

Ring Masters

Getting in to the ring to box is character-building, asks for commitment and demands fierce discipline. But once you start the journey, there's a surprise in store. It's not only your body that it shapes.

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INSERT THE HORSESHOE, SNORT THE LINES, dip the glove in broken glass. Find your anger, slugger: outside they're playing your fight song. Like to gut a website developer? Fancy body-bagging a corporate banker, or some other superior pantywaist? Here's your chance – and screw the cash you took to take the fall.

Checklist. You weighed in, scowled for the flashbulbs, and duly raved abuse at your foe. You kitted up over cigarettes and French fries, and waited your turn. Now we're on: 'It's the eye of the tiger, it's the cream of the fight ...'

Rhino through the curtains and the shadowed, pumping mass of spectators towards the apocalypse, the luminous space of encounter, and demolish that MD, movie-maker or (most risible of all) journalist. Only it will be different once you're there.

In the world of white-collar boxing, where members-club 'fight nights' are focal events, the anthems that contestants choose could as easily be classical music as folk rock, and while gangsta rap is always du jour, the undertone of matey self-parody is often heavier than the bass boom. Fighters might affect elements of the bad-ass boxing script in wry irony or partial delusion; they don't necessarily live them.

White-collar boxing emerged in the 1990s in New York and other cities such as Hong Kong and London. Since then, it has flourished internationally as a recreational sport with its own code of rules. In South Africa, Cape Town's Harrington Street Boxing Gym was a well-known centre for the sport, and now a new contender has emerged: The Armoury Boxing Club.

For owner Steve Burke, white-collar boxing is as intriguing to think about as it is engaging to do. It offers an enigmatic, paradoxical excitement: the state of safe danger.

Where the high-stakes professional boxer usually aims to win by knocking out the opponent, amateur and white-collar boxing follow the Olympic style based on clean, i.e. non-scraping, blows to the body's point-scoring regions. But unlike amateur boxing, white-collar bouts are shorter – three two-minute rounds – and, in addition to standard headguards, gum guards and groin protectors, gloves are twice as padded as those of the pros, making facial injury a rarity, nicks and scuffs aside. If things get too one-sided or someone is ailing, the fight ends.

An even more pertinent contrast is that as much as the sport might stir fantasies of fratricide among the professional classes (annihilate the accountant!), by pitting day-jobbers of similar footing against one another, it limits potential for damage. Steve's patrons, about a third of whom are women, range in age from the early twenties to mid-forties, with many drawn from banking and media sectors. Amateur boxers are typically township youths, peaking in their late teens and competing hell for leather

Sparring: Almost the real thing but not quite. It's the time for testing combinations, footwork and fitness. [Left] Vest R70, Woolworths; shorts price on request, The Armoury Boxing Club; trainers R700, Adidas Originals. [Right] Vest R70, Woolworths; shorts and trainers, boxer's own



to become big-game professionals. As Steve puts it, 'If you step into the ring against someone who's training full-time in the Bronx and living the gutter-to-glory story with every fight, he's going to tear you apart.'

None of which will happen on his watch. 'I get the boxers together before fight night and talk about the club's expectations. They must behave in a very sportsmanlike manner. We ask them to embrace the other guy at the end of a fight, which they do – naturally. We don't encourage bloodthirstiness. We're the exact opposite of that ... This is a boxing club where not everyone actually boxes.'

Shrewdly mindful, on the one hand, that boxing is perceived as 'brutish', yet convinced, on the other, that boxing training provides 'the best overall workout you'll get', The Armoury asserts as its key value proposition that it 'uses boxing as a superb training technique' to suit its members' diverse sporting or fitness goals. The boxing regime is a means to an end. The end need not be boxing itself, even though the foretaste of experience is always beckoning as an opportunity accessible to comfortably-off, regular Joes and Josephines.

