to your first white-collar fight in three months. There's an incredible paradox in that boxing is the hardest sport to master, but is ultimately so simple in that there are just six punches to learn.

AS YET, THERE ARE NO MUHAMMAD ALI BEHEMOTHS RAGING IN THE BOXING RINGS OF CAPE TOWN

The Armoury manager Tamzyn Botha tells me they're all about getting members 'fighting fit' – a euphemism for being in top physical form. 'Our trainers are great, because they make you want to work hard for them, even while they're making you suffer.' Tamzyn invites me to try out a few one-on-one boxing lessons. The offer is irresistible. And daunting. She puts me in the strong, capable hands of Johannes Salie, a professional and title-holder. Johannes is resolute, restrained and has nothing to prove – he's had some powerhouse fights in his career.

It's my first session, but he's eager to show me the basics: how to stand (a little awkward), move (higher grade) and how to



duck and dive (brain surgery). By my third session, Johannes has me sweating furiously, and he shows his less merciful side, clipping the side of my head each time I duck the wrong way. He wants me to know that those heavy gloves make a difference. That holding your hands in a fist for an hour is tiring, and that holding your glove-bound fists in front of your face (where they should be when you're not striking) is exhausting.

As he urges me on, I get a sense of Johannes's strength – he's like a brick wall. But when he looks me in the eyes, he sees deep inside. He's measuring the future, seeing how I'm going to move split seconds from now. Yet, while his eyes scan like

scientific instruments, there's also a softness in his gaze, and always a hint of a smile. Perhaps in order to be a boxer, you really do need to be human first, to read a person's emotions, probe them psychologically.

UP IN ARMS

The Armoury's membership is diverse ... and growing. There's a tidal wave of Capetonians signing up for Fight Night bouts. And while most people come to the gym with the intention of sorting themselves out physically, they soon discover that being fighting fit also prepares them to tackle the world in new ways, too. Spend an hour with Johannes as he gets your mind

PHOTOGRAPHY: KEITH BAIN



Left Landing a punch is deeply satisfying; receiving one can mean seeing stars; **Middle** Christia Wollner prepares herself mentally for her Fight-Night bout; **Right** Johannes nurses the wounds of a fighter he's been training during a Fight-Night encounter

and body aligned, and you know you've had a workout. Throwing punches may sound like the start of something routine, but knowing which punch to throw, and with which arm, requires you to be switched on mentally. And focused.

MASTERING THE SAVAGE

Ringside, the slams and bops to the face during the fights are at times difficult to watch. 'I'm quite a compassionate person,' says graphic designer Nick Mills. 'The more I box, the more I realise it's not an aggressive sport. It's almost like a chess game. You try to outdo your opponent, but you don't go in there to try and destroy them.' Of course, if you do it properly, you will hurt your rival at least a bit. 'Every time I spar, my nose bleeds,' says Nick, 'and despite the gloves and the head gear, there are times when you definitely see stars.'

So, the question that sane people everywhere are probably asking is why anyone would put themselves through all of this. 'It's like dancing,' says Christia Wollner, who studied opera and teaches Pilates. 'You can't explain why you enjoy it, but you do.' Steve believes it's about 'mastering the savage'. Boxing is a noble enactment of primal urges. Like sex and laughing, the need to express some violent, physical, fighting urge is very real. 'But it's repressed,' says Steve.

Say what you will about repressed violence, but witnessing the fights at The Armoury, there's very little by way of rage or aggression. Sure, they're dishing out punches, and there is blood flying about, and it is obviously very violent. But somehow the intention is never violent.

'YOU TRY TO OUTDO YOUR OPPONENT, BUT YOU DON'T GO IN THERE TO TRY AND DESTROY THEM'

I guess we all wonder if we'd have the guts to do what these guys are doing. It's an intersection of primal urge and civilised control. Ringside, the air is alive with energy – you feel each and every blow, tremble with the knocks and grimace as strikes and uppercuts are landed. You feel the impact on the bodies of strangers and, while it's easy to imagine what it might be like to be in the ring, I'm only too grateful to be standing on the outside looking in...

And at the end of these fights – three rounds of two long, exhausting minutes each – the fighters know full well that they've stretched themselves in ways few urban professionals ever get a chance to these days. And I'm left scratching my head, wondering if I'll ever be brave enough to go in front of that chanting crowd and sweat it out for real...

WHY 'WHITE COLLAR'?

White-collar boxing was designed to bring the competitive side of this tough sporting code to ordinary city folk. People with regular jobs – lawyers, media types, academics, businessmen, writers – who might not otherwise have the time or inclination to train to the level of amateur and professional boxers, but nevertheless want a chance to go one-on-one with other busy professionals caught up in their hectic contemporary lifestyles.

The white-collar sub-genre makes fewer demands on competitors, with heightened safety measures. Remember in *Fight Club* when Edward Norton started turning up at work with a face full of serious injuries? Well, technically, that shouldn't happen in white-collar boxing.

The trend apparently originated with urban professionals training at Gleason's Boxing Gym in New York in the 90s. It was basically a bunch of fit guys looking to up their game from sparring to something a little more serious – more competitive.

But the notion of a more 'civilised' boxing code goes back to the mid-1700s, when the first boxing school was opened for 'gentlemen' whose social standing meant they'd traditionally only been spectators at the underground bare-knuckle prizefighting tournaments that thrilled crowds in London's Haymarket. Tucked into padded gloves, the noble classes finally had the chance to let off steam without being reduced to savages. Sparring became a gentleman's pastime.

■ THE ARMOURY BOXING CLUB

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