



Title: The boxer's point of view: an ethnography of cultural production and athletic development among amateur and professional boxers in England

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The boxer's point of view:

An ethnography of cultural production and athletic development
among amateur and professional boxers in England

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of
Luton

August 2008

For Mum with all my Love

Elizabeth Psaltis

(1943-2003)

Abstract

Since the late nineteenth century boxing in England has been socially organised into two ideologically distinctive versions - amateur and professional boxing – that to this day are practiced in spatially segregated social universes. Nonetheless, both amateur and professional boxing-practitioners understandings and lived experiences in and through boxing are necessarily grounded in the wider social and cultural contexts through which they interpret meaning and construct worldviews and identity. Thus despite the institutional, ideological and spatial boundaries demarcating either code, on a rather more subtle yet incredibly powerful cultural level, amateur and professional boxing are both symbolically and practically deeply intertwined. Over a five year period, I conducted ‘insider’ ethnographic research among distinct cohorts of amateur and professional boxers based in Luton and London to investigate the lived experiences and socially constructed worldviews, values and identities developed by practitioners immersed in either code. The overriding aim of this research was to critically evaluate the limits and possibilities of boxing-practitioners association with and development through ‘boxing’ henceforth.

The findings of this ethnography reveal that it was common for the amateur and professional boxing-practitioners studied to cultivate empowering identities through intersubjective and socially validating instances of purposefulness, expressivity, creativity, fellowship and aspiration. These lived dimensions were grounded in sensuous, symbolic and emotional attachments respective to the social organization defining the social practice of either code of boxing. Equally, the research reveals that under the veneer of collective passion for and consequent fellowship experienced through boxing, an undercurrent yet ever-present sense of dubiety, tension and intra-personal conflict was in evidence among both the amateur and professional boxing-practitioners studied. It is suggested, therefore, that as a consequence of an array of both micro and macro post-industrial societal reconfigurations defining the structural principles of amateurism and professionalism in the practice of ‘boxing’, contemporary boxers are increasingly predisposed to developing athletic identities predisposed towards patterns of meaning production “...dominated by market-mediated consumer choice and the power of individualism” (Jarvie 2006 p. 327). Thus through complex, historically dynamic and seemingly paradoxical social processes of cultural (re)production and transformation - dialectically fusing individualistic aspirations geared towards self-interested gain, acts of group and subcultural fellowship and social resistance to measures of institutionalised control - it is argued that the role of boxing as an agent for humanistic personal and social development in the contemporary late-modern era of structural reconfiguration is progressively rendered impotent.

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I would like to thank Dr. Lesley Lawrence who in the first place had sufficient faith in me to allow this disparate marriage between the science of bruising and the science of academia to take place and was always available to offer advice thereafter.

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Authors Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Bedfordshire. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University

Name of candidate:

Signature:

Date:

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Sport defines us as a nation. It teaches us about life. We learn self discipline and teamwork from it. We learn how to win with grace and lose with dignity. It gets us fit. It keeps us healthy. It forms a central part of the cultural and recreational parts of our lives...

Tessa Jowell MP, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport

The above statement introduces the rationale underpinning the most comprehensive report on the social significance of sport in British society to date - *Game Plan: a strategy for achieving Government's sport and physical activity objectives* (see DCMS 2002). With the London 2012 Olympic Games firmly in the foreground, New Labour's Tessa Jowell outlines the 'twin track' agenda for sport in Great Britain – namely the aims of massively increasing physical activity for the public at large and simultaneously nurturing sustainable success on the elite stage of sporting competition. The feel-good factor generated by international sporting glory thereafter, "...particularly in more popular sports" (p. 80), is championed for enhancing the nation's emotional wellbeing. Concomitantly, elevated national sporting participation and passion can also play a significant role in combating social ills in health, education, crime and social exclusion.

The research findings documented in this thesis portray rather more critical evaluations of the social significance of sport in contemporary Britain. Following Sugden and Tomlinson (2002), the guiding tenet of this research upholds that if theorisation of the value of sports in society is to be made it benefits greatly from research that is grounded in the lived experiences and power relations of those engaged in the area of cultural production under scrutiny. Accordingly, the analysis presented in this thesis is based on an intensive long term 'insider' ethnography conducted over a five year period. By way of introducing this methodological approach the following narrative describes one such grounded instance of cultural production through which the social practice of boxing took place in contemporary English society.

'Steak'

It is approaching midnight and I am lying on two tables prised together in a hotel function room. It takes what seems like an eternity before I am informed the doctor is on his way. As I anticipate his arrival I dwell upon the spectacle of (my) living human flesh in need of first aid while only an arm's length away from a group of formally attired men dining on fillets of steak while smoking fat cigars. I am aware of the banter directed at my expense from a well-inebriated voice somewhere to my left, "eye, eye... thee should 'ave ducked lad...[laughing]...you lost me five-hundred quid blue corner...you should have used that right hand more kid...serves thee right for getting a wallop 'int eye [more laughing]". In a mixed state of contemplation, fatigue and endorphin induced stress-relief I am content to let the comments pass by. Unlike many who have found themselves in a like predicament, however, I uncontrollably become submerged in a thought process through which I attempt to interpret the

action packed and emotion filled events of the ‘nice little contest’ (as a diner obliges me while I wait to have my injury inspected) in a frame of logical analytical coherence. The sheer immediacy of defeat etched on my bruised and blood-stained features has taken its toll, however, and my thoughts prioritise a concern along the lines of ‘let’s get paid and let’s get out of here’... A British Medical Association doctor appears in my line of vision and proceeds to inspect the injury. Over the years I have heard too many yarns of doctors subsumed in the hospitality on offer barely able to stand let alone focus on the intricate job of inserting stitches into someone’s (my) eyebrow. I fix into his gaze in the hope that a study of assiduous concentration will be reflected back. To my relief his focus is clear and he skilfully executes the job at hand. Six stitches later ‘doc’ advises me on the appropriate course of care and paternalistically bids me farewell...

Field-notes [amended] December 2000

What transpired was the ‘focal event’ (Brewer 2000) of a rather transient, although centuries old, sporting tradition regularly taking place in and around the city-landscapes of England. To be more precise, it was a ‘Gentleman’s Evening of Professional Boxing’ staged at the Moat House Hotel in Stoke-on-Trent. As the main event of this ‘show’ I had contested eight-rounds of professional boxing in front of an audience of a few hundred diners seated comfortably around tables draped in immaculate white linen. The fair on offer for the ‘punters’ seated ringside at £60 per head consisted of four evenly matched professional boxing contests, hospitality food, free flowing alcohol, the odd gambling flutter and fraternisation of a business nature. In between the tables waitresses kept a frantic pace clearing unwanted plates and filling empty glasses. Apart from the boxing, the schedule of entertainment included the performance of a stand-up comedian and an auction of sport memorabilia in support of various charities. Also in attendance was ex-professional boxer and now journalist and television pundit Steve Holdsworth on hand to ply two of his many entrepreneurial interests: the video production of the contest (priced at £20) and his role as a journalist for the long serving trade paper of British boxing, *The Boxing News*¹. Here is how he saw the fight’s progress:

Close shave for Nigel

PAT BROGAN'S Christmas show at the Moat House Hotel saw Nottingham 38-year-old NIGEL SENIOR claim the spoils in the eight-tuos main event with a hard-fought 77-76 points win over Luton's ALEX STEWART.

It could have gone either way but referee Paul Thomas of Derby, officiating throughout, favoured the aggression of Senior to the measured approach taken by Stewart (8st 12lbs).

Alex, having only his second pro fight, made a bright start, denying Senior (9st 11lb) a free shot. Nigel banged in a hard left hook in round three that staggered Stewart into a neutral corner but, more importantly, split open his right eye. The cut later required seven stitches and it is to cornerman John Cox's credit he managed to patch up the wound well enough for his man to continue.

There was never much in it as Senior nicked his fifth win in 13 comeback starts. In his previous incarnation he fought 49 times.

BOXING NEWS RINGSIDE

STEVE HOLDSWORTH
in STOKE
- December 7

In the show-opener, Nottingham first-timer JAMIE LOGAN (10st 12lbs) finished well but had too much ground to make up in his six-tuos against DAVID SMAILES (10st 11lbs) from Birstall near Huddersfield. Referee Thomas scored 59-57.

Smailes used the ring well and punched sporadically to prevent the taller Logan getting into a rhythm. Logan, unsure - like so many debutants - of his ability to handle the distance, realised he had something left in the tank and had the better of the last two rounds, but it was too late.

Debutant JOHN-PAUL RYAN from Northampton gave the Cox stable a welcome win when he outthusted PADDY FOLAN of Bradford over six-tuos for a 58-56 verdict.

Ryan, 29, started well and took Folan by surprise with his strength and determination. Paddy upped the pace in the second but Ryan, despite his left eye swelling, stayed with him. They staged a grand finale and Folan tried hard to claw back the deficit, but Ryan was well worth his win.

Both scaled 8st 12lbs.

While adjusting to the intrusion of six stitches inserted into my eyebrow I was happy to declare boxing as my sport of choice, one that I felt proud to be associated with. Accordingly, when contemplating Joyce Carol Oates's (1987) observation that, "Impoverished people prostitute themselves in ways available to them, and boxing offers an opportunity for men to make a living of a kind" (p. 34), I shook my head in disbelief at the comparison of boxing with prostitution – '*what is she on?*' Equally, I stubbornly rejected her assumption that boxing was somehow an affliction of societies divided by privilege and dispossession, wealth and poverty. Nonetheless, as I peered into the mirror wondering how visible my newly acquired scar tissue was likely to be it was difficult to claim a sense of fulfilment and empowerment from my most recent episode with the 'Noble Art'. The internal dialogue of the meanings, values, beliefs and, consequently, relationships and actions I and other boxers attached to our chosen athletic identities, when and how they came to fruition and the reasons why they did, took another turn. By fully participating in this cultural frame of lived experience I was, following Wacquant (2004 p. vii), conducting sociological analysis "...from the body, that is, deploying the body as a tool of inquiry and a vector of knowledge". As 'the boxer' conducting ethnographic research among 'other' boxing-practitioners I was thus able to experience first-hand, deliberate with and eventually throw light upon the 'lived' web of sensuous, symbolic and emotional dimensions defining the social processes through which I and other boxers constructed athletic identities. If a particularly strong sense of ambiguity resonates in my 'voice' through which I reflexively narrate the snap-shot 'ethnographic tale' (Van Maanen 1988) above it is because, much unlike other boxers, my journey into the universe of academically inspired deliberation, although at that phase of the research journey still in its infancy, was well underway.

1.1 Boxing and the Sociological Imagination

Having formatively introduced my identity as 'the boxer' and 'academic researcher', I advance Donnelly's (2003 p. 11) argument for the consciousness raising potential for those predisposed to developing a sociologically crafted imagination:

"Discovering the sociology of sport can also change your life – if you are an athlete, and/or student in sport studies or the sport sciences. It can help you understand the social forces that affect your involvement in sport and physical activity, and that knowledge may help you to exert more control over your participation"

Donnelly continues to discuss how the fundamentals for cultivating understanding in sociology articulate "...*agency theories and structure theories*" (p. 12 original emphasis). For sociologists the concepts of agency and structure offer analytical dimensions or concepts through which to interpret and evaluate the limits and possibilities of individuals' and groups ways and means of social existence. Agency tends to be associated with individualism, voluntarism and the free will to pursue any specific action; in this case the liberty of individuals to create meaning and act in accordance to that meaning when choosing to box. Structure articulates the material conditions, social institutions,

social relations and cultural traditions serving to shape and define the ways human action is determined externally to, and/or reciprocally with, individual will (see also Layder 1994; Gruneau 1999; Miles 2001; Beal 2002; McAnulla 2002). By examining the ways agency and structure define the possibilities and/or limits of social reality, and social-actors understanding of that reality, it is possible to evaluate with greater clarity how and why individuals subscribe meaningful capacities, value orientations and belief systems to their actions and/or likely outcomes of any perceived action.. Moreover, it is possible to more fully investigate the complex interrelations between free will and determinism and its primacy in shaping and defining the human condition - or the capacities individuals have to exercise control of their own destinies as opposed to the extent external and possibly unconscious social forces shape their existence.

The analytical standpoint of this study encapsulates this fundamental sociological concern - namely why and how do the agential and structural dimensions defining boxing-practitioners understandings and practice of boxing determine limits and possibilities in their development as human beings. In seeking to explore this issue, it is important to acknowledge the central importance of freewill in defining actors' understanding of and action within social life in democratic nation states such as England. Moreover, in the context of this study, the everyday cultural contexts through which amateur and professional boxers operate - or 'life-worlds' to borrow Alfred Schutz (1972) phenomenological terminology (see Hughson et al 2005) - can be thought of as arenas of social interaction and personal development through which boxers wilfully engage and are socialised into the norms and values of society (Horne et al 1999). Accordingly, the value of athletic participation in boxing, to boxers and society at large, may logically encompass Kidd's (1996 p. 84) exhortation for the potential benefits of sport:

“It cannot be said that sports alone provide such moments, but those of us who have experienced them would agree the formative potential is there: Much of our important knowledge about ourselves and others was gained through the challenges and reflection sports encourage”

As much as the challenges set by sport hold undoubted potential to develop practitioners physical, psychological and emotional capacities, it is important to take further note of Kidd (!996) when he argues, “...there is no guarantee that the provision of difficult challenges set through sporting competition is in itself educational in a humane, beneficial, or ethical way” (p. 84). When seeking to evaluate the 'self-actualising' (Cashmore 1982) properties of any given sporting practice, therefore, heed should be taken of the capacity of sporting competition to be developmental in a pathological as opposed to, or even as well as, a humanistic way. Moreover, it can reasonably be argued that this developmental quandary applies more so to the athletic practice of boxing than other sporting activities as 'hurt', injury and on occasion death can and does occur during its practice (see Sammons 1989; Jordan 1993; Wildes 1995; Sugden 1996; Parry 1998; Warburton 1998; Simon 2001; David

2006). Furthermore, in acknowledging that in dynamic ways human agency and social structure interrelate or ‘synthesise’ (Donnelly 2003) to determine the human condition, it is understood that the capacity to create and act upon meaningful orientations connotes the construct of power – individually the empowerment to self-actualise specific actions and relationally the power to negotiate a pathway through and/or validate one’s position within any given social context (see Sugden and Tomlinson 2002). A central concern of this study, therefore, is to fully investigate the multi-faceted, dynamic and sometimes contested dimensions of power defining boxing-practitioners cultural agency. Rather than uncritically relying on the ‘one-nation, one-life, one-sporting passion’ ideology extended by Government, therefore, the premise of this study is to fully acknowledge the power-laden social relations among and between groups of actors who wish to lay claim to the array of economic, symbolic and social sporting ‘profits’ through which they infer to be of significance. As shall be discussed below, boxing more so than any other sporting practice stirs controversy among the British public.

Boxing and Society thus far

Boxing is one of the oldest and enduringly most popular sports in Britain regularly consumed as ‘spectacular’ (Shipley 1989) entertainment by thousands sat ringside and millions by way of televised broadcast (see Brailsford 1988; Shipley 1989; Sugden 1996; Polley 1998). Boxing also represents a bona fide athletic practice for thousands of boys and men, and increasingly girls and women, throughout most cities and towns in contemporary England - be it as a keep-fit recreation, a more serious (i.e. competitive) sports practice and, for a minority, a means of livelihood. Also true, however, is that boxing attracts vehement opposition or, at the very least, bafflement among the British public (see Donnelly 1989; Jordan 1993; Wildes 1995; Sugden 1996; Parry 1998; Warburton 1998; Simon 2001; David 2006). Most notably, the British Medical Authority habitually call for the ban of boxing (see BMA 1996; David 2006). Hauser (1986) offers a concise estimation as to why boxing entices such a disdainful reaction:

“Boxing is ironically a marvellous showcase for the brain. Skilled fighting requires balance, coordination, speed, reflexes, power, instinct, discipline, memory, and creative thought. These assets enable a professional fighter to deliver blows with force exceeding one thousand pounds, blows that snap an opponent’s head back and twist it violently from side to side. The brain is a jellylike mass suspended inside the skull in cerebrospinal fluid. A hard blow shakes and shocks the brain, sending it careening off the inside of the skull. When it happens, blood vessels stretch and sometimes snap. In extreme cases, damaged brain tissue begins to swell. The human brain is a complex creation. Nothing does it more harm than punching the head in which it resides”.

Hauser (1986 p. 23)

Opponents of boxing insist the underpinning ethos of the sport legitimises ‘intent to harm principles’ that are quite distinct from other sporting activities (see Jordan 1993; Wildes 1995; Parry 1998; Warburton 1998; Simon 2001; David 2006). If, following Sugden (1996), it is correct to suggest “...the *raison d'être* of boxing exists on a continuum which can and often does lead to infirmity and death” (p. 174), then physical harm is clearly a product of boxing and therefore anathema to the ethos expected of and desired developmental capacities of athletic engagement in the civilised practice of sport. In accord with this standpoint, abolitionists view boxing as ‘obscenity’ (Lunberg 1984), ‘barbarity’ (Sammons 1989) and a ‘blood sport proper’ (Parry 1998).