So the vast majority of members come only to exercise, working in classes or one-on-one with physical-training instructors and boxing coaches. The more adventurous try full-contact sparring. Only an estimated 20 percent of members go the distance and participate in fight nights. And here's the *coup de grâce*. At The Armoury there are no losers, no winners – only heroes. To avoid partisanship from contaminating these festive assemblies of members, pals and relatives, no scores are kept and no winners declared. Both sweating fighters have their arms raised to the cheers of the crowd.

How perplexing. What's your objective in the ring, then?

Steve laughs. 'You want to win!' Never mind scores. You'll know how you've fared, as will the crowd. When it's suggested that for some 'staying alive' might be the main thing, he laughs even louder.

Because you shouldn't get the wrong idea. When Steve says his club 'has no place for people who want to prove themselves in a macho way', he does so not in a nanny-statist spirit but in the name, if you like, of a higher machismo – toughness epitomised. And when he remarks that he's 'not a tree-hugger', believe him.

It's a working morning and we're shooting the breeze at The Armoury, located within a boom-gated complex in Woodstock and neighboured by such outfits as a publishing house and The Institute for Security Studies. That gets a good mutual chuckle, and Steve, 50, genial and joshing, British-born but long resident in South Africa, doyen of a programme for street kids, also digs the fact that it's Woodstock, a downtown suburb going upmarket. 'It's edgy, and boxing's a bit edgy.'

The same is true of the gym itself, a far cry from the dank, tattooed armpit canonised in folklore or the cosseted cruise-liner facility with martini glasses adjacent to the StairMaster. Think industrial loft. Think clean, friendly, functional. It's said to be 'quiet' but is pervaded by the ambient sound of PA music and human to and fro. There is a trainer, the Olympic weightlifter. And over there, offering coffee, is the manageress, a world-champion kickboxer. From the ring, a shuffle-hustle-thump marks a woman who is pummelling the bejesus out of her coach's hand pads.

Beneath its whited walls the building is sheer Dickens, and it actually was once an armoury. Light streams through high windows, girders line the ceiling, and pillars display poster-sized engravings of Victorian boxers with walrus moustaches. Juxtaposed to the lounge, with its wood panelling, library and framed clippings, is the weights room and the favoured tools, kettlebells and TRX bodyweight suspension system.

The former, 'a hand-held gym', resemble chunks of Boer War ordnance; the latter, a US Navy SEALs gizmo, could be stuffed in a kitbag with your Woodbines and used

Skipping: The boxer's exercise (as was chopping wood) demands hand/feet coordination, footwork and stamina. Often used as a warm-up before sparring. [Left] Vest R70, Woolworths; shorts price on request, The Armoury Boxing Club; trainers R700, Adidas Originals. [Right] Vest R70, Woolworths; shorts and trainers, boxer's own





anywhere. Aside from being useful in training, they're illustrative of boxing's portability. Hell, you don't need much. All it takes, Steve says, is good stance, keeping your guard up and knowing the blows – the jab, lead, hook and uppercut – stuff you can explain in seconds yet not perfect in a lifetime; basics that can spiral into combinatorial infinity. And, so saying, he demonstrates. An interesting moment ... having former Major Burke's fist held inches from your face ... a long history manifests itself as his arm swings out and the knuckles steady into view.

In feudal England, bare-fisted contests were popular at village fairs. Come the Industrial Revolution, they spread to cities where these spectacles gained such cachet among aristocratic spectators that the prizefighter Jack Broughton, seeing opportunity, opened an academy in London, introduced gloves and rules, and advertised for 'persons of quality and distinction'. Thus was boxing born, a pursuit of the nobility that, in time, flourished in public schools, universities and military academies.

Steve Burke revives these traditions of the English amateur, the gentleman boxer. 'Boxing was seen as a vehicle for expressing one's noble side,' he says.

And, by Jove, talk about exemplifying your own brand.

A management consultant and eloquent conversationalist, Steve sports a crisp, striped shirt and close-cropped gelled hair. As he takes his boxing stance, the movement is executed with elegant sureness. When the fist appears, it's like looking down the barrel of a gun held by James Bond.