Just as vociferously supporters of ‘The Noble Art of Boxing’ reject the suggestion that boxing constitutes a violent anomaly casting a dark shadow on the civilised status of society. Insisting such accusations are rather misinformed, ill-judged, prescriptive and discriminatory, supporters of boxing argue such propaganda serves to falsify the athletic ethos of boxing and accordingly demeans the cultural values and beliefs of the groups that practice and support it (Donnelly 1989). In particular, when comparing the incidence of injury and/or death in boxing to other contact and non-contact sports it is pointed out that boxers fare substantially better than many other sportsmen/women (Cantu 1995; Saintsbury 1999). Accordingly, the legions of boxing supporters world-wide claim boxing represents a codified, regulated, skill-orientated, consensual, equitable and thus ethical athletic challenge that should rightfully be understood as ‘the antithesis of violence’ (Saintsbury 1999), albeit one that is intensely contested and therefore has an unavoidable degree of risk.

Augmenting the public debate of boxing, a number of sociologically informed studies have offered richly detailed and insightfully theorised discussions as to the social significance of boxing (see Weinberg and Arond 1952; Furst 1971; Hare 1971; Sugden 1996; DeGaris 1997; Hargreaves 1997; Wacquant 2004; Woodward 2007). By far the most detailed studies are the recent ethnographies by John Sugden (1996) and Loic Wacquant (2004). Drawing upon extensive fieldwork among American, Cuban and Northern Irish amateur and professional boxers, both scholars concur that boxing is a social phenomenon culturally embedded in the sectors of society beleaguered by poverty. Accordingly, the human energy and expression serving as a constituent force by which boxing-practitioners are active in the making of their own history – their cultural praxis (see Hargreaves and McDonald 2002) - should be understood as a striving to resist, transcend or live through life-circumstances layered through by multiple indices of social injustice, material impoverishment and structural determinism. In turn, both authors are at pains to assert that powerful individuals controlling the professional boxing entertainment industry take advantage of boxers ‘needy’ disposition and ruthlessly exploit them. Although a few boxers are among the highest paid of all athletes, for the vast majority dreams of wealth and upward social mobility prove to be illusory. Further still, the intense

physicality of boxing competition and the corresponding character traits cultivated by boxers in the process of constructing 'gladiatorial' values and identities, often enforces a maladjusted retirement from the sport at a relatively young age. Shorn of the pizzazz of gladiatorial life and lacking adequate transferable work and social skills to prosper in normative society, boxers are commonly left in the same poverty stricken circumstances they sought to escape from. More so, the inevitable brutality associated with the professionalised code of boxing commonly renders ex-pugs physically damaged and emotionally disillusioned (Sugden 1996). In this way, over the life-course of his athletic career the boxer subjects himself to a form of self-violation by essentially selling his labour - or the lifetime of human agency encapsulated in perfecting a very particular working instrument, his athletic body (see Beamish and Ritchie 2006 p. 140) – for the amusement and/or profit of those on the safe side of the ring-ropes. Both Sugden (1996) and Wacquant (2004) argue that, in the final analysis, the commercial enterprise of boxing carries weighty moral baggage and is not dissimilar to another practice of the needy - prostitution. Further still, as Sugden (1996 p. 192) convincingly argues, to fully understand the social processes leading to exploitative submission it is necessary to grasp the means through which amateurism and professionalism in the practice of boxing are seamlessly interdependent:

“...ideologically and in terms of process, amateur boxing is bound to and, in many ways, is dependent upon professional boxing. Boxing is a social good because it keeps vulnerable and potentially delinquent youngsters off the streets and out of trouble. It also gives them an opportunity to make something of themselves and if they should make it all the way – become ‘a contender’ – almost by definition, they will have completed an interpersonal journey which will have transformed them from urchins to decent young men. If they should so choose they and those close to them may wish to interpret success in the ring as a triumph against the tyranny of political elites, social class and racial and ethnic prejudice. Whatever the rationale - and it is usually a complex blend of all the above – the net result is an example set which will stimulate the steady production of talent to the professional ring”.

The clarity of this argument should not be understated as Sugden is quite right to suggest that professional boxing is a commercial enterprise of global proportions and exudes remarkable symbolic power. Moreover, as a consequence of the all-pervasive representational power of the media glamorizing the triumphs of a select band of astronomically paid celebrity-like athletes, boxing appears one of the only arenas of true meritocracy for the downtrodden in society². Nonetheless, while acknowledging the excellent scholarship of previous studies, I argue that the athletic practice of 'boxing' has exclusively been theorised amidst the backdrop of impoverishment and social degeneration spawning gang violence, drug addiction and sectarian warfare typical of the localities in which the research took place. Consequently an ideal type of 'the boxer' has emerged: he (as opposed to a she) is an African-American or 'rough' European, youthfully naïve, poverty stricken, and generally, lacking options in a life circumscribed through poverty³. While it would be foolish to dismiss the consequences of impoverishment as a defining feature of the cultural practice of boxing whether in the US, Northern Ireland or England⁴, it is also apparent that, thus far, the literature has

reduced the scope through which boxing as an athletic experience and social practice has been evaluated. Moreover, little room remains to interpret the limits and possibilities associated with the practice of boxing further than the illusory and somewhat economically desperate (or ‘hungry’ to use the folksy terminology commonly associated with boxing) striving to achieve material betterment and upward social mobility. Accordingly, by way of departure of what has become a predominantly US centred typology of ‘the boxer’ and ‘boxing’, the premise of this research, at least formatively, is to offer an original vantage of examination through which to evaluate the developmental potential of boxing as an athletic experience and social practice in contemporary England.

Boxing from the ‘insider’ point of view

‘Richie Woodhall is from Telford, England and is the European Champion ... Roy Jones from Pensacola, Florida is the World International Boxing Federation Super - Middleweight Champion ... next they could fight for a World Title.

These men have stamina, power, speed, courage and guile - the stamina of the marathon runner, the speed of the sprinter, the agility of the acrobat, the power of the weightlifter and the courage of a soldier. No other sport demands the capacity for endurance with the ability to deliver explosive power. No sport asks more of the human body for the boxer is the ultimate athlete. At its best boxing is still the ‘Noble Art’. Intelligence, physique and fitness pitted man to man. A lifetime dedication is required to produce a human frame that can sustain and suffer for a period of thirty-six minutes in the ring.

After twenty years of boxing both amateur and professional the world title beckons Richie with its fame and fortune. No sport is so totally demanding, no sportsman closer to all round Peak Performance’.

Peak Performance (ITV Productions 1995)

The opening commentary of the televised series ‘Peak Performance’ offers a public frame of representation through which to, at least formatively, assess the athletic experience of boxing from a cultural standpoint of analysis. Nobility, art, intelligence, dedication, athletic virtuosity, supreme physicality, suffering and the prospect of fame and fortune are words interwoven to signify one time aspiring middleweight contender Richie Woodhall’s career trajectory towards the higher echelons of his sporting vocation. As the extract states, there can be few sports that demand as much of the athlete as does a twelve-round professional boxing contest. For elite professional boxers, like Richie Woodhall and Roy Jones, to have arrived at the point where they could ‘sustain and suffer for a period of thirty-six minutes in the ring’ in their bid to acquire personal, social and material rewards means they negotiated, and largely prevailed over, an array of rites of passage unique to the social universes through which the cultural production of boxing in England and the USA takes place. In order to fully understand boxing as it is perceived from ‘the athlete’s point of view’ in the English societal context that this study is based in, therefore, the two closely related yet nonetheless spatially and institutionally

autonomous codes of amateur and professional boxing in England need to be fully examined and understood on their own terms.

Amateur and professional boxing in England

Amateur and professional boxing can be considered as two versions of the same sport that nonetheless are organised from distinctive regulative authorities, both nationally and internationally. Further still, from an athletic/experiential standpoint, amateur and professional boxing have enough unique stylistic/technical differences to be considered as athletic codes on their own terms (see Shipley 1989; Saintsbury 2000; Dusenberry 1990; Cantu 1995; Sugden 1996; Wacquant 2004). Wacquant (2004 p. 52) discusses the experiential divide demarcating amateur and professional boxing in the USA:

“These two types of boxing from neighboring universes that, though they are tightly interdependent, are very distant from each other at the level of experience... Moreover, the rules that govern competition in these two divisions are so different that it would scarcely be an exaggeration to consider them two different sports. To put it simply, in amateur boxing the goal is to accumulate points by hitting one’s opponent as many times as possible in rapid flurries, and the referee enjoys ample latitude to stop the contest as soon as one of the protagonists appears to be in physical difficulty; among professionals, who do not wear protective headgear and whose gloves are notably smaller and lighter, the main objective is to “hurt” one’s opponent by landing heavy blows, and the battle continues until one of the fighters is no longer able to carry on”.

As much as Wacquant makes reference to the unique performance criteria demarcating amateur and professional boxing in the USA, he is also careful to concede the differences discussed are simplistically articulated. This is particularly the case when seeking to evaluate the similarities and differences between the cultural production of amateur and professional boxing in England. For the best part of the 20th century the Amateur Boxing Association of England (ABAE) has legislated against amateur boxers associating with their professional counterparts during training and competition. By following the International Olympic Committee’s (IOC) insistence that a ‘pure’ amateur athlete should not aspire to economic rewards (Sewart 1985; Holt 1989; Morgan 1993; Schneider and Butcher 1993; Smith and Porter 2000; Allison 2001) the ABAE enforced what ‘officially’ amounted to an amateur-professional boxing-practitioner apartheid, effectively demarcating the social organisation of amateur and professional boxing in England. In more recent times however, the requirements for Olympians to aspire to ever increasing standards of excellence yet remain recreational in spirit and substance led to widely held criticisms of the Olympic ideal as cloaked in a veil of ‘Shamateurism’⁵ (Sewart 1985). The contradictions inherent forced the IOC’s decision to banish rules disallowing financial reimbursement as an aid to developing athletic excellence in 1987, effectively doing away with “...the ideological hegemony of amateurism in sport” (Allison 2001 p. 51). Nonetheless, despite the virtual extinction of a ‘pure’ amateur ideal associated with the global stage of high performance sport, the spatial demarcation segregating the cultural production of amateur and professional boxing in England largely remains intact (see Shipley 1989).

Accordingly, even though in the present era 'am-pro' relations are less guarded, it is not unusual for many vastly experienced amateur boxers to have had little practical knowledge of their professional counterparts.

That said, as Sugden (1996) argues, virtually all professional boxers have been nurtured within the grass-roots provision of amateur boxing. Thus, by definition, the social organisation of amateur boxing competition serves as a 'farm system', to use Sugden's (1996) analogy, through which virtually all current and future professional boxing superstars have honed their athletic talents before seeking rewards in the professionalised arena of boxing. In this way, amateur boxers have for centuries 'graduated' from, and one might say symbolically 'gradated' to, the professional ranks. Concomitantly, for as long as boxing has had a history in England, it has been (re)represented to the masses via the idioms and 'spectacularised' (Shipley 1989) representations produced by the popular press, literary novels, televised representations and film dramatizations (see Shipley 1989; Sugden 1996). Accordingly, it is fair to suggest that as much as 'boxing' in its guise as a popular cultural phenomenon symbolically permeates the consciousness of the public at large, so it does boxing-practitioners. It is logical to infer, therefore, that social structures through which the cultural production of both amateur(ism) and professional(ism) boxing takes place inform the interpretative consciousness of boxing-practitioners. As yet no other study of boxing has fully examined the cultural contexts and concomitant social processes through which amateur and professional boxing-practitioners develop value orientations and construct athletic identities. Thus, the social dynamism through which boxing is culturally produced, reproduced and transformed and the developmental possibilities and limits realised by boxers as a consequence remain under-examined⁶.

1.2 Framework of the thesis

Research aims

The aims guiding this study of amateur and professional boxing in England are as follows:

1. To investigate the social dynamic(s) through which amateur and professional boxing is experienced in England and to assess the meanings and values of the activity and its associated social world for those who participate in either code

□ The ethnographic empiricism of this study focuses on the overlapping processes contributing to boxers 'socialization into', 'cultural production of' and 'career progression through' (see Donnelly 2000) the segregated life-worlds of amateur and professional boxing in England. To this extent, amateur and professional boxers interpretative frameworks, actions and constructed athletic identities are examined and understood on their own terms.

2. To explore why and how amateurism and professionalism in the athletic practice of boxing synthesise to contribute to the (re)production of, and transformation in, boxing-practitioners interpretative frameworks and actions.

□ By examining why and how amateurism and professionalism in the practice of boxing differentiate, yet also, synthesise to define (and transform) boxers interpretative frameworks, this study aims to contribute an original understanding to the role of boxing as an agent for personal and social change within English society.

A synthesised research agenda

The complex task for examining the web of sensual, symbolic and emotional 'lived' dimensions through which boxing-practitioners define their beliefs, athletic identities and actions follows a critical cultural studies ethnographic agenda (Donnelly 2000; Beal 2002; Hargreaves and McDonald 2002; Wheaton 2002). Giulianotti (2005 p. 60) articulates the elements of analysis guiding critical cultural studies, or what he terms a 'structured polyphonic contextualist' approach to studying social phenomena such as boxing:

"The structured elements concern the social-actors' circumstances, in particular their historical, structural and geographical location; their life-chances; and their material and symbolic resources, including the sources of, and dominant meanings attached to, these resources. The polyphonic aspects of research should capture the open-endedness of social action and cultural relations within this context and the reflective, dialogical manner in which these actors make sense of their immediate and structural circumstances"

According to Giulianotti (2005), critical cultural studies research agendas interweave grounded empiricism of social-actors everyday realities with, "...critical engagement with theory *selectively* amending, introducing and discarding theories as context necessitates" (p. 60 original emphasis). The application of theory in this way, or "theory-method" (ibid), encourages a fully contextualised understanding of culture to emerge from the grounded everyday experiences and interpretative capacities of the individuals/groups studied. In order to adequately examine and communicate the 'lived' realities experienced by the boxers in this study, or fully capture the "...external factors and the internal sensations that intermingle to make the boxer's world" (Wacquant 2004 p. 7), a number of key analytical, interpretative and representational dimensions have been implemented.

The first of these dimensions is to emphasise methodological reflexivity and that the researcher is a part of the social world being studied (see Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Wheaton a 1997; Brewer 2000; Sparkes 2002). By fully recognising the methodologically and theoretically embroiled reality of the research journey it is possible to facilitate critical reflection upon the processes enabling 'knowing' within and beyond the fields of inquiry, yet also view the research process itself as a learning experience (see Fleming 1992). Thus, following Wheaton (1997; 2002), rather than 'writing about' the field of inquiry I account for my evolving authorial presence as 'the boxer' and 'the researcher' during the research journey as a constituent force shaping, defining and ultimately informing the final production of knowledge represented. Consequently I am, as 'the boxer' and 'the researcher', "...written into, and not out of, the text" (Sparkes 2002 p. 17).

The second dimension implemented is the blending of historiography, autobiography, ethnographic thick description, polyphonic interpretation and theoretical analysis. Following Sugden and Tomlinson (2002 p. 10), gaining a critical sense of how history shapes and defines the present allows for a more intricate and critically informed understanding of contemporary social phenomena to emerge:

"...it is vital to give research into contemporary phenomena a dynamic historical dimension – to identify and connect key institutional developments and critical moments of individual and collective action that underpin the area of social interaction under scrutiny, help to frame its contemporary form and suggest its legacy"

By teasing out the historical processes informing the field under scrutiny, the researcher is better able to develop what C. Wright Mills (1959) termed the 'sociological imagination', or the ability to "...grasp history and biography, and the relations between the two in society" (p. 12). By cultivating a sociological imagination it is possible to develop a comparative rationale to guide the analysis and interpretation of any given social phenomena and 'others' constructed understandings of it. Moreover, far from relying on a disengaged theoretically informed 'abstracted empiricism' (Mills 1959) to underpin the production of knowledge, it is important to stress that data collection, analysis,

interpretation and critical evaluation for this research was mediated through dialogue with existing literature. Therefore, I developed critical awareness of both the field and existing theorisation of the social significance of boxing as a consequence of the iterative processes called upon by conducting this ethnography as a fully participating boxing insider. Over time and in phases, concepts that formed the building blocks of theory were generated so as to discover theory from data, or as was more the case, to mesh theorising with data collection and offer retrospective theorisation (see Bryman & Burgess 1994; Miles & Huberman 1994; Wheaton 1997; Silk 2005). As such, over the sustained period of ethnographic submersion a more contextualised sociological picture emerged.

Finally, the rhetorical conventions chosen to portray the themes and issues emergent from the field aim to articulate and evoke the fully contextualised nature of the lived experiences through which amateur and professional boxing-practitioners construct athletic identities and actions. As Richardson (2000a) states, writing is a process of discovery, understanding and analysis (see also Sparkes 2002). Van Maanen (1998 p. 3) further argues that the representation of culture in ethnographic texts constitutes an interpretative process created by *both* the author and the reader:

A culture is expressed (or constituted) only by the actions and words of its members and must be interpreted by, not given to, a fieldworker. To portray culture requires the fieldworker to hear, to see [and to feel] and...to write of what was presumably witnessed and understood during a stay in the field. Culture is not itself visible, but is made visible only through its representation.

As is fully discussed in chapter 2 of this thesis, in a bid to fully contextualise my own and other research subjects reflexive standpoints of cultural reality, and also engage the readers cultural understanding, two narrative conventions have been implemented to fully and adequately represent the fields analysed: ‘the confessional’ and ‘the impressionist tale’ (Van Maanen 1998; Sparkes 2002; Wheaton 2002).

Outline of chapters

Chapter 2 – contextualises the study in relation to its theoretical and methodological framework. Section 2.1 discusses the theoretical relevance of the broad conceptual bases of phenomenology, symbolic interactionism and cultural studies underpinning the interpretative stance of this study. Section 2.2 discusses the rationale for the ethnographic approach, with particular attention given to how my reflexivity as boxing insider and (emerging) academic researcher contributed to the production of knowledge presented in this research.

Chapter 3 - examines the historical development of boxing in England, and in particular, the social processes contributing to the emergence of amateurism and professionalism in the practice of boxing. By gaining a historically situated appreciation of both forms of boxing in this way, it is possible to

gain a comparative and contextualised understanding of the cultural dimensions through which present day social actors experience and interpret the social practices of amateur and professional boxing.

Chapter 4 – discusses the process of and findings generated from the five year ‘insider’ ethnographic journey among amateur and professional boxing-practitioners in England. Section 4.1 articulates a ‘confessional’ (Sparkes 2002) account of the research journey discussing in detail the field work phases and ‘sense assembly procedures’ (Brewer 2000) through which collection, analysis, interpretation and representation of the data developed (or not) in consequence with my evolving reflexivity as ‘the boxer’ and ‘academic researcher’.

Section 4.2 presents the ‘impressionist tale’ (Van Maanen 1988) of the five year ethnography. The analytical schema guiding the ethnographic processes of data collection, qualitative description, analysis and interpretation focuses on the overlapping themes of ‘socialization into’, ‘cultural production within’ and ‘career progression through’ (Donnelly 2000) the social/athletic life-worlds patronised by amateur and professional boxers in Luton and London.

Chapter 5 – presents the final discussion of why and how amateurism and professionalism in the practice of boxing contributes to the production, reproduction and transformation of amateur and professional boxers’ interpretative frameworks, athletic identities and actions. The processes through which boxers live-out their athletic experiences and social relationships have been contextualised in relation to the ‘liquid’ (Bauman 1998) socio-cultural fabric of contemporary society, characterised by Jarvie (2006 p. 327) as a “...rapidly privatised, individualised and globalised world...dominated by market-mediated consumer choice and the power of individualism”. From this theoretical vantage of examination the limits and possibilities of athletic engagement in and development through the athletic experience and social practice of amateur and professional boxing have been critically evaluated.

Introducing ‘the boxer’

Before outlining the theoretical and methodological rationale underpinning the knowledge claims of this research (see chapter 2), it is necessary to expose my interpretative capacities as someone who has invested many years as mostly an amateur and briefly a professional boxer. The following section introduces an account of my life-history as I feel it contributed to, that in turn was shaped and defined by, my experiences in and through boxing. The inclusion of this brief and (at this stage) descriptive autobiographical account is central to the application of methodological reflexivity by which the first

task is to situate myself within the conception of this research project and the context of analysis thereafter (see chapter 2 for full methodological discussion).

I was born in Athens, Greece, (of dual Greek/English parentage) and lived there for the first ten years of my life before immigrating to the UK. Upon arriving on English shores and settling in the town of Grantham in Lincolnshire I was eager to pursue my interest in football, athletics and table-tennis I had cultivated while growing up in Athens. Mightily impressed by what seemed like an abundance of lush football pitches and purposively built sport centres, ample in comparison to the rather more arid and heavily crowded landscape of seaside Athens, I vividly recall my eagerness to take advantage of them. It took me no time to become an active member of football, judo, athletic and tennis clubs all outside an equally active sport participation in the school curriculum (Central Comprehensive). At the same time as I was representing school and town in football and athletics my brother, elder by five years, became submerged in the rituals, trials and tribulations of amateur boxing practiced at a gymnasium⁷ situated in close proximity to our neighbourhood. Curious at the mysterious appeal boxing held for my brother and inspired by Sylvester Stallone's epic Hollywood blockbusters 'Rocky', I persuaded my best friend to tag along one evening and join in the training sessions taking place at the premises of Aveling Barfords, a prominent industrial employer in Grantham at the time. Upon entering the gymnasium premises I can still recall having my senses engulfed by the vivid noise and smell emanating from the actions of this strange milieu of devotees working out before me. In particular, I remember being drawn to the no-nonsense seriousness exhibited by the boxers before me as they skipped, punched, grunted and sweated in self-absorbed concentration. Having changed into my sports kit I was soon trying my best to mimic the execution of physical mastery and psychic energy exhibited by those around me. Before long, under the supervision of 'Coach-Benny' (a pseudonym), I was instructed to don a somewhat tatty and pungent pair of boxing gloves and take my place in the boxing ring taking a centre stage in the gymnasium. In the opposite corner was my best friend having been issued with the same instructions. Fidgeting nervously and grinning sheepishly at each other with the instructions to '*box don't have a scrap*' informing our animated consciousness we moved close to one another and began swapping punches. Although time, movement, space and thought seemed to merge into an unfathomable and uncoordinated blur, as if in forward rewind, I was surprised that my punches found their mark without too much difficulty. Unfortunately, for my spar partner and best friend at that time, the precision of my punches became too much for him and he burst into tears. Paternalistically escorted out of the ring we were both instructed to finish our workout and think about how we could improve for next week's training sessions. I returned, but my best friend didn't. Having decided to enter the fold, it was soon when my interest in other sports, in particularly my passion for football, faded and boxing became my chosen sport.

I quickly developed the ring craft necessary to compete in organised tournaments staged in working-men's clubs, community halls, leisure centres and night-clubs throughout the East Midlands during the Thatcher years. I hold vivid memories as a schoolboy boxer climbing into the boxing ring in packed venues, steeling my resolve at having entered that lonely divide separating fighter and audience and peering through a haze of cigar smoke at opponents wondering how good they were likely to be. At the sound of the bell my anxiety would evaporate as the instinctual experience of competing in a boxing ring subsumed every sinew of my senses. With audiences eager to be enthralled by the flow of action unfolding before them, the noise level inside these cramped arenas erupted into roars of approval when a well-supported opponent landed cleanly on any part of my anatomy. Equally, as I frustrated my adversary by moving in and out of striking distance with quick and accurate flurried punches, many a time covering his face with his own nose bleed, I would draw confidence from the support my skills drew from the less partisan spectators in the arena. After the frantic and exhausting three rounds of two minutes 'bout' of boxing-action ended, a sense of almost overwhelming fellowship between myself and my opponent would take over and we would both instinctively embrace each other. Upon being declared a winner or loser⁸, the exit from the ring would often be accompanied by heart-felt accolades from total strangers, "*thee was cracking in there son...sharp as a razor...a beautiful little boxer and you had to be because he is a right hard banger...a right hard'n...if you'd have let'im*". Undeniably I often felt a sense of ambivalence toward the entirety of this experience; be it the qualms generated by pre-contest nerves at the uncertainty of the outcome, the possibility of public and painful humiliation etched in the back of my mind, the ambience emanating from elements in the audience who pints of beer in hand sought to be entertained by "*a good scrap with plenty of shots getting in*". If and to what extent similar thoughts were shared among other boxers and in which incarnations is a question that begs to be considered.

For me, the continuum of boxing experiences saw progression through the various grass-roots club tournaments, eventually competing in the schoolboy and junior national 'Championships' competitions. A reasonable success rate allowed me to represent the Midland Counties against national and international opposition in venues such as the National Exhibition Centre in Birmingham. My athletic career culminated in a Young England 'box-off', of which my opponent won providing him with a place on the under-19 National squad. At the conclusion of that year's competitive season I, like many young men in a variety of sports, was in a state of transition and flux. Post further education possibilities merged with a spiralling social calendar and all its attractions serving to compromise the increasing demands of dedication required of an upcoming senior amateur boxer contemplating national honours. As an eighteen year-old becoming versed in the same night time attractions on offer at my local town centre as my peers, the disciplines of boxing began to represent the opposite end of the rather more carefree and decadent youthful indulgence. This was an era that, from the lens of my early adulthood (or late adolescence), was framed by a popular cultural

aesthetic epitomised by the decline of football ‘casuals’ and the rise of the rather more decadent, Ecstasy fuelled, ‘summer of love’ club/rave subculture. Quick to identify with the promise of free-living abandonment, I followed many of my peers and duly indulged during long summers in select Mediterranean islands. Upon returning to the rather more mundane and sombre wintertime realities promised by life ‘back home’, the lack of fulfilling employment locally and the opportunity of higher education study in the seaside town of Bournemouth saw me drift away from the rigours of competitive boxing for a period of seven years. In that time life took me far and wide and I took my boxing with me (as a recreational, physical fitness and sociable feature of my identity). Periodic stints of casual labour and backpacking across the world saw me alternate experiences of the beach-bum variety, tending cattle on a Kibbutz in Israel, working on farms and building sites in Australia and trekking the jungles of Thailand and Indonesia with stints of training in a variety of boxing gymnasiums in European, Thai, Israeli and Australian urban landscapes. On arriving back in the UK and full of a desire to ‘get on’, I decided to pursue my interest in sport by gaining an academic qualification in it. The next port of call was the University of Luton to study a BA degree in Sport and Fitness Studies.

As an undergraduate student I was instantly fascinated by the academic discipline of sport sociology. In particular, I developed a vivid interest in the ‘boxing debate’ and the multitude of intertwined issues of exploitation, identity, violence and the social meanings of sport to name but a few. Upon being introduced to the impending array of vantage points through which boxing as a cultural phenomenon was to be debated during lectures and seminars, I recall been drawn into fiery discussions regarding the civilised status of boxing. Feeling taken aback at the opposition and disdain of some of my fellow students held of my sport, I shook my head in dismay when they reasoned “*you cannot call two men beating each other up a sport. It is simply barbaric and stupid, a blood-sport...*” I wondered how on earth they could not see that boxing was the one sport all others aspired to be! I reasoned that it was because they failed to appreciate that the ‘hand-eye-time-distance’ co-ordination required emulating those on the television screens was a lifetime’s work, in fact an art form that could only possibly be admired. Of course, as much as I forcefully aired my opinions there was no consensus to be found. Slightly miffed I chose to dismiss the view of those opposing boxing as of the pompous conservatism of the ‘middle-Englander’ variety and nonchalantly shrugged my shoulders incredulous at their ignorance. Nonetheless, upon reflection I was moved to contemplate both the social profile of my adopted sport and my own interest in it. In particular, I became fascinated by the task of disengaging my own bias as a practitioner and fan of boxing in an attempt to come to terms with the criticisms commonly levelled at boxing, and therefore by extension, myself. That said, academically informed contemplation of this nature did not douse my ambition at making a ‘comeback’ as a competitive amateur boxer. Submitting to the rituals of early morning runs and nightly gym workouts at my local amateur boxing club, I ventured to compete in the yearly Amateur Boxing Association of England

senior championships. In addition, between studying and training, I supplemented my income by working nightshifts at the local post office. Despite this rather full schedule I felt my academic progress was relatively unproblematic, as sport-related theory merged with athletic and general life experience allowing me to complement each in a symbiotic learning curve. My renewed involvement in boxing was of course recreational, although life as an ‘open’ class amateur boxer⁹ was often demanding and during the competitive season a serious affair. The ultimate accolade in amateur boxing gradates toward international representation and although aspiring towards the mix of those to be chosen to wear that prized England vest (in my own mind at least) the opportunity never materialised. At an unusually mature age for an amateur boxer¹⁰, the dawning of retirement imposes the dilemma that years of physical, psychological and emotional investment, a fitness-for-performance lifestyle and all the focus, excitement and aspiration that it brings, will come to an abrupt end. The potentiality of this oncoming void in my life focused my attentions on the possibility of ‘*having a go*’ at professional boxing. The opportunity did materialise although unexpectedly in the form of a dual consideration: fulfilling the quest of experiencing ‘*pro*’ boxing first hand and simultaneously critically analysing both it (my personal quest) and the interpretative capacities and actions of other practitioners of the amateur and professional worlds of boxing I was an integral part of.

ENDNOTES

¹ *The Boxing News* is the trade paper of the British boxing fraternity and has been in circulation since 1909. It is religiously purchased every Friday by practitioners and boxing aficionados alike.

² Mike Tyson, the most iconic figure in the recent history of boxing, has reportedly earned between \$400-500 million since his professional debut in 1986 (Cashmore 2005)

³ This frame of thought is supported by, or is an extension of, earlier sociological studies that emphasise the poverty and harsh physical environment of the US ghetto as central components framing the human condition to become ‘the hungry fighter’ (see Weinberg and Arond, 1952; Furst, 1971; Hare, 1971; Sammons 1989).

⁴ I make explicit reference to indices of (relative) material impoverishment framing my own autobiographical recollections

⁵ ‘Shamateurism’ is defined by Sewart (1985 p. 78) or, “...hypocrisy, violations of antitrust, involuntary servitude, fraud, unenforceable contract, unfair competition, restraint of trade laws, and generally as a code that arbitrarily enforces rules contrary to human rights”.

⁶ Sugden (1996) has made extensive reference to the socialisation processes embedded in the boxing subculture serving to “farm” (pp. 62-88) amateur boxers into a professional orientation. His formative vantage of examination however relies on data collected among US boxers patronising a gymnasium with a heavily ingrained occupational ethos (see Sugden 1987). Wacquant (2004) ventured to compete in one amateur boxing contest much as a finale to his observant-participant study among US professional boxers. Nonetheless, he does not compare and contrast his experience of amateur boxing competition with the professional context of boxing he based his findings on.

⁷ Grantham Amateur Boxing Club

⁸ While boxing for Grantham Amateur Boxing Club I competed in twenty-eight contests and was declared winner on twenty-five occasions.

⁹ Senior amateur boxers are classed as ‘Novice’, ‘Intermediate’ and ‘Open’ in accordance with the number of bouts competed in and more importantly level of success attained. An ‘Open’ class boxer must have won an Area title and therefore is eligible to compete against international calibre opposition.

¹⁰ I was nearing my 30th birthday at the time

Chapter 2 – Methodology

2.1 Contextualising the research

As I have already indicated, in order to achieve the requisite focus to critically evaluate the web of ‘lived’ cultural dimensions fabricating amateur and professional boxers interpretative consciousness and constructed athletic identities and actions, this study draws on the interpretative tradition of sociology. The interpretive stance (or hermeneutics) draws upon a particular philosophical worldview of the nature of social reality and/or society (ontology) and the nature of knowledge (epistemology) and thus what is accepted as knowledge (see Brewer 2000 pp. 28-30). The following brief discussion of the philosophical underpinnings of the interpretive standpoint of social analysis helps contextualise more fully the methodological approach for this study.

Research paradigm

Two paradigms, or models, within the social sciences uphold distinctive philosophical and theoretical frameworks, or methodological standpoints, to validate different sorts of research practices and data collection techniques (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Brewer 2000; Denzin and Lincoln 2003). The two paradigms of social research are the natural science model based on positivism and the humanistic model based on naturalism. The interpretive agenda of this study is premised upon the humanistic model of social research and therefore upholds the ontological and epistemological stance of naturalism. Whereas the positivistic model of social research upholds there is a ‘real world out there’ beyond individual consciousness and thus objective knowledge can be rendered comprehensible by numerical measurement and/or deductive hypotheses, the interpretative paradigm pre-supposes that social reality is always mediated by human interpretation, including the researcher’s (Beal 2002). Therefore, as Brewer (2000 p. 34) articulates, central to naturalism is the argument that:

“...human beings and social behaviour are different from the behaviour of physical and inanimate objects. People are meaning endowing, in that they have the capacity to interpret and construct their social world and setting rather than responding in a simplistic and automatic way to any particular stimuli. Moreover, people are discursive, in that they have the capacity for language and the linguistic formulation of their ideas, and possess sufficient knowledge about discourse in order to articulate their meanings. Society, thus, is seen as either wholly or partially constructed and reconstructed on the basis of interpretative processes”

Naturalism’s commitment to the human capacity to meaningfully interpret social life thus rejects positivistic views of science reliant on the belief that a ‘real world’ is out there and therefore, “...objective knowledge is possible, for there is a fixed and unchanging reality

which research can accurately access” (Brewer 2000 p. 30). Rather, the humanistic paradigm of social research, by focusing on individuals and groups interpretative capacities and concomitant abilities to pursue their interests, acknowledges the dynamic nature of social reality. More succinctly, by stressing the human capacity for meaningfully endowed action, interpretative social research retains the position that, at least partially, human beings are active agents in the construction of their social worlds in as much as they possess the capacity to create meaning and act according to that meaning (Beal 2002). The imperative for interpretative social research is that it stresses fidelity to the social phenomena under study. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1995 p. 7) point out, “A key element of naturalism is the demand that the social researcher should adopt an attitude of ‘respect’ or ‘appreciation’ towards the social world”. Nonetheless, interpretative social researchers need also acknowledge that there are always limits imposed upon social actors’ interpretative agency, as Brewer (2000 p. 34) argues:

“People live in material and bounded structures and locations, and these contexts shape their interpretative processes, so that we are not free to define the social world as if we existed as islands, each one inhabited by ourselves alone. All social life is partially interdependent on the concrete situations and structures in which it exists, so ‘society’ is not a complete invention (or reinvention) every time”.

Clearly there is an inherent complexity to the study of social life from an interpretative standpoint. Moreover, it need be acknowledged that, more than ever in the contemporary era of global social transformation and cultural flux, the relations through which social actors construct interpretative frameworks contributes to multiple, power-laden, dynamic and often contested dimensions of understanding and being within any society. In order to understand the “...existence of such variations in cultural patterns across and within societies” (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995 p. 9), the broad methodological agenda of this study fuses three conceptual bases, phenomenology, symbolic interactionism and cultural studies with what is widely acknowledged as the method of research most suited to unearthing qualitative data capable of capturing the cultural richness and complexity of social life - ethnography (Van Maanen 1988; Beal 2002; Sugden and Tomlinson 2002; Denzin and Lincoln 2003; Wacquant 2004).