Steve grew up in a boxing milieu and is a former manager of the British Army boxing team. He went to Sandhurst, and was commissioned in the elite Parachute Regiment. During 16 years of service, he held only one desk job, in covert surveillance and agent-handling, activity where he reported at ministerial level. The rest of it was active duty worldwide, in training or combat. 'One minute you're crawling in the jungle, the next, parachuting into the Arctic.' And then we trail into off-the-record territory.

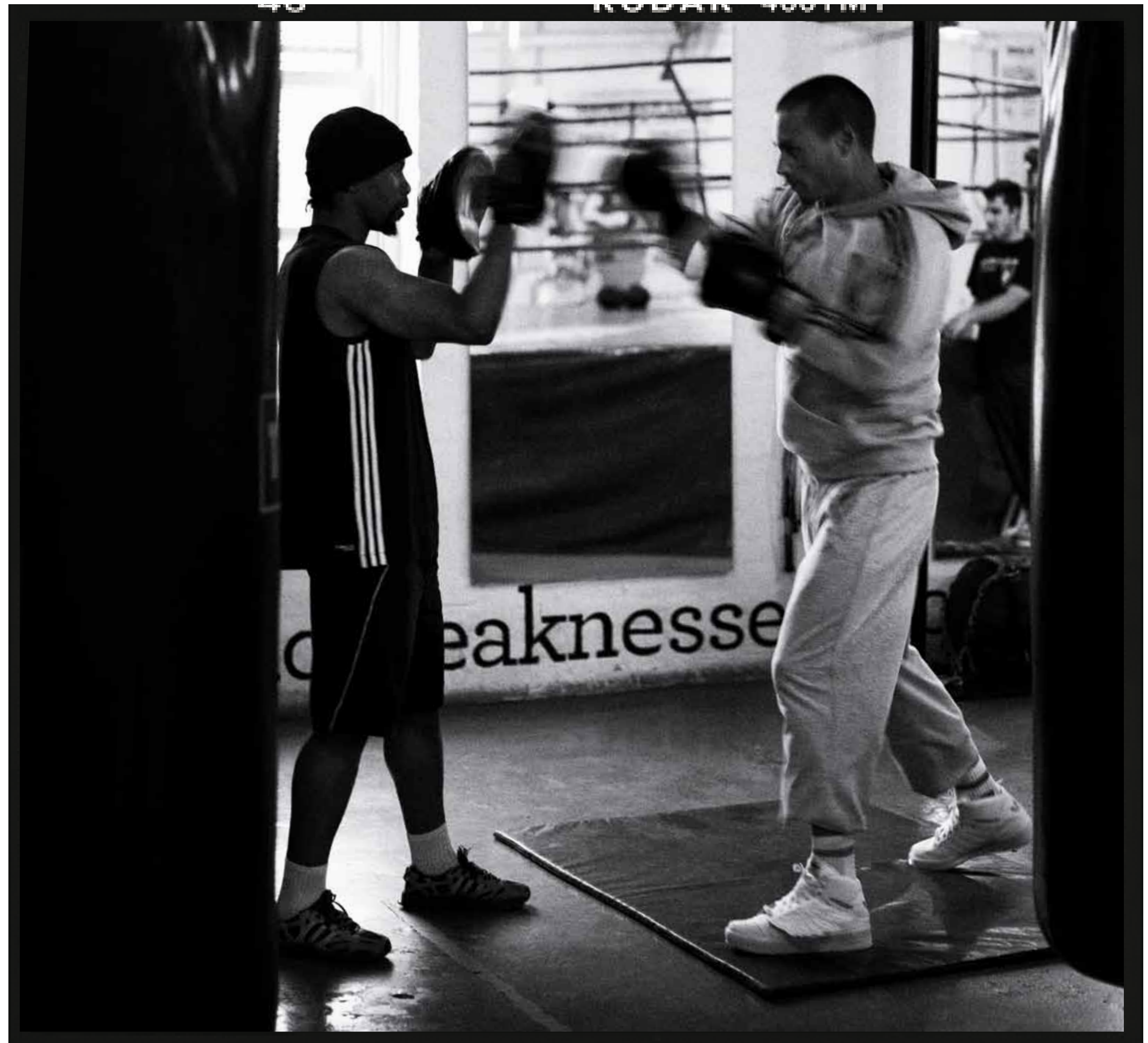
So he's tough. With all its safety measures, is white-collar/gentleman boxing equally as tough? Look, he says, boxing is boxing. It's psychologically intimidating to get into a ring for the first time, trade blows, and feel the turmoil of fight-or-flight reflexes.