2.2 Theoretical underpinnings

Boxing is a source of fascination for many literati (see Schulberg 1947; Mailer 1975; Oates 1987), journalists (see Hauser 1986; Matthews 2001; Mitchell 2001), academics (see Weinberg and Arond, 1952; Furst, 1971; Hare, 1971; Sammons 1989; Sugden 1996; DeGaris 1997; Parry 1998; Wacquant 2004; Woodward 2007) and the general public, who at times watch professional boxing in their millions or alternatively vehemently denounce the sport’s

barbarity. It is also an athletic experience and social practice for up to two million amateur boxers and tens of thousands of officially registered professional boxers globally (Saintsbury 2000). As a feature of everyday life, therefore, boxing is a signifying cultural phenomenon through which its social meaning is one way that individuals make sense of themselves and their immediate life-circumstances (Geertz 1993; Hall 1997).

Symbolic interactionism as an approach to understanding social life is fundamentally concerned with the social processes through which humans symbolically create, communicate and validate their social identities and (preferred or otherwise) everyday practices and relations (Layder 1994; May 1996; Beal 2002, Donnelly 2002). The application of symbolic interactionism in the analysis of social life is articulated concisely by Beal (2002):

“Symbolic interactionism tends to locate the foundation of human culture, the symbolic world, in small group interaction. Culture is viewed as a *process*, constantly being built ‘from the ground up’ as opposed to being imposed ‘from above’ as a coercive social structure... (p. 354) Symbolic interactionism assumes that symbols are the very foundation of our social reality...humans have the capability as reflective agents to create and manipulate symbols which, in turn, enables us to change our identities and social worlds. Symbolic interactionism is, in brief, a perspective that grants humans, irrespective to their social relations, a significant amount of power in the creation of social ‘realities’ (p. 356)”.

The symbolic interactionist approach to the study of social life acknowledges that the practices and relations through which individuals and groups interpret and construct their realities become validated through ritualistic interactions among and in relation to ‘significant others’ and more indirectly ‘generalised others’ in what constitutes their immediate everyday ‘interaction order’ (see Goffman 1967; May 1996; Donnelly 2002). Moreover, as Turner (1982 p. 9) argues, symbolic interactions among groups and between individuals constitute power-laden dimensions:

“This power inheres not only in the shared lexicons and grammars of spoken and written languages, but also in the artful or poetic individual crafting of speech through persuasive tropes: metaphors, metonyms, oxymora, “wise words” (a Western Apache speech-mode), and many more. Nor is communication through symbols limited to words. Each culture, each person within it, uses the entire sensory repertoire to convey messages: manual gesticulations, facial expressions, bodily postures...at the individualized level; stylized gestures, dance patterns, prescribed silences, synchronized movements such as marching, the moves and “plays” of games, sports, and rituals, at the cultural level”.

A detailed comprehension of boxers’ meaning endowing social rituals, practices, stories and relations is thus fundamental when seeking to understand *how* boxing signifies value as a ‘lived’ everyday cultural practice. Furthermore, key to understanding the signifying power of boxing as a routine cultural practice is to comprehend the phenomenological dimensions through which boxers “...see, perceive, understand, experience, make sense of, respond to,

emotionally feel about and engage” (Hughson et al 2005 p. 138) with the athletic experience of boxing in and through social context. As May (1996 p. 77) argues, cultural practices are as symbolically meaningful via non-verbalised behaviour and inference as they are via oral articulation:

“Meanings are then attributed to both verbal and non-verbal behaviour. The body, for example, may be mobilized to create an impression to significant others, whilst also enabling a space, or...‘egocentric territoriality’, to be produced by an individual who draws upon the cultural resources at their disposal”.

In acknowledging that verbalised non-verbalised processes of symbolic communication fabricates the social (re)production of cultural phenomena such as boxing (and vice-versa), the central issue of social-power brings to the fore the relational influences exerted by the meanings, values, beliefs and expectations articulated by significant others and generalised others. Moreover, it is understood that the interpretative capacities of amateur and professional boxers are directly/indirectly and consciously/unconsciously shaped, defined and transformed through their identities as social actors. From this standpoint, the life-world context through which boxing-practitioners ‘articulate’ (Storey 1998) or ‘read’ (Beal 2002) the cultural practice of boxing is concomitant of the macro relations of power shaping and defining British actors’ contemporary life-circumstances.

As has been discussed in the previous chapter, sport and boxing in particular is a multi-faceted and often contested cultural phenomenon. This study, therefore, adopts a critical cultural studies approach to examine why and how the social practice of amateur and professional boxing is perceived as ‘logical’, ‘empowering’ or else. Beal (2002 p. 356) defines the cultural studies approach to the study of sport as:

“...cultural studies is an interdisciplinary approach to analysing culture, especially the struggle over meanings which occurs in all cultural practices. Central to cultural studies is investigating relations of power, and how those relations are contested in the everyday lives of people”.

The analysis of the relationships between personal/group micro and macro modalities of social power is a central concern when seeking to understand the struggle to articulate meaning and value to boxing as an athletic experience. Moreover, the focus on examining boxing-practitioners constructed athletic identities and actions brings to the fore the two distinctive yet, nonetheless, relational social contexts, discourses and practices through which the cultural (re)production of amateurism and professionalism in English boxing occurs. Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of ‘field’ is useful when seeking to examine the nexus of power relations constituent of, and negotiated/contested within, definitive social worlds or contexts through which the cultural (re)production of amateur and professional boxing in England takes place:

“A cultural field can be defined as a series of institutions, rules, rituals, conventions, categories, designations and appointments which constitute an objective hierarchy, and which produce and authorise certain discourses and activities. But a field is also constituted by, or out of, the conflict which is involved when groups or individuals attempt to determine what constitutes capital within that field and how that capital is to be distributed”

Webb et al (2002 p. x-xi)

By seeking to examine the social processes through which discourses and practices are created and struggled over within the cultural fields of amateur and professional boxing, the importance and centrality of symbolic empowerment to this research agenda is brought to the fore. Specifically, the power to encourage or prioritise “...specific behaviour and limit what is perceived as possible behaviour” (Beal 2002 p. 357), and concomitantly the agency to accept or contest such power is seen as pivotal to fully understanding how and why boxing-practitioners construct interpretative frameworks, athletic identities and actions. Correspondingly, it need be acknowledged that boxing constitutes a site where the personal and the public, in terms of both ‘fantasy and reality’ (Woodward 2007), are inextricably enmeshed. As Woodward (2007) argues in her study of boxing, masculinity and identity, “Public stories, symbolic representations, unconscious desires and anxieties and embodied experience and iterative practices are all constitutive of identity” (p. 2).

There can be few cultural practices like boxing (at least those that are deemed legal) in society through which routine everyday practices and relations, the dramatic enactment of antagonistic and inherently dangerous sportive competition, and spectacularised media representation takes place. The manifestly individualistic athletic practice of boxing is, therefore, an endeavour that is displayed through, and accordingly is constituent of, the public domain. Accordingly, it can be inferred that the athletic challenge of boxing signifies a medium of enactment where boxers, significant others and more abstractly fans (or even detractors of boxing) symbolically construct and validate their cultural beliefs/identities and, in doing so, accept or contest the beliefs/identities of ‘others’. In order to investigate, interpret and critically evaluate the agency-structure synthesis through which amateur and professional boxing-practitioners construct interpretative frameworks, athletic identities and actions the analytical concept of ‘performativity’ has been implemented throughout this research (see Butler 1990; Birrell and Donnelly 2004; Woodward 2007).

For Butler (1990) performativity can be understood as the consciously/unconsciously enacted synthesis of densely woven webs of social relations, practices and speech-acts that render one’s interpretative capacities, social identity (specifically gender) and actions intelligible, believable and acceptable. That is, the behavioural styles of ‘doing’ amateur and professional

boxing (whether from the boxers, significant others, fans, journalists or detractors vantage of interpretation) are considered to be a conscious/unconscious manifestation of one's corporeal, social and symbolic being. From this standpoint of analysis, the fully participating 'insider-researcher' can utilise the concept of performativity as a sensitizing means to investigate, unlock and elucidate cultural practices such as boxing by reflexively embodying and, ultimately, critically evaluating the synthesis of agency and structure through which meanings are (re)produced in and through social context

In order to substantiate the conceptual and theoretical focus of this research it is paramount to demonstrate the epistemological orientation guiding the production of knowledge presented to the reader. In other words, it is necessary to demonstrate the nature of the knowledge claims presented, how knowledge is produced and the methodological validity for gaining access to such claims. One qualitative data collection method in particular is widely recognised as being most suited for capturing the cultural complexities inherent of social life – ethnography (Van Maanen 1988; Sugden and Tomlinson 2002; Denzin and Lincoln 2003).

2.3 The ethnographic approach

The origins of ethnography as a qualitative research method are rooted in the anthropological traditions of 19th century scholars, where ethnography was a descriptive account of a non-Western community or culture. Since the early 20th century ethnographic fieldwork was adopted by Western sociologists. In particular, the 'Chicago School' of urban sociologists examined the multitude of diverse micro-communities, subcultures or sub worlds forming in the industrialised landscape of Chicago during the 1930s to 1950s era of mass immigration. Their work had a seminal influence on the genre of ethnography prominent to this day (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). In recent times ethnographic analyses of a multitude of social groups and their cultural practices have been conducted in settings throughout the world (Brewer 2000; Donnelly 2000). Hammersley and Atkinson (1995 p 1) offer a 'liberal' definition of ethnographic method thus:

“We see the term as referring primarily to a particular method or set of methods. In its most characteristic form it involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research”

Participant observation is the cornerstone of ethnographic analysis whereby the researcher seeks to develop a grounded understanding of a given cultural group from the perspective of the participants scrutinized (Silk 2005). The role of the ethnographer is to gain penetrative access among the cultural group(s) studied by establishing rapport among the subjects

analysed and empathy for their way of life pursued. Through the application of any number of data collection techniques such as observation, participation, in-depth interviews, video recording and documentary analysis, the researcher is able to explore a given cultural group's meanings invested in a particular social context and through specific social phenomena from the 'inside'. Ethnography is thus exploratory in nature and the process of 'insider' knowing, that is, gaining an empathetic and detailed understanding of the cultural minutia defining how and why people behave the way they do in natural settings, and thereafter making explicit their taken for granted assumptions (Wheaton 1997), is relatively unstructured as it emerges (gradually) from prolonged submersion in the field. As Sugden and Tomlinson (2002 p. 12) argue, the 'richness' attributed to data collected via well-crafted ethnographic research is reliant on the researcher's ability in:

“...gaining a sense of space, place, character and culture – which can only be achieved through spending some time in the living research environment – [that] sharpens a researcher's critical gaze, helps the formulation of questions and enhances interpretation and theorisation”

Once accessing a credible presence among any particular group and 'inside' the cultural intricacies defining their collective sense of being, the task of the ethnographer is to convey empathetic understanding of the cultural group and its practices by producing fully contextualised 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1993) in written form. Thus what ethnographers essentially claim to produce are a 'written representation of a culture' (Van Maanen 1988 p.1), or what Fetterman (1998 p. 20) calls 'the emic perspective', where phenomena are richly described from an 'insider's' perspective. An interpretative rationale is therefore pivotal to understanding and accurately conveying the culture through which individuals and groups make sense of their realities.

Within the study of sport sociology there have been many published studies conducted by researchers who adopt insider roles, either by developing such an understanding over the research period or by 'native' association prior to undertaking the research (see Klein 1993; Beal 1995; Giulianotti 1995; Sugden 1996; DeGaris 1997; Klein 1997; Armstrong 1998; Sands 1999; Donnelly 2000; Tsang 2000; Wheaton 2002; Wacquant 2004) This study follows in the 'native' ethnographic tradition wherein my background in boxing allowed me to investigate the amateur and professional social universes of boxing as a fully participating insider. Accordingly, over a five year period of data collection, I was able to formulate a grounded, detailed and richly theorised understanding of amateur and professional boxing in England gleaned from 'the boxer's point of view'.

That said, as Brewer (2000) argues, the legitimacy of ethnography as a data collection method derives endorsement from the scholarly community of practitioners who pursue its practice. Moreover, in recent times the validity of the findings documented by ethnographers face what has been referred to as the ‘double crisis’ of legitimation and representation from within the qualitative community of scholars (see Brewer 2000; Donnelly 2000; Sparkes 2002; Denzin and Lincoln 2003; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). In this ‘crisis’ all epistemological criteria validating ethnography as a methodology and all aspects of the research process have come under inspection. The crisis in contemporary ethnography holds implications for how ethnographer’s do research, their role as researchers, the ways of writing about ethnographic research and the criteria upheld towards validating their work (Wheaton 2002).

The crisis of ethnography

An on-going philosophical debate about the nature of knowledge within the naturalistic social sciences concerns the quality of data generated and consequent representations of reality made by interpretative approaches of sociological enquiry (see Richardson 1990; Stanley and Wise 1993; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Altheide and Johnson 1998; Brewer 2000; Donnelly 2000; Sparkes 2002; Sugden and Tomlinson 2002; Wheaton 2002; Silk 2005). More to the point, the claim of ethnography to be able to ‘tell it like it is’ by somehow gaining privileged insider understandings of any given cultural milieus realities is challenged as a consequence of the “epistemological revolution” (Silk 2005 p. 69) spearheaded by postmodern and post-structural rejection of grand meta-narratives of science (Brewer 2000; Denzin and Lincoln 2003; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). In particular, as variants of feminist ‘standpoint epistemology’ have notably critiqued (see Stanley and Wise 1993; Wheaton 2002), claims pertaining to universal cultural truths are deemed naïve because they are regarded as failing to account for the subjective (gendered) nature inherent of the research process when interpreting given cultural phenomena, as Brewer (2000 p. 42) elaborates:

“The problem, according to the anti-realists, is that there is no independent and external reality, and the ethnographer’s representation is not privileged; it is just as much a partial account as the insiders’, and claims to realist-like objectivity, accuracy and truth are spurious. Thick descriptions, therefore, do not represent ‘reality as it is’ because such descriptions are selective from the various competing versions of reality that could have been produced and end up presenting a partial picture”

As Wheaton (2002 p. 240) argues of many sporting ethnographic texts, too often researchers (predominantly male, white and middle-class), despite claiming space as cultural ‘insiders’, often failed to investigate the ‘self’ as gendered, racialised and/or ethnicised subjects (see also Sparkes 2002). If, therefore, the status of the thick descriptions claimed by ethnographers are subjective and by definition criteria assuming the possibility of arriving at ‘objective’ truths is

“...stripped naked under the impulse of anti-realism and postmodernism” (Brewer 2000 p. 44), then the scientific validity of this study or any other naturalistic social research is brought into question. In short, the arguments presented by postmodernists / post-structuralists posit that contemporary ethnography must contend with the issue of realism versus relativism in order to justify the interpretive standpoint which the methodology is premised upon.

A reflexive epistemology: A ‘native’ studying boxing?

According to Stanley and Wise (1993 p. 188), the value and truth claims of all research agendas are based on epistemological criteria as to what constitutes knowledge:

An ‘epistemology’ is a framework or theory for specifying the constitution and generation of knowledge about the social world; that is, it concerns how to understand the nature of ‘reality’. A given epistemological framework specifies not only what ‘knowledge’ is and how to recognise it, but who are the ‘knowers’ and by what means someone becomes one’.

Following Stanley and Wise, crucial to validating the knowledge claims made in this thesis is the need to specify how my situatedness as the ‘knower’ and architect of data collection, interpretation and analysis contributed to the final production of knowledge presented in this thesis. Moreover, the criteria for claiming legitimate understandings of ‘others’ reality constructions need to be brought to the fore. In the first instance, my ‘insider’ boxing identity was clearly an issue impacting on the procedures of data collection, analysis and interpretation throughout this research. As a researcher who has invested many years as a competitive boxer I was/am, in academic terminology, a ‘native’ of the cultural context through which boxing is practiced and defined. The term native or the notion of ‘going native’ - as Wheaton (2002) argues itself a notion steeped in the discourses and practices of colonialism - implies the researcher, either through priory identification or over identification during the research process, is or becomes so saturated in the belief systems and value orientations normative to the milieu under investigation that s/he is unable to exercise a balance between personal involvement and detachment. Thus, the critical disposition necessary to ‘objectively’ interpret the enquiry at hand is blunted due to failing to recognise, or even, is willing to acknowledge the rather less enchanting and/or cherished dimensions of the culture analysed. The fundamental premise behind this argument is that scientific vigour and exactitude become abandoned for self-indulgent narcissism, mere common sense or at best investigative journalism (Sparkes 2002).

The ‘anti-realist’ (Brewer 2000) critique of scientific realism, however, raises strong philosophical and ethical arguments regarding the rather essentialist absolutism regarding the efficacy of being a native, or indeed a non-native, researcher. Moreover, anti-realists argue that the act of acquiring ethnographic knowledge is regarded as always inherently biased, be it

from the researchers' biographical reflexivity, their adopted theoretical standpoints or the degrees of cultural relativity circulating *among* members of any given social milieu, sporting subculture or sporting life-world studied (Brewer 2000). To claim anything more from ethnography, or any other sociological research agenda, implies the researcher is a "...neutral vessel of cultural experience" (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995 p. 16) or a 'transcendental subject' (DeGaris 1999) that, when required, becomes invisible during the research process itself and analytical induction thereafter and is thus able to 'objectively' interpret data through the application of rigorous 'scientific' fortitude. More to the point, the impossibility of achieving such a state of transcendence during the research process raises the issue of the researchers 'reflexivity' upon the research endeavour. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (1995 p. 16) reflexivity implies that:

"The orientations of researchers will be shaped by their socio-historical locations, including the values and interests that these locations confer upon them. What this represents is a rejection of the idea that social science research is, or can be, carried out in some autonomous realm that is insulated from the wider society and from the particular biography of the researcher, in such a way that its findings can be unaffected by social processes and personal characteristics."

The premise of reflexivity is that the researcher is an integral part of the epistemological agenda guiding the processes of data collection, interpretation and analysis. The generation, interpretation and analysis of data, therefore, are processes inevitably mediated by and through his or her subjectivity (Altheide and Johnson 1998). Therefore all researchers' understandings of the field of inquiry and their representations of 'other' members of the cultural groups studied are unavoidably reflexive. Nonetheless, to adopt an extreme relativistic standpoint is clearly problematic as it, "...undermines all criteria by which to judge and evaluate the products of ethnographic research: all criteria are doubted, none are privileged and everything goes" (Brewer 2000 p. 46). Moreover, as Sugden and Tomlinson (1999; 2002) argue, an extreme relativist standpoint leaves no critical space to examine power relations or identity politics in society as it takes away the interpretative role of the researcher.

The stance adopted in this research follows Sugden's and Tomlinson's (2002 p. 17) orientation to ethnographic research. For them, the task of the ethnographer is for him or her to recognise 'sociological truth' or "...what people believe to be true in the context of the social worlds within which they abide". In order to achieve this point of contextual clarity, the ethnographer must faithfully and honestly seek to situate where his/her voice is located in relation to other voices within the field of inquiry and "...through self-reflection and dialogue with existing theory and research, contribute to the accumulation of 'associational' sociological knowledge" (ibid p. 17). Accordingly, the task for determining sociological truth amidst the polyphony of voices situated within the field of inquiry is considered thus:

“...given that there are multiple vantage points, there are multiple truths...it is the task of the researcher to identify, gain access to and share as many of these vantages as possible. On this basis it is possible to construct an overall interpretation that may not be true to any single vantage points, but which, by taking account of them all, including the researcher, is the most honest representation of a given milieu’s shared truth about itself at a given point in history”

Sugden and Tomlinson (2002 p. 18)

Like many published findings generated from a host of critical ethnographic studies, in seeking to avoid the “...epitome of the postmodern dissolution into nothingness” (Brewer 2000 p. 47) I therefore applied a reflexive agenda to more fully capture the contextualised dimensions emergent from this study. As Sparkes (2002 p. 17) asserts, ethnographers must not simply report the ‘facts’ emerging from the time spent in the field, but actively document and analyse how these interpretations came about:

“...researchers need to reflect on the political dimensions of fieldwork, the webs of power that circulate in the research process, and how these shape the manner in which knowledge is constructed. Likewise, they need to consider how issues of gender, nationality, race, ethnicity, social class, age, religion, sexual identity, disability, and able-bodiedness shape knowledge constructions. These issues may affect interactions in the field; who gets studied and who gets ignored; which questions are asked and which are left unasked; how people are written in and out of accounts; and how ‘others’ and the self of the researcher are represented”.

From this standpoint, this study’s epistemological incorporation of the ‘reflexive turn’ (Brewer 2000) in ethnography makes explicit the sense making procedures underpinning the way knowledge was produced throughout the research process. Moreover, by making explicit how my ‘self’, in terms of axes of my identity defining my (self-perceived) insider status within the boxing-milieus studied, contributed to the always partial nature of the knowledge and the rhetorical conventions through which data are represented in text, the legitimation and representation of the data is strengthened (Altheide and Johnson 1998; Armstrong 1998; Wheaton 2002).

Defining criteria of legitimation

Following Sugden and Tomlinson (2002), the position upheld for this research is to subscribe to an ‘associational realist’ ontology “...upon which the metalanguage of the critical social science community must be based” (p. 18). From an associational realist standpoint knowledge is socially constructed and thus, as Wheaton (2002 p. 246) argues, “...the ethnographer is, in terms of experience, always the ‘marginal native’ (see also Atkinson 1990). In this way, mirroring Hobbs’s (1988), Armstrong’s (1998) and Wheaton’s (1997; 2002) insider studies of policing in the East-End of London, football hooligans and the subculture of

windsurfing respectively, my subjective orientations are, through critical (on-going) retrospection, openly acknowledged and put to good use.

If I had what Bourdieu (1984) has called the “cultural competence” (p. 2) to actively participate as a boxer, then an effort has been made to honestly consider how and why my own ‘native’ meanings, values and beliefs, or at least my perception of them at given moments in time and through space, impinged upon the production of knowledge. Where my own value orientations differed, or became differentiated, from ‘other’ boxing-practitioners during the period of data gathering this disparity of sensibility served to raise further issues for analysis. Further still, it became possible during the research process to problematize and, in time, theme the many taken-for-granted everyday routines of practice and social interaction through which I and other boxing-practitioners inferred logic to our actions. Thus, albeit always a reflexive process, my native understandings of boxing, much like Hobbs (1988) before me, became progressively sensitised through contemplation of the literature. Accordingly, over the prolonged duration of the research process my understanding of ‘other’ boxing-practitioners meanings, belief systems, identities and actions became informed in tandem with my intellectual wrestle and developing grasp of the literature. By absorbing the theoretical hypothesis of the literature, selecting field strategies and filtering my own and other boxing-practitioners interpretative frameworks and actions through a continually developing analytical mind-set, I endeavoured over much time to formulate a deeper, more critically informed, contextual understanding of the lived standpoint of the boxing-practitioners I was interacting among.

By seeking to recognise the ‘polyphonic’ (Giulianotti 2005) vantages of boxing reality encountered during the ethnographic process (including my own), theorising them and by making them explicit within the final representation of the findings, the knowledge claims produced in this study adhere to reader identifiable validation standards of plausibility and credibility (Hammersley 1990; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Brewer 2000). Plausibility implies that claims represented in the findings are likely to be true given our existing knowledge. Credibility implies that the reality accounted for is accurate given the nature of the phenomenon, the circumstances of the research and the characteristics of the researcher (see Brewer 2000 p. 48). Accordingly, the findings discussed throughout this thesis are deemed to be ‘real’, yet it is also understood that there is no set mode for validating the realities documented as there can be no finitude when interpreting cultural phenomena (Armstrong 1993). Someone else conducting a similar research agenda can, and will, through a necessarily unique reflexive capacity understand events, people and relationships with different shades of grey. As Armstrong (1993) elaborates, “Every ethnography then, is

incomplete, it is only a partial truth and is no more than a statement of the rules of the study of the discourse: work has always to be done” (p. 37).

Defining criteria of representation

As Hammersley (1990, 1992) argues, ethnographic representations of culture constitute both a research *process* and a textual *product*. Therefore the plausibility and credibility of this research lies not merely in the procedural rules of how data was collected, analysed and interpreted but, equally so, how the research is presented in written form (Sparkes 2002). Accordingly, the crisis of legitimation and representation blur together, as “...any representation must now legitimate itself in terms of some set of criteria that allows the author (and the reader) to make connection between the text and the world written about” (Denzin and Lincoln 1994 p. 11). As Van Maanen (1988) asserts, ethnographers aim to access and understand culture through participant observation and then convey it to the reader in written prose, i.e. make the intangible visible. Yet it should not be assumed that this process – transforming one’s own and others lived understandings of cultural experience to text – is unproblematic. More to the point, it is not only the assumption that ethnographers can directly and ‘objectively’ capture lived experience that is questioned but also the assumption whether it is possible to seamlessly convey lived experience in written prose, as Sparkes (2002 p. 11) asserts:

“Knowledge, therefore, is not only historically and contextually bound but is actually constructed through a process of reflexive mediation, where the world that is studied is created, in part, by the author’s experience and the way the text is written”.

The ‘crisis of representation’ brings to the fore methodological issues and ethical dilemmas inherent from my authorial lens through which other boxing-practitioners realities were represented in the text and the stylistic convention chosen to do so (Sparkes 2002 p. 9). My response to the representational ‘crisis’ therefore, is to adopt the epistemological framework of reflexive realism outlined and, in doing so, deny the dry rhetorical ‘objectification’ of positivism. Moreover, following many interpretative researchers who have responded to this crisis by defining alternative criteria to validate ethnography¹, I closely followed Altheide’s and Johnson’s (1998) criteria of reflexive accountability, or ‘validity-as-reflexive-accounting’ as they term it, to legitimate the representation of the findings in this thesis. Altheide and Johnson (1998 pp. 291-2) outline five analytical dimensions that need to be honestly and clearly accounted for if ethnographers are to plausibly and credibly represent the social worlds studied (see also Brewer 2000 p. 50):

- The relationship between what is observed (behaviour, rituals, meanings) and the larger cultural, historical and organisational contexts within which the observations are made;
- The relationship between the observed, the observer and the setting or field;
- The perspective or point of view used to render an interpretation of ethnographic data, whether the observer's or the member's;
- The role of the reader or audience in the final written product;
- The representational, rhetorical or authorial style used to render the description or interpretation documented

By addressing the criteria suggested by Altheide and Johnson, my subjectivity and the ways it informed my (evolving) understandings of "...the topic, the subjects, the field, the sense-making process and the written text" (Brewer 2000 p. 50), has been honestly documented and crucially (self)critically *analysed*. Moreover, the traditional rhetorical practices of positivistic ethnography, that seeks to make a text authoritative and persuasive through 'distancing' the authorial presence such as third person reporting, have been abandoned. The rationale for adopting a first person dialogue throughout the thesis text is defined concisely by Wheaton (2002 p. 249):

"First person narratives help to produce a reflexive account as they situate the fieldworker in the ethnographic account, recognising explicitly who the ethnographer is – as Bourdieu describes it, their habitus – and how they actually produced the account. The dialogue and differences between the researcher and the informants is emphasised, reducing the ethnographer's authoritative influence".

Two overlapping and interwoven narrative conventions have been applied to plausibly and credibly convey and evoke the fully contextualised nature of the fields of inquiry and the reflexive accountability informing the interpretation and analysis of the findings generated during time spent in the field. In the first instance, rather than pursuing an "...author-*evacuated* and methodologically silent" (Sparkes 2002 p. 57) representational style, I adopt a rhetorical convention referred to as the 'confessional' (Van Maanen 1998; Sparkes 2002; Wheaton 2002). The confessional makes explicit the research process from start to finish. The intention is to be open about the messy and problematic experience of fieldwork and bring to the fore the many methodological and ethical dilemmas encountered. As such, the procedures of data collection and analysis become in themselves topics of research. Moreover, the plausibility and credibility of the findings are strengthened by making "...explicit, the relations between the author, the object of analysis and the final constructed text" (Wheaton 2002 p. 249). Also, as Sparkes (2002 p. 71) argues, by recording the perils and pitfalls of the research experience as a hermeneutic process, the community of sport scholars benefits through raising, "...a host of ethical and methodological questions about the basis of

ethnographic authority – how we come to know about ourselves and others via our research activities”.

The second rhetorical convention I have adopted in my attempt to plausibly and credibly represent the fields analysed is the ‘impressionist tale’ (Van Maanen 1988). Explicitly narrative in form, my impressionistic tale of the research process seeks to draw the reader into the field in a bid to enable him or her to see, hear, feel and sense from the vantage of my insider’s gaze focused upon ringside and within the ring space itself as it were. The epistemological criteria validating impressionist writing are stated by Sugden’s and Tomlinson’s (2002 p. 18) evocation of the ethnographic text as an impressionist painting:

“...The impressionist painting...is constructed over time and incorporates the various dimensions of the artist’s gaze and what is known about the places and people that are painted. It also leaves room for interpretation by those who view the work in the gallery. Thus, what is produced is not reality per se, but an informed *impression* of that reality. The artist then offers the painting for public appraisal, acclaim or ridicule, implicitly challenging other artists to depict the chosen scene differently. In this way we regard ourselves as rigorous social scientists and as social impressionists”.

Much like an impressionist painter’s canvas, an impressionistic ethnographic tale avoids simplifying experiences into one voice, one reality, and emphasises the polyphony of voices engaged with while in the field and the contextual richness of the social phenomena studied (Wheaton 2002). As Brewer (2000) argues, evocative and competently contextualised narratives of real events and people enhance the value and illustration of the culture under analysis. In a bid to ‘bring to life’ my own and other boxing-practitioners meanings, values and actions the following impressionistic ploys have been adopted: the use of sidebars and boxes to depict ‘focal events’ (Brewer 2000) while making inference to key actors intentions (including my own) within that moment in time and space; close-up descriptions of experiential phases and processes; confessional autobiographical vignettes; dramatic autoethnographic recall of the sensual, symbolic and emotional dimensions informing my understandings as ‘the boxer’ during specific moments in time and space; interview excerpts, media representations and diary recollections; the mixing of direct and indirect ethnographic narrative often via different fonts (see Sparkes 2002; Wacquant 2005a). By substantiating the polyphonic, historically contextualised and theoretically informed ethnographic analysis with a reflexive account of the research process this study is mindful of the contemporary fluidity of social existence, yet equally, does not succumb to “...the morass and meaningless of postmodern relativism and scepticism” (Brewer 2000 p. 50).

ENDNOTE

¹ Staking out a middle ground between the excesses of realism and relativism, alternative epistemological standpoints include 'subtle realism' (Hammersley 1990), 'analytical realism' (Altheide and Johnson 1998), 'the ethnographic imagination' (Brewer 2000) and 'associational realism' (Sugden and Tomlinson 2002).

Chapter 3 - Social development and boxing

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the historical development of boxing in England and in particular the social dynamics contributing to the processes through which amateurism and professionalism in the practice of boxing took hold. By examining the cultural legacies bestowed by over three-centuries of boxing tradition, a more critically informed analysis of the lived dimensions through which contemporary amateur and professional boxers construct identity and experience may be gained. In particular, it is necessary to account for the onset of industrial capitalism in Britain during the 18th century and the massive transformation of social space and lifestyle as country folk relocated on mass into sprawling urban and massively industrialised conurbations (Holt 1989; Sugden 1996; Polley 1998; Horne et al 1999). It was not coincidental that from this social upheaval ‘formal’ sporting institutions were formulated through the organisational aegis of the captains of industrial production, in conjunction with the moral zeal of Muscular Christian reformists for the purpose of benefiting, and controlling, workers (Hargreaves 1986, Holt 1989). Whatever the underlying intent, it is clear that from this point onwards the institutionalisation of the “...new world of industrial culture” (Holt 1989 p. 148) led to new ways of practicing sport while restricting established traditions.

Nonetheless, as Holt (1989) argues, it is equally important to consider the rather more grounded “...half-hidden continuities” (p. 3) passed down from one generation to the next. Accordingly, following anthropologist Cleeford Geertz’s (1993) understanding of Balinese cockfighting as signifying a form of ‘deep play’ through which Balinese men affirmed their sense of identity, it can be said boxing in England is also a cultural phenomenon loaded with deep play connotations. The meanings invested in and through the practice of amateur and professional boxing may therefore be symbolically significant to those who are drawn to its appeal in ways other than the prescribed idealisms promulgated through the organisational aegis of the respective governing bodies and other external agencies complicit in defining the popular appeal of boxing. Thus a process of “...cultural brokering” (Tomlinson 1999 p. 3) contributes to the ways social-actors *want to* or are *expected to* participate in boxing. With the above in mind the aim of this chapter presents, and where appropriate critiques, academic discourse of the historical development defining the social practice of amateur(ism) and professional(ism) boxing in England. More explicitly, this historical overview aims to draw out the social and cultural dimensions through which either code of boxing may be defined in their own right, yet also, in relation to one another. As such, this is the macro contextual backdrop informing the micro-social ethnographic detail to follow.

3.1 Ancient origins

The origins of what can be considered the ruled bound and athletically codified form of boxing first took shape in the country fairs and drinking dens of early industrial England during the 18th century. It is worth noting however, as historian Allen Guttmann (1978 p. 36) states, professional athletes specialising in combat sports can be traced as far back as the Hellenic civilisation:

“In the long course of Greek civilisation, specialisation did indeed lead to professionalization in the sense that athletes were officially remunerated and in the more important sense that they were able to devote themselves fully to their sports. Amply provided for by their enthusiastic citizens, the athletes were freed from economic necessity and encouraged to make the most of their physical talents”.

The professional status of Ancient Greek athletes undoubtedly signified the cultural popularity of sport, with material reward in no way thought of as tainting athletic virtue. As Poliakoff (1987) tell us, “...purists who refused to mix money with sport did not exist in the ancient world, and victors’ monuments boast of success in the cash competitions as openly as they boast of victory in sacred contests” (p. 19). A number of social commentators of that era, however, criticised professional athletes’ need to develop excellence in any one specialist field of athletic endeavour. It was widely held that a one-sided *arête*, i.e. the emphasis of physical attributes to the detriment of intellectual ones, distorted the many-sided development of the citizen (Guttmann 1978; Morgan 1993). The medical philosopher Galen comments on this aspect of professionalism for ancient boxers and wrestlers:

“Beneath their mass of flesh and blood their souls are stifled as in a sea of mud.... They have not health nor have they beauty. Even those who are naturally well proportioned become fat and bloated: their faces are often shapeless and unsightly owing to the wounds received in boxing and in the pankration”.