Some people cannot bring themselves to throw punches at another person; for most it's receiving them that's the issue. Then again, there you have it – people do it; genteel citizens who are not after career advancement and cash, who are motivated not by need but an order of desire. For Steve, this is the crucial consideration, one that casts the enigma of boxing into relief and which, by implication, makes white-collar boxing less a sideshow to the amateur and professional acts than the sport's central or purest expressive stage, its main psycho-cultural laboratory. 'While relatively safe, there's always the fact of violence and fear of getting hurt – it's strangely compelling.'

Safe/danger. The ambivalent allurement of boxing turns and turns on this edge. Seen from one direction, it's all about your safety becoming endangered. From another, it's about engaging danger and making it safe, about parachuting into the Arctic of the ring time and again to rehearse the mastery of a primordial challenge, be it the shadow-boxing foe cowered beneath a hood, or the self, the zone of autonomous nature we are behind our eyes.

'To decide to box is a real adventure. It's character-building, highly disciplined, takes massive commitment and gets you into bloody good shape. Yet when you start the journey, you'll realise it's all about this.' He thumps at his heart; touches his crown. □

Fighting with hand pads: The improvement of hand speed, punching power and other skills, with comment and encouragement from the person behind the pads. [Left] Black vest R229, Adidas Performance; shorts and trainers boxer's own. [Right] Grey hoodie R499, Ess Grey tracksuit pants R399, both Adidas Performance; trainers JS Wings GID R1 799, Adidas Originals





Let any other sportsman try and tell you that his sport is more exhausting than a comprehensive workout of throwing punches in or outside the ring. He would be wrong



The similarity between boxers, jockeys and models is the importance of weight. Boxers competing below their normal weight can take huge strain to shed the extra kilos before the official weigh in



[Above] ADI Firebird tracksuit top R599, ADI Firebird tracksuit pants R449, both Adidas Originals. Grey shorts R249, Active towel R279, both Adidas Performance. [Opposite] Airo jacket R4 500, Weigley Hoodie R2 000, both G-Star Raw; blue inside out printed T-shirt R999, Diesel

Boxers are not always bent noses, cauliflower ears and scarred eyebrows. A handsome face usually means a champ boxer. 'My face is so pretty; you don't see a scar, which proves I'm the king of the ring by far.' – Muhammad Ali

Photography: Mark Cameron; fashion director: Suzannah Garland; model: Chad Melhuizen/Outlaws (Chad is Alzheimer's South African ambassador and dedicates his free time to creating awareness for the cause, see how you can get involved by visiting <http://www.alzheimers.org.za>); trainer/professional boxer: Johannes Sallie; grooming: Merle Titus/Infidels; photographer's assistant: Jacques van Zyl; fashion assistant: Jacqui Turner; fashion intern: Hannah Moore; captions: Martin Oosthuizen; post-production: Clone. Shot on location and with special thanks to The Armoury Boxing Club: 021 461 9141. STOCKISTS: Adidas Originals: 021 421 8262; Adidas Performance: 021 419 6754; Diesel: 011 630 4000; G-Star Raw: 021 418 9000; Woolworths: 021 415 3411