(cited in Guttmann 1978 p. 37)

A long winding thread of continuity can be traced from the Ancient eras to the present in that the likely arrival of combative sports practices came to the shores of Britain via the Romans who, in turn, inherited boxing from the Greek civilisation. As Gorn (1986) states the word *pugilism* has Latin origins and it has been widely noted that the many amphitheatres built by Imperial Rome regularly held armed and unarmed combat between slaved gladiators and/or various wild animals (Poliakoff 1987; Sugden 1996). As McIntosh (1993) tells us, gladiatorial spectacles hinging on life and death were not only considered to be a high form of entertainment but also served the purpose in transmitting the symbolic and political authority of the Roman rulers. By way of contrast, however, for the slaved gladiators the realities of combat were rather more elemental; serious injury and likely death for the majority with only a few survivors fortunate and tough enough to be awarded their honorary freedom. If

amphitheatres and the spectacle of gladiators fighting to the death remains confined to the annals of Roman dictatorship it is, nonetheless, logical to infer that once the Romans retreated from the shores of Britain much of their civilisation, including techniques of warfare, became ingrained as an essential component of everyday Anglo-Saxon life (Sugden 1996).

3.2 The Birth of Bare-Knuckles

Throughout the Middle-Ages physical prowess in man-to-man armed and unarmed combat in order to ensure self-preservation and the survival of one's kin was an essential requirement of daily existence in what was a relatively lawless era. It was usual practice for disputes between individuals to be settled in quasi legal 'trial-by-combat' affairs, whereby disagreements could be brought to a close while preserving a vestige of honourable consensus (Sugden 1996). Further than combative enterprise as ethico-legal currency, the literature also makes clear that a culture of 'rough play' in the form of ball games, running races, fighting and animal sports (perhaps the legacy of Romaic culture) were prominent features of communal life. For instance, Wigglesworth (1996) cites "...football, wrestling, boxing" (p. 13) events taking place toward the end of the 12th century. By today's standards the level of violence tolerated was remarkable, as Holt (1989 p. 18) makes clear when describing this 'recreational' game of folk foot-ball:

"...parties mutually agreeing to fight 'up and down', which includes the right of kicking on every part of the body and in all possible situations, and of squeezing the throat or 'throttling' on the verge of death. At races, fairs and other public occasions contests of this nature are watched by crowds of persons who take part on each side...that death often occurs in such battles will not be thought extraordinary..."

Despite the very real risk of injury and even death, fighting sports regularly took centre stage as part of the calendar of festive celebrations (Holt 1989). With no recognisable authority organising and regulating contests, men's and at times women's (Hargreaves 1997) eagerness to participate in rough play customs indicates the cultural significance attributed to demonstrating sporting prowess and valour among one's peers. From such rough folk traditions the commercialised practice of bare-knuckle pugilism developed into the most popular sporting pastime in 18th and 19th century Britain. As is illustrated below, the golden era of 'the manly art of pugilism' (Gorne 1986) lasted for over a century before epochal transformations in the social landscape of England contributed to its downfall.

Urban life and the Golden Age of Pugilism

The literature is unanimous in asserting organised pugilism developed as a consequence of the mass urbanisation of the English landscape at the start of the 18th century (Gorn 1986; Brailsford 1988; Holt 1989; Sugden 1996). In what was an era of remarkable change with

established social orders crumbling and new ways of life emerging, England transformed from an essentially agrarian social order of dislocated parish communities into thickly populated urban conurbations configured by the promise of commerce and manufacturing. The waves of displaced country folk seeking to carve out a livelihood amidst this new and emerging urbanised social order resulted in a natural tension that, although stimulating growth and opportunism, in general was a harsh era in which to live (Gorn 1986). With underdeveloped or simply non-existent law enforcement agencies at work, a martial code of honour applied in settling disputes often "...with deadly results at the end of a rapier, ten paces from a duelling pistol or with a skull fractured by a cudgel, backsword or singlestick" (Sugden 1996 p. 13). Extreme physical assertiveness clearly became a natural means by which to ensure self-preservation and incrementally enhance one's social standing in this harsh new urban-industrial landscape.

Situated within this rather informal adherence to the rule of law newly migrated workers soon assimilated the rough-play customs of the countryside as prominent components of their urbanised way of life. Fighting sports along with other bloody pastimes that included dog-fighting, bear-baiting and cockfighting thus became embedded in the many taverns and drinking dens popular among working men (Holt 1989). At the same time Gorn (1986) speculates that wealthy young squires, fascinated by accounts of boxing in the classics of Virgil and Homer and with plenty of time on their hands to pursue 'quests for excitement' (Elias and Dunning 1986) became interested in unarmed combat as a means of entertainment, physical recreation and self-defence. Accordingly, by way of a 'civilising spurt' (Dunning 1999), their patronage gave impetus for the unrefined folk traditions of fist-fighting to develop into something resembling an athletically codified sport. The rather diverse influences of harsh justice, cultural valour, rough play and classic notions of athleticism provides an interesting backdrop by which to speculate about the processes that helped established pugilism as the most popular sporting entertainment throughout the early-industrial era.

Representing Pugilism: 'Folk tradition', 'quest for excitement' and 'entrepreneurship'

Dennis Brailsford (1988 p. 2) outlines a set of features that distinguished pugilism, cricket and horse racing as the first sporting practices to entice mass popularity in Britain:

"Modern sport must first of all have rules and the means of arbitration to determine whether the rules have been broken. It must have a more-or-less regular programme of events and be able to match the best competitors against one another. It has specialised venues for play and is essentially commercial, paying the performers, charging people to watch and giving the chance of profits to promoters and backers. It seeks publicity before its events and creates a thirst for accounts of play immediately afterwards. In short, a modern sport develops both an economic and

literary life of its own, and its transactions are important to significant sections of the community”.

Two figureheads are widely identified as pioneering the development of pugilism into an organised, codified and commercially inspired affair; James Figg ‘the father of boxing’ and his successor Jack Broughton (see Gorn 1986; Brailsford 1988; Sugden 1996). As Sugden (1996) argues, Figg deserves the reputation as “...one of the first boxers on record to use his skills in combat as the basis for setting up a business” (p. 12). For many years competing as a journeyman pugilist at fairs and festivals, in 1719 Figg ventured to open an indoor arena on the Oxford Road (now Oxford Street) in London where he staged a regular schedule of contests primarily for the entertainment of wealthy patrons. As Brailsford (1988) argues, the charges for admission reflected Figg’s intent at marketing pugilism with an air of exclusivity, as illustrated in the match between himself (Figg) and Sutton, “...the admission charge was 2s 6d – virtually a day’s wage for most workers and very expensive when compared with the usual 2d or 3d to watch a day’s cricket” (p. 4). Besides catering for spectators Figg also instructed pugilism as a form of self-defence and physical recreation. Accordingly, his entrepreneurial instigations created the necessary infrastructure for the reproduction of fighters and supporters alike¹.

According to Brailsford (1988 p. 6) Jack Broughton, the next figurehead in the history of pugilism, graduated from Figg’s amphitheatre. By this point in time it seems a man of pugilistic talent was in position to claim share in a lucrative business venture:

“By the time that Jack Broughton became a regular exhibition in the amphitheatre, the bouts there – and in at least three other indoor booths – were regular, well advertised and well supported. In addition to growing in style and skill, pugilism was offering the possibility of good cash returns. The takings often amounted to £150, implying audiences of 1200 or so, at 2s 6d. a head. The proprietor kept one-third of this himself, the rest being split between the day’s two main fighters, two parts to the winner and one to the loser. Supporting bouts had to rely on money thrown on the stage in appreciation at the end of the fight, but the leading boxers – and Broughton was soon one of them – stood to take the equivalent of a working craftsman’s annual wage for one afternoon’s work, and this was irrespective of any side-betting or gratitude from patrons”.

Broughton capitalised upon his stature as champion and soon forged a pioneering presence in the athletic development of pugilism. Emulating the entrepreneurial spirit displayed by Figg, Broughton effectively marketed the ‘Noble Art of Self Defence’ to wealthy young squires in his own purposely-built Boxing Academy. He catered for his wealthy clients sensibilities by refining the harsher elements of bare-knuckle combat through introducing ‘mufflers’, or leather-padded mitts, to reduce the propensity for unseemly abrasions to hand and face. Broughton’s marketing initiatives not only increased the appeal of pugilism to a wider and

more recreational clientele but also elevated its social status due to fist-fighting becoming a fashionable and less lethal means of settling disputes ‘the Gentlemanly way’. As Sugden (1996) argues, the more ‘sportinised’ practice of bare-knuckle fighting was afforded a semblance of honour by reflecting aristocratic codes of chivalry. From this point on, the literature emphasises the pivotal role played by Aristocratic patronage in driving the development of pugilism into its 19th century heyday.

The power of privilege

For Sugden (1996), pugilism can be better understood when considered in the context of a stratified society deeply divided by extremes of wealth and poverty. He contends notions of chivalry and athleticism associated with ‘the manly art of pugilism’ were rhetorical disguises through which enthusiasts of pugilism, an amalgamation of nobility and peasantry collectively known as the *Fancy*, could be entertained by placing sizeable bets on the ebb and flow of bloody fist-fights. Through the financial backing of wealthy patrons an organised network of challenge matches subsequently enticed the toughest fighters to compete for handsome purses, often on private estates in and around London. The gambling largesse displayed on such occasions shaped the character of the *Fancy* as a rather flamboyant subculture. For instance, Holt (1989) cites the enthusiastic support of the Duke of York and the Prince of Wales who indulged in wagers of up to £40,000, a huge amount of money for that time. While Aristocrat’s eagerly anticipated the outcome of their wagers, pugilists eager to claim their share of the spoils increasingly succumbed to the bloodthirsty expectations of the *Fancy* and fought to a bloody pulp, even death. Certainly, as is evident from this extract of William Hazlitt’s essay “The Fight” depicting Tom ‘The Gas-man’ Hickman’s championship contest with William Neate in 1821, prize-fighting was a brutish affair:

“[Neate] planted a tremendous blow on [Hickman’s] cheek-bone and eyebrow, and made a red ruin of that side of his face. The Gas-man went down, and there was another shout – a roar of triumph as the waves of fortune rolled tumultuously from side to side...”

But the challenger would not give up. In the twelfth round Neate lunged again, striking Hickman with full force:

“All traces of life, of natural expression, were gone from him. His face was like a human skull, a death’s head, spouting blood. The eyes were filled with blood, the nose streamed blood, the mouth gaped blood. He was not like an actual man, but like a preternatural, spectral appearance, or like one of the figures in Dante’s *Inferno*”

(in Gorn 1986 p. 26)

Despite the obvious hardships a steady supply of men were willing to compromise their health and integrity for the benefit of spectators solely intent on amusing themselves through

gambling and witnessing their brutal struggle. For Sugden (1996) the primary causal factor driving men to risk life and limb in this way was due to material life-circumstances characterised by "...filthy slums, demoralised by crime, congestion, disease and prostitution" (p. 17). Concomitantly, all powerful Aristocratic backers were willing to pay good money to pursue gambling and witness a good fight. Accordingly, the fusion between impositions driven by poverty on the one hand and the gambling practices and expectations for bloody amusement by the wealthy on the other hand, spawned a sporting practice of rather primitive violence. As is outlined below, it is further argued that the cultural context through which pugilism was popularised by rich and poor alike gave rise to subtler yet no less exploitative dimensions.

Pugilism as a signifier of masculine valour

It is interesting to note while including the above description of the Neate vs. Hickman contest in his historical study of pugilism, Gorn (1986) argues the meanings associated with pugilistic combat held significance beyond "...butchery turned spectacle" (p. 27). He too depicts 18th and early 19th century England in harsh terminology:

"Street violence threatened peace-loving citizens with assaults, robbery, gang attack, and murder. More, the era was rife with revolutionary bloodbaths, wars of unprecedented ferocity, public executions, grinding poverty, restive labor, and repressive capital" (p. 27).

For Gorn (ibid), nonetheless, pugilism held significance both because of and despite the social hardships of that era. He argues pugilism symbolised the following cultural metaphors:

"Prize fighting engendered a male aesthetic. For the fancy, a good bout was an artistic idealization of reality, displaying manliness, fair play, and finely developed physical skills. The ring, it was said, taught Englishmen bulldog courage, fostering a sense of national pride while countering effeminacy. Pugilism elevated honor over money-getting and martial valor over comfort. Equally important, the fancy found beauty in man's sheer physicality"

Evidently, for Gorn (1986), the social significance of pugilism symbolised a very British sense of masculine aestheticism; fair play, hardy physicality and bulldog courage. As has been mentioned earlier in this chapter, Gorn (1986) speculates the gentry's fascination with classical literature infused notions of athleticism into the fighting customs of the peasantry. Perhaps for this reason, notions of fairness such as 'no hitting below the belt', 'not hitting a man when he's down' and 'coming up to scratch', still in use in today's language, epitomised the cultural etiquette defining pugilistic contests (Holt 1989).

The literature also illustrates the means through which pugilism took meaning from, and developed in accordance to, the rational scientific exactitudes increasingly gaining a foothold in modernity. As Sugden (1996) argues, the first ever text to resemble sports science is

attributed to Captain Godfrey Barclay's manual of pugilism entitled the *Treatise on the Useful Science of Defence*. This book was written during his tutelage of and presumably inspired by Figg's school of pugilism at his famed Academy on the Oxford Road (see Walsh 1997). That said, wealthy patrons did not interpret the 'Noble Science of Defence' from the standpoint of securing their livelihoods. Rather, symbolic notions of honour exhibited during the 'scientific' application of fist-fighting were idealistic muses fuelled by a desire for monetary gamesmanship as opposed to concern for the brutal realities experienced by pugilists. Accordingly, the metaphorical qualities associated with the 'Manly Art' served to propagate ideals representative only of the self-interested whims of the gentry.

Nonetheless, as much as pugilism's popularity was analogous with the Aristocracy's lordship over the masses, the era was also a period of great change and social upheaval. With industrial capacity increasingly shaping the economy of English society, time-honoured hierarchies favouring traditional relations of aristocratic privilege and wilful serfdom became undermined as the bourgeoisie increasingly staked control of workers' means of livelihood. Of paramount concern for the Gentry patrons of pugilism, therefore, was the evangelical fervour of the Protestant work ethic instigated by industrialists to ensure the labouring masses adopted ways of life conducive towards industrial productivity (see Gorn 1986; Sugden 1996). In light of this prevailing wind of change, Gorn (1986) argues the flamboyant largesse displayed by the *Fancy* during high profile pugilistic contests became symbolic statements of celebratory defiance directed at the rather more sombre and rigidly dictatorial bourgeois culture increasingly gaining a hold of the labouring masses. In the midst of the threat to their elite standing among the lower orders, association with pugilism afforded the gentry the opportunity to publicly associate with the masses. At the same time they could easily sustain an air of superiority through displays of wealth and largesse and by doing so not only reinforce time-honoured hierarchies yet also encourage loyalty. So although pugilism developed dimensions of honour, scientific athleticism, fair-play and the like, the measure of pugilism's true significance is to be conceived as a medium for maintaining power in society.

In sum, by accounting for the various signifying dimensions indicated there is room to interpret pugilism as a cultural practice whose meaning and value was interpreted beyond arguments centred on sadistic exploitation. It remains clear, nonetheless, that the literature envisages realities experienced by pugilists as being defined through poverty, subservience and brutality. Although there can be little doubt pugilism was often (especially by modern standards) a violent, bloody and even murderous activity, as is discussed below, the literature suffers from some common problems.

Pugilism and the birth of sports-journalism

The discursive emphasis upheld by the literature thus far depicts pugilism as being almost exclusively determined from 'above'; the influence of wealthy patronage is depicted as *the* driving force shaping the culture of pugilism. Pugilism is therefore depicted as an unrefined folk practice inevitably manipulated by the socially and economically privileged. This dynamic is widely argued as conducive to the brutal outcomes of pugilistic contests. Although the literature cites many examples confirming the undoubted brutal nature of bare-knuckle fist-fights, it is worth questioning the reliance placed upon sensationalist tales of blood and gore when seeking to gain a fuller understanding of the lived actualities experienced by pugilists.

It is logical to infer that pugilism was transformed into a national pre-occupation largely because of the advancements of printing technology and subsequent circulation of newspapers throughout the land. In this way newsworthy sporting achievements and other events and gossip deemed of worthy attention were relayed in print to an increasingly literary public. Also true is that the mass popularity of pugilism was economically beneficial to the media industry of which, as Sugden (1996) argues, "...a growing interest in sport, particularly boxing, stimulated the birth of sports journalism" (p. 12). It should be acknowledged, therefore, that historical accounts of prize-fighting typically focus on media representations that, at least partially, were accountable to the commercial principles of an industry intent on enhancing the popular appeal of pugilism. As Holt (1989) argues, forces of consumerism from the late 18th century onwards transformed popular cultural traditions into leisure products. A leisure-class of affluent consumers emerged who wished to pursue vicarious excitement via observing and reading dramatic tales of sporting adventure. The media industry was therefore instrumental in transforming pugilism into a commercial enterprise packaged and sold as mass popular entertainment (see Plumb 1974; Brailsford 1988; Holt 1989; Sugden 1996). Equally, the huge and influential popularity of pugilism did much to attract a regular readership eager to be enthralled by the spectacular feats of famous pugilists. Pugilism thus developed a literary life of its own, whereby media depictions promoted upcoming contests and in no small measure shaped and defined the culture of the prize ring to its readership. Equally so, media packaging undoubtedly exerted influence upon the values and meanings of pugilists whose actions danced to the tune of consumerist expectation. Thus, it can justifiably be argued rhetorical representations constituted a complicit element of the actualities of pugilism (see Brailsford 1988).

The foremost such journalism was Pierce Egan's who wrote *'Boxiana; or Sketches of Ancient and Modern Pugilism; From the Days of the Renowned Broughton and Slack to the Heroes of*

the Present Milling Era first published in 1812. Egan's writing provides an invaluable contribution to the social history of early boxing and has been extensively cited in scholarly arguments (see Gorn 1986; Brailsford 1988; Sugden 1996). For instance, Sugden (1996) tells us "Boxiana is one of the most remarkable books to be written about sport" (p. 12) before quoting freely from this source to support his arguments. Much as the print media of today, however, it should be acknowledged that the literary representations penned-in by Egan had a commercial agenda. Therefore it is important to pay heed to the dramatic penmanship from the likes of Egan, largely for the benefit of a select middle-class readership as non-literacy by and large excluded the masses. As Brailsford (1988) points out, although Egan's journalism should be acknowledged, it should also be "...treated with caution to appraise the flights of fancy into which his pre-Dickensian linguistic flourishes frequently led him" (p. 165).

In short, the consumerist sensibilities of newspaper readers attracted equally flamboyant reporting and vice-versa. It should be acknowledged therefore, that the absence of historical data due to the high illiteracy rates among the popular classes, including of course the majority of pugilists themselves, has privileged media accounts over first-hand accounts not part of a consumerist agenda. Much literature fails to acknowledge the paucity of historical record informing pugilism as '*a way of life*' as opposed to sensationalised '*dramatisation of life*'. Moreover it is noticeable that, at intervals, discourse departs from representing pugilism as brutishly violent. This seems to happen when, for the middle and upper classes, the practice of sparring is depicted as significant for its intrinsic and functional benefits. For instance, Sugden (1996 citing Egan 1812 p. 194) argues how young gentlemen saw fist-fighting as a less lethal alternative to swordsmanship, pistol shooting and stick fighting when settling disagreements among themselves:

"But what would rather that they should have had recourse to the manly defence of boxing than the deadly weapons of sword and ball [shot]; from which a bloody nose, or a black eye, might have been the only consequence to themselves and their families, and neither in their feelings or their circumstances be injured; reconciliation with their antagonist – faults mutually acknowledged – and perhaps, become inseparable friends ever afterwards."

In this instance, the practice of pugilism is recognised as being relatively safe, fair and honourable and as such a cathartic practice that can promote strong bonds of friendship between combatants. Further to the function of fist-fighting as a means of satisfying disputes honourably, the significance of pugilism is argued as a means of physical fitness and self-defence. The prevailing rationale clearly privileges the practice of pugilism among the middle and upper classes as a *reaction to violence* rather than as a *representation of violence*.

Similarly, the cultural integrity of ‘combative-pugilism’, as opposed to ‘recreational-pugilism’, has been interpreted in ambiguous terms. For instance, when Sugden (1996) acclaims James Figg for “...showing initiative which predates all other sporting entrepreneurs” (p. 13), it would be fair to presume it was Figg that introduced established cultural mores to the wealthy. It is worth pointing out (beyond fanciful ideas derived from classical literature) that long established customs governing the ethos of pugilistic contests enabled the upper classes to apply rather less bloody practices when settling disputes that, no doubt, commonly ended in mutilation and death as a consequence of sword-fighting or pistol-shooting. As has already been stated, however, the literature makes reference only to the inherent brutality of pugilism. Moreover, pugilism is brutal because it derives meaning from a cultural frame of lived experience that is ‘rough’, poverty stricken and powerless.

The points raised indicate that the literature virtually dismisses the cultural meanings and values defining pugilism from ‘below’ and therefore remains vastly ignorant of a more studied understanding vested from that point of view. As such, limitations and opportunities actualised through pugilism in all variations, combinations and consequences remain under-examined. For example, Brailsford (1985 p. 129) argues:

“The ethos of all eighteenth-century organised sport was two-sided, stemming on the one hand from a concept of “honour”, and on the other from the law of contract. They were apparently very divergent traditions. The notion of honour and self-esteem in sporting combat was at least as old as the age of chivalry, while the legal contract was the new medium through which modern sporting morality found its first expression. The former was customary, largely imprecise and unwritten, felt more than reasoned, and the latter was novel, specific, defined, and objective. Yet there was still sufficient overlap to keep the two together. The subsequent history of the ethics of sport concerns the attempted reconciliation of its two founding traditions”

According to Brailsford’s argument, cultural codes of honour and the concept of reasoned sporting contract are significant in shaping the lived actualities of pugilists. Dramatized accounts of pugilism gleaned solely from media representations may inform very little of the rather more grounded practices and relations signifying realities lying beyond, or negotiated as a consequence of, commercially inspired tales of sensationalist combat. In short, the literature has thus far displayed a lack of a consideration for the possibilities of *negotiable* as opposed to wholly *deterministic* pugilistic actions. Brailsford (1985) provides a useful illustration of the means through which publicly pronounced idealisms of honour and notions of contractual obligation were commandeered by the pugilists themselves. Illustrating notions of honour, with one eye firmly on the gate receipts, the following exchange between Daniel Mendoza and rival John Jackson was conducted through the medium of newspapers:

Daniel Mendoza accused the irreproachable John Jackson of “opprobrious falsity, brazen impudence, or malignant calumny” and of repeatedly raising the stakes to

avoid fighting – “here was courage, here was consistency, here was bottom, and yet Mr Jackson is a man of honour and of his word!!!!”

Illustrating business-like contractual agreement, seemingly signed and sealed via public declaration, Jim Gully and Robert Gregson exchanged the following correspondence in November 1807:

“MR GULLY, - It is the wish of myself and friend that I should try my fortune with you in another battle for £200 a-side. If you are inclined to give me the opportunity, I will thank you to say so, and also to name the time when it will be convenient to meet, to put down stakes, and arrange particulars.

R. GREGSON”

And the reply –

“MR GREGSON, -I accept your challenge, but wish you would make the match for £250 instead of £200 a-side. I shall not delay a moment in returning to town to make necessary arrangements as to time, place, etc.

JIM GULLY”

Thus far such like negotiated actualities remain under-emphasised throughout the literature. As such, it is worth emphasising that pugilists partook in a sporting culture through which the extremes of death and longevity, fair play and brutality, subjective honour and objective professionalism. The task of interpreting their experiences, therefore, call for a more nuanced consideration of rather more organic social dynamic that may allow for the cultural values and practices enacted by pugilists to be something other than those depicted as a consequence of poverty, exploitation, subservience and the like. In short, dominant discourse has thus far only partially understood the vantages of pugilism experienced as a social practice significant from the ‘ground-up’. The literature’s reliance on the deterministic consequences of ideological and economic variables exerted by the powerful in society to fully examine the social significance of pugilism, particularly when solely understood from dramatised media representations, has restricted a fuller understanding of pugilistic realities. Discourse of pugilism’s demise and the legacy inherent from it is examined next.

Fighting traditions in decline or continuity?

The literature informs us that by the last quarter of the 19th century pugilism was outlawed and steadily forced underground to the point of extinction (Gorn 1986; Brailsford 1988; Sugden 1996). The demise of pugilism was in line with industrial capitalists wish to impose dominance over the proletarian workforce. Accordingly, as has been stated earlier in this chapter, the owners of industry wished to reshape national culture in its own image in a bid to ensure progress through piety, productivity and moral correctness (Gorn 1986). As such, by

effectively utilising law enforcement agencies, the new powerbrokers of society sought to alienate the Aristocracy from the masses by subduing their symbolic hold over popular cultural practices such as pugilism. With attendance at pugilistic contests becoming rather risky affairs due to prosecution from increasingly effective law enforcement agencies, Aristocrats steadily withdrew their backing of pugilists, choosing instead to gamble on horse racing (Brailsford 1988).

For Sugden (1996), the lack of Aristocratic backing reduced the significance of pugilism to the point where it became virtually extinct, before re-emerging some decades later as a more socially tolerated version - 'modern' gloved and rule-bound boxing. Some historians, however, resist the notion of an absolute decline of pugilism as a popular pastime (see Hargreaves 1986; Brailsford 1988; Holt 1989). For instance, Holt (1989) argues that despite the absence of aristocratic patronage renowned pugilists resumed their status among working-class communities often competing or organising contests staged in drinking dens, significantly the focal point of informal working-class culture. Likewise Brailsford (1988) argues pugilism continued to be an established feature of popular culture across the land, most notably in the form of travelling fairground booths where journeymen pugilists accepted challenges from locals. Shipley (1989) too makes an interesting point when he states, "...prize fighting at the highest level had been elitist within the working-class, a sub-culture within a culture" (p. 90). Although he fails to articulate the reasons pugilism was proffered elitist accolades, it would be fair to presume the opportunity to earn large sums of money and the benefits apparent in associating with wealthy patrons had been closely guarded. Equally so, to rely solely on economic benefits and prestige by proxy as the overriding variables determining pugilism's elite status can only partially reveal its full cultural resonance. After all, pugilists had over many decades developed and refined a sporting etiquette that included forays into the science of coaching, physical conditioning, tactical acumen and such like. So, rather than being conceived as merely an opportunistic yet unrefined and brutal means to earn fairly large sums of money, pugilism was thought of by many as a skilled craft, much as an autonomous artisan practice and hence a hierarchical occupation on its own right. From this standpoint, it is logical to assume the practice of pugilism retained a strong enough cultural foothold to retain its 'prestigious' identity among the vast majority of the population and as such continue to flourish.

Whether bare-knuckle pugilism had been quashed entirely due to its injurious profile (Sugden 1996), or as a skilled, autonomous and lucrative practice pugilism remained intact among the working-classes (Shipley 1989), it remains that by the end of the 19th century two newly codified forms of fist-fighting emerged - amateur and professional boxing. The developmental

processes contributing to gloved boxing's modern and newly legalised status in society are examined next.

3.3 The Origins of Gloved Boxing

The literature tells us it was public school educated John Grantham Chambers and John Shotts Douglas the 8th Marquess of Queensberry who, by way of introducing boxing to the curriculum of public schools sports in 1867, set in motion the necessary adaptations for the modern sport of boxing to emerge (see Brailsford 1988; Shipley 1989; Sugden 1996; Sheard 1997). As Brailsford (1988 p. 158) argues, these two public school educated men devised a set of rules, the Queensberry Rules, effectively distancing the practice of boxing from bare-knuckle pugilism:

“The original rules appropriated the tempo of the long-standing sparring exhibitions, but they were clearly aimed at establishing a new and amateur sport. With their limitations of fights to three two-minute rounds, plus a fourth if needed for a decision, they were so drastically different from what the prize-ring was accustomed to that they appeared to offer little to fist-fighting”

Undoubtedly, as Sugden (1996) argues, Lord Queensberry's Rules affected a 'civilising spurt' that not only reduced the likelihood of injury through the use of padded gloves and the length of rounds contested, but also a measure of public tolerance that enabled the sport to flourish in a shroud of respectability. Before discussing the ramifications demarcating the newly codified amateur and professional codes of boxing as they either code developed throughout the 20th century, the literature offers some interesting clues as to the cultural reflexivity defining the rule changes deemed to be 'rational' and as such 'civilised'.

Combat, masculinity and style

There is evidence to suggest Lord Queensbury formulated the rules of boxing through values clearly reflecting his own self-interest and prejudice. Besides formulating the new rules and regulations for public school boxing competitions, Lord Queensbury was famed for his legal battle against Oscar Wilde in 1894 and 1895. This dispute arose over Wilde's homosexual relationship with Lord Queensbury's son, Alfred Douglas (Holt 1989 p. 90). Presumably embarrassed at the scandal and subsequent damage arising to his social standing due to his son's affair, Lord Queensbury sued Wilde for accosting his vulnerable and naïve son with indecent proposals. In appealing to the courts that homosexuality transgressed natural norms of physical and moral masculinity Lord Queensbury subsequently won his case. The causality of this court battle in relation to the formalisation of boxing as a rational and more civilised (i.e. rule bound) sports practice, is made apparent when considering that the distinctions made

between notions of masculinity deemed natural or unnatural are evidenced in the content of the rules Lord Queensberry developed for boxing.

Previous to the Queensbury Rules pugilistic contests had been regulated by the London Prize Ring rules, first formulated in 1743 and further amended in 1838 (Gorn 1986; Brailsford 1988; Sugden 1996). Under these rules contests resembled a combination of boxing and wrestling in what amounted to a hybrid form of combat, much like ancient Greek pankration (see Poliakoff 1987; DeGaris 1997). The distinctiveness of pugilism to the newly formulated gloved version of boxing is made clear when considering the sometimes hundreds of rounds contested during bare-knuckle fights. By modern standards this duration seems an incredible feat of endurance. The basis of this assessment, however, is a misunderstanding of what constitutes a round. Under the London Prize Ring rules the round ended when a contestant was knocked down as a result of a throw, trip or blow. The rounds contested could therefore last for many minutes or end in a few seconds, often via wrestling throws or simply self-induced collapse through fatigue. The fallen pugilist was then required to stand behind a line scratched on the floor and resume the next round of the contest, hence the expression widely used in today's language 'coming up to scratch' (see also De Garis 1997).

Lord Queensbury's Rules transformed pugilism in the following ways: the use of gloves; rigidly timed three-minute rounds with one minute rest period; the elimination of wrestling holds and clinches (see Brailsford 1988, appendix a). For most academics the significance of these changes are technical i.e. the introduction of gloves and timed rounds gave the sport a more 'civilised' demeanour. However, it is possible to interpret how Queensbury's self-interest and prejudice contributed to the content of the new rules devised for boxing. The disallowing of clinching or any other form of wrestling between the boxers considerably changed the sport. The insistence that both contestants remained upright to trade blows whilst avoiding any sort of contact, other than glove to skin, can logically be inferred as a stylistic adaptation analogous with Lord Queensbury's homophobia. From this point of view, the rule change disallowing somatic contact between two men as they grappled on the floor while wrestling had much to do with eliminating any possible unseemly taint of homoeroticism as it did for technical reasoning (De Garis 1997). The point made is that the developmental processes deemed rational, such as a stand-up execution of 'pure' athletic skills, were in fact instigations stimulated as a consequence of prejudice, Victorian conservatism, self-interest or whatever other whim of those with the necessary power to affect change in society. This serves to illustrate one instance of cultural manipulation by those with the power to exercise institutional control in society.

Whatever the rationale contributing to the development of the rules of boxing, it remains that the Queensberry Rules were applied to both the amateur and professional codes of boxing. Equally clear is that each version of boxing developed autonomously from one another (see Hargreaves 1986; Brailsford 1988; Holt 1989; Shipley 1989; Sammons 1990; Sugden 1996). As such, the underlying ramifications of cultural ideologies deemed ‘rational’ and ‘irrational’ in Victorian and Pre-Victorian society are particularly significant when evaluating the meanings, identities and experiences constructed by contemporary amateur and professional boxing-practitioners. In particular, the symbolic legacy of pugilism needs to be acknowledged as defining (in differing permutations) the development of modern amateur and professional boxing in England. The unique social processes contributing to the development of either version of boxing from the late 19th century onwards are examined next.

3.4 Amateurism and Boxing

In order to fully understand the social significance of contemporary amateur boxing, the developmental processes contributing to the ideals enshrining amateurism as an appropriate moral image in the practice of sport (see Morgan 1993), by way of the Victorian public schools system, need be acknowledged. In this respect it was the physical education system of elitist public schools in England that gave birth to the notion of amateurism in the practice of sport from the 19th century onwards. The prominence of this brand of sporting idealism became global when the founder of the Olympic games, Pierre De Coubertin, was greatly influenced by the ethos of public school sports when he dreamt up the philosophy of Olympism and through it the educational capacities of sport (see Mangan 1981; Hargreaves 1986; Holt 1989; Kidd 1996; Horne et al 1999; Mueller 2000; Girginov and Parry 2005). In a published letter in *La Gazette de Lausanne* in 1919, Coubertin argued for the educative function of boxing for young people²:

“It is not so paradoxical to call boxing a “pacifying sport”. In English public schools the masters used to nickname boxing gloves “Keepers of the peace”. And in fact they fulfilled this function to the general satisfaction...This is not surprising. In both youth and man there exists a fighting instinct which is not only excusable but normal, and which can only be appeased by affording some outlet. That is why a boy’s education is not complete without some contact with ‘combat sports’.

Pierre De Coubertin – Olympic Letter XV: The Value Of Boxing (Mueller 2000)

It is interesting to note that around the same time and in seeming confirmation with Coubertin, Theodore Roosevelt opened many boxing clubs in the poorer quarters of New York (Mueller 2000). Therefore, the evidence suggests that powerful world figureheads

afforded boxing value quite distinct from the stigmatised (as according to the literature) traditions of its bare-knuckle forefather. Of course, as Coubertin himself tells us, boxing as a ‘rational’ sporting recreation reflected the institutionalised ideals of the elitist public school system through which amateur boxing in England, and to degrees the rest of the world, was founded. It is this formative stage of amateur boxing development that is examined next.

Public school origins - from ‘Rough’ to ‘Civilised’

Mangan’s (1981) seminal study of the ideals of athleticism, first implemented in the public schools system of the 19th century, reveals how sport was used to nurture upcoming generations of political and professional elite. In what he terms the ‘ideology of athleticism’, Mangan (1981 p. 9) argues sport was administered as a vehicle for public school boys to develop key attributes as future leaders of society:

“Physical education, it was believed, would cultivate desirable moral values: Physical and moral courage; loyalty and cooperation; the capacity to act fairly and take defeat well; and the ability to command and obey...For many in the Victorian and Edwardian public schools, games became ‘the wheel round which the moral values turned’. It was a genuinely and extensively held belief that they inspired virtue; they developed manliness; they formed character”

The ideology through which the public school system eulogised the functional benefits of physical education is clearly made apparent. Ideals of fair-play and sportsmanship were seen as synonymous with the character traits of the ‘virtuous’ Gentleman. Far from being conceived purely in moralistic overtones, however, it is also the case that sport became a means by which the new ruling class could develop “...a firm identity as a prerequisite for wielding authoritative power” (Hargreaves 1986 p. 40). The literature contributes interesting examinations of how the symbolic power of ‘Gentlemanly’ sporting etiquette was put to the service of ‘the system’. As Holt (1989) argues, the culture of public school education during the 18th and 19th centuries had encouraged physical assertiveness as a means of discipline and all-round robust character development, often through the sanctioning of unofficial violence between boys. It was common for Harrow and Eton boarders to engage in fist-fights among themselves, with local navvies, butcher-boys and even professional pugilists, with serious injury or even death recorded. By way of example, Holt (1989 p. 78) illustrates the following incident between two well-healed public school boys engaging in what appears an organised pugilistic affair, as opposed to a ‘Gentlemanly’ sporting encounter:

“The most notorious instance involved the youngest son of Lord Shaftesbury, who died in 1825 after a fight with another boy that lasted two and a half hours. This match had been properly arranged as a prize-fight might have been, each boy having a ‘second’. Significantly Shaftesbury refused to prosecute through the courts in what had been a fair fight between equals. Aristocratic morality required that what had been a duel by fists should be respected, even when the participants were only thirteen and fourteen years of age”

It is clear from this and other examples of public school life (see Holt 1989) that rough customs held sway with the elite and were unofficially tolerated or even encouraged. Holt argues the incidence of physical assertiveness among pupils was so prevalent public school Governors feared it might spiral out of control. Thus, the culture of rough physicality was effectively directed away from the possibility of it fermenting into unruly and disruptive behaviour directed toward school authoritarianism by being incorporated as the muscular-morality appropriated for the public school system itself. Not surprisingly the practice of boxing was deemed ideally suited for this purpose. In every way therefore, threads of continuity deriving from the bare-knuckle traditions of pugilism were perpetuated, albeit in the institutionalised guise of ‘Gentlemanly amateur boxing’. The genesis of amateur boxing as a codified form of athletic competition, as intended to cultivate the privileged status of the pupils the public school system catered for, is discussed next.

Ideological and practical elitism

By the time the Queensberry cup amateur boxing championship took place at the enclosed stadium of Lillie Bridge in 1869, the ideal type of the contestants required an air of social and economic exclusivity, as Shipley (1989 p. 81) tells us:

“Lillie Bridge boxing championships contestants came from a narrow social spectrum. They were invariably middle-class. References could be demanded on entry, there was a fee, but the chief reason was the exclusiveness of amateur boxing clubs. At Cestus BC, for example, which met at the Oval cricket ground, membership was by ballot at a general meeting, ‘one black ball in five to exclude’”.

The barriers of exclusivity demarcating the ‘Gentlemanly’ practice of amateur boxing from the populist practice of pugilism further extended to the style deemed appropriate of amateur competition. According to Holt (1989), a true amateur was encouraged to “...never take advantage of an opponent that he would not expect his opponent to take over him” (p. 99), always play to the rules without “...giving the impression of strain” (p. 100) and even forgo practice because “...gentlemen were not supposed to toil and sweat for their laurels!” (p. 100). The real extent such moral and stylistic nuances applied to boxing contests is clearly debatable. It is more likely, as Holt (1989) argues, that such discourse reinforced practical exclusion of working-class participants by being critical of “...not only the fanaticism and violence of working-class sports but the seriousness and intensity with which it is taken by members of its own class” (p. 100). The opposition to professional boxing not only depicted a primitive, dangerous and immoral practice bearing no resemblance to the more ‘civilised’ amateur ethos of competition, it also served to defy the popular customs and commercial interests of groups deemed oppositional. Also true, however, is that Victorian public school sports-amateurism, albeit shrouded in the grandeur of elitism, developed ethical dimensions

encouraging not only respect for written rules but also a distinctive spirit of athletic competition. As such, with ethical ideologies and stylistic sensibilities firmly in place, the divide with professional boxing and the social groups that supported it was justified as ‘rational’ and indeed ‘moral’. As is discussed next from this institutionalised model of athleticist ideology amateur boxing was administered to the rest of society at large.

Amateurism, boxing and the working-classes

As has been stated earlier in this chapter, the athletic ethos of amateur boxing took on a functional semblance through which the next generation of Britain’s elite learned valuable lessons in leadership and obedience in preparation for their roles within the “power network” (Hargreaves 1986 p. 38) of society. Such men, the products of ‘the system’, subsequently instigated the development of the voluntary sport network. Accordingly, the literature stresses the impetus of social organisation from ‘above’ when seeking to evaluate the significance of amateur sports for the working classes (see Hargreaves 1986; Sugden 1996; Horne et al 1999; Saintsbury 1999; Smith and Porter 2000).

According to the literature the Amateur Boxing Association was formed in 1880; just one of the major governing bodies designated to administer sport for the benefit of society at large during this period (see Hargreaves 1986; Holt 1989, Shipley 1989, Sugden 1996; Polley 1998; Horne et al 1999). Unlike many other sporting activities, however, whereby rules and regulations were put in place to protect the spatial divide between well-healed ‘Gentleman Amateurs’ from social inferiors, amateur boxing quickly became an almost exclusively working-class participant sport. As Shipley (1989) argues, “Boxing thrives where the proletariat is working over-time” (p. 98). The relative ease by which boxing could be facilitated in crowded urban spaces in the guise of affordable recreation for manual workers supports Shipley’s observation. It is also logical to infer that the provision of boxing would be an attractive proposition for working-class boys and men as they had enjoyed tales of pugilistic lore for many decades. As such, the popularity of amateur boxing as an identifiable relative of pugilism and now readily accessible ‘for all’ living in densely populated urban spaces is made apparent.

It is equally apparent, however, that the underpinning values signifying amateur boxing as ‘rational’ recreation for the working-classes derived meaning from the cultural specificities inherited from public school ideologies as opposed to the practice of pugilism that, by definition, was pragmatically and symbolically a far closer approximate to working-class cultural sensibilities. To offer a critical understanding of amateur boxing in England,

therefore, it is important to explore the bind (or not) between the ideals of ‘Gentlemanly’ amateurism in the practice of sports and the symbolic resonance of boxing as a working-class ‘elitist’ cultural phenomenon discussed previously in this chapter.

Strands of tradition (1)... Social control and resistance

Much literature stipulates that social reform initiatives on the one hand and concerns with ensuring industrial productivity on the other hand contributed to a national framework of amateur sports provision for the working-classes (see Hargreaves 1986; Holt 1989, 1991; Shipley 1989; Kew 1997; Sleaf 1998; Horne et al 1999). Likewise, the development of amateur boxing is attributed as an initiative of Muscular Christian social reform propagated for lower orders via the church and other social agencies (Sugden 1996). In this guise, amateur boxing was conceived as a tool promoting lessons in health, education and morality to the working-classes. Of course, such initiatives also served the needs of industrial owners by cultivating a more disciplined, cohesive and productive workforce. As Sleaf (1998) tells us, “...many businesses invested in sports facilities to increase fitness and productivity, while also encouraging a sense of loyalty” (p. 93). Amateur boxing was believed to be particularly functional in this regard as it served purpose for disciplining a potentially unruly workforce via a regulated yet suitably ‘rough’ sporting outlet.

In a similar vein of thought, Hargreaves (1986) maintains “bourgeois intellectual” (p. 48) groups retention of the administrative and ideological organisation in society controlled the lower orders although via more subtle processes of subjugation. In what he labels the “philanthropic strategy” (p. 58) of social reform, Hargreaves argues the gaze of authority was extended via the voluntary aegis of sports provision. The infrastructure of amateur sports provision proved to be hegemonic in this way because dominant groups retained their authority through the power of administration, whilst workers/practitioners became internally divided into ‘respectable’ elements who conformed to the disciplinarian ideals of the amateur code and the ‘rough’ who did not. By this analogy, intra-class divisions served to impose measures of internal regulation thus maintaining the status quo. Hargreaves (1986 p. 85) makes the complexity of this process and the way it became ‘naturally’ manifest explicit:

“The dominant classes’ control and influence over working-class people’s free time which was manifested in sports, was effective not because there was a ruling-class master plan, which was inexorably put into practice, but precisely because dominant groups’ responses were not monolithic, because the working-class was internally divided and, in different ways, was willing to tune into the wavelengths upon which dominant groups were broadcasting”.

In this way, manual workers wilfully consented to their own subjugation by retaining relative control over their sporting agency albeit only in and through their divisive intra-cultural attachments with their sporting institutions. Hargreaves illustrates this point well when referring to the almost total exclusion of women in the male dominated sport cultures of that time, boxing of course being (and mostly still is) one of them. He maintains the crystallisation of male chauvinist attitudes in working-class sports was a compensation "...for the loss of autonomy in other spheres" (p. 79). As such, the voluntary sporting infrastructure in the face of the alienating landscape of industrial capitalism soon became to represent "...a haven into which working-class men could withdraw with an enhanced sense of their own dignity and identity" (ibid). This aided bourgeois control because workers frustrations and consequent potential for political radicalism was in effect contained and counteracted. Of course more work is needed to define 'male chauvinism' and the ways it relates to particular sporting cultures (see Connell 1990; Messner 1990; DeGaris 2000). Nonetheless, Hargreaves makes an interesting argument of how male dominated working-class sporting institutions served to engender a 'macho' culture of resistance that, in turn, was internally contested within the working-class context through which the cultural production of boxing took place. Moreover, in the final analysis, this social dynamic served to perpetuate industrial workers inferior social status.

For Sugden (1996) the predominant manifestation of working-class resistance was the opportunity to participate in "...an officially sanctioned alternative to street fighting" (p. 27). Accordingly, once amateur boxing clubs featured prominently in the crowded spaces of the urban poor Sugden argues control was soon rested from the reformers clutch. For Sugden, therefore, the meaning of amateur boxing for working-class boys and men reflected the violent folk customs of 'rough play' and its offspring pugilism, albeit in an institutionally sanctioned form. As is discussed next, however, Holt (1989) deploys an alternative frame of analysis to define the values through which boxing-practitioners constructed experiences.

Strands of tradition (2)... boxing and community

Holt (1989) too acknowledges messages for moral reform and education were widely ignored by the "...dangerous classes of unskilled, casual labour" (p. 137), such as those concentrated in the East-End of London that up to this day are hotbeds of both amateur and professional boxing. Equally, he argues initiatives from industrial employers were "...not very widespread" (p. 143) and when introduced were on the most part shunned by adult workers. For Holt, however, the institutionalised framework of amateur sports provision became meaningful to the working classes because it replaced "...older rites of passage, which were increasingly lost as the apprenticeship system declined" (p. 154). In this frame of

consideration, amateur boxing clubs such as the St Pancras³ held meaning as community run initiatives of which affiliation provided a strong sense of personal pride and collective fellowship in thickly populated and anonymous city-urban landscapes. This line of argument is significant because it allows for the possibility of more humanistic meanings and values associated with the practice of amateur boxing beyond those stressing the limiting characteristics of poverty, rough socialisation, macho resistance and the like.

Nonetheless, despite arguing for a more humanistic strand of logic to the meanings ascribed amateur boxing, Holt insists the athletic properties of boxing remained proximate to the street fighting orientations of the ‘roughs’ in society. As evidence he relays how Benny Lynch, who became world flyweight champion in 1935, had his face slashed by a Protestant gang in the notorious Gorbals district in Glasgow as a young boy. In reasoning “...the lore of the street in slum areas...spilled over into more organized pub fights” (p. 149) where the likes of Lynch learned how to box, Holt is keen to emphasise continuity with the rough and ready bare-knuckle fighting traditions of the past. Accordingly, for Holt (1989 p. 149), the culture lubricating the athletic practice of amateur boxing is closely related to the rough customs of the pugilists of old:

“Boxing came to take the place of the old animal baiting, the rapping, and the cock-fighting that had gone on in the upper rooms and the courtyards of innumerable alehouses until the middle years of the nineteenth century. The line between being an amateur and a professional was hazy when it came to pub contests. Fighting, after all, was part of a pub culture and some of the matches were little more than regulated brawls, extensions of the street-fighting tradition that was so much a part of the world of the poorer working-class.”

Unfortunately, although stating a ‘hazy’ demarcation existed between amateur and professional boxing Holt fails to elaborate any further. Instead, he chooses to associate amateur boxing solely with street “hardness” (p. 149) and its close associate ‘pub-brawling’. Such rather one-dimensional reasoning can only partially explain the emergence of a sporting code made distinguishable by segregated space, philosophy and athletic style from its professional counterpart. Did the culture of amateur boxing exist as an extension of, or in opposition to, customs and traditions deemed to be ‘rough’, ‘un-sporting’, ‘immoral’ and the like? How was amateur and professional boxing either similar or differentiated in social organisation and athletic practice? These and many more questions may be asked of the rather narrow causation between street fighting and the significance of amateur boxing as a working-class sporting code and social practice. Below Shipley (1989) offers a number of interesting standpoints through which to examine such issues by considering how *specific* meanings and values defined the athletic and social identity of amateur boxing.

Strands of tradition (3)... prestige for all

For Shipley (1989) a more organised and economically stable industrial workforce was able to stamp its own cultural values to define the athletic practice and social identity of amateur boxing. Consequently, since the formation of the ABA it took only a short space of time for a sports infrastructure catering specifically for the practice of amateur boxing to develop alongside and independent from professional boxing, with clubs opening "...in their hundreds at pubs and polytechnics, working men's clubs and church halls" (p. 90). Accordingly, Shipley (1989 p. 83) argues the rationale for working-class interest in amateur boxing differs from the normative assumption associating boxing endeavour as like-for-like with street or pub brawls:

"This [amateur boxing] should not be seen as street fighting moving indoors and using gloves. This was a new interest for boys because the clubs had only just been established, and street fighting, which the young can usually avoid if they choose to, carried on...Street fighting youth tended not to join clubs. They were anarchistic, and clubs had rules".

As has been stated previously in this chapter, Shipley speculates pugilism was considered to be an elitist occupation among the working-classes. As such, it can be inferred that the popularity of amateur boxing was as much due to its accessibility for all-comers to have the opportunity to emulate the famed local and national heroes of pugilistic renown. It should also be recognised, however, those opportunities only became possible due to ABA organisers willingness to spend their free time administering a framework of regional, national and international competition. The bind between the cultural identity of amateur boxing as an athletic experience and social practice and the ABA organisational capacity premised on the ideals of public school amateurism is discussed next.

Strands of tradition (4)... amateurism and boxing 'to win'

The literature is ambiguous when addressing the relation between the belief systems of those administrating boxing as a 'rational' recreation and the cultural values of the practitioner community. As Shipley (1989) argues, the formative class exclusiveness of 'Gentlemanly' amateur boxing was fractured by the likes of stockbroker Jack Angle who, by forming the ABA, encouraged competition for all (p. 90). Nonetheless, Shipley maintains a clear divide between organisers and participants existed. He argues, "...the gentlemen of the ABA were much more likely to be stockbrokers than clock punchers at a factory, yet they administered a sport at which the working-class won almost all the prizes" (p. 86). Holt (1989) expands upon this argument by maintaining that the "...administrative history of sports merges into the wider history of British institutions" (p. 110). Accordingly, the theoretical ideal of access for all in the voluntary governance of amateur sports was largely dependent upon one's ability to

execute skills of an administrative-bureaucratic nature, extensively the province of the professional classes. As such, be it through academic ability, free time or possession of the necessary social and organisational skills, the governance of amateur boxing implies a middle-class cultural affair. Disappointingly, the literature offers no further examination of the relationship between middle-class norms of administration/organisation and working-class cultural sensibilities towards athletic engagement of amateur boxing in England. As has been discussed earlier in this chapter, however, Hargreaves (1986) argues amateurism and the voluntary sports network "...in complex ways reproduced internal divisions...which mitigated opposition between the classes" (p. 67). Taking this argument into consideration, attention needs to be paid to the possibility of contested meanings and values prevalent *within* the amateur boxing community. With such issues in mind, discourse of the social significance of late-20th century amateur boxing is considered next.

Amateurism and boxing in the 20th Century and beyond

"Amateur boxing calls for great physical fitness, mental toughness and a high level of self-discipline. It also generates a sense of *fair play* and *sportsmanship* which continues to influence behaviour for a lifetime. However, none of this would be possible without the dedication and commitment of voluntary trainers, officials and administrators".

Philip, Duke of Edinburgh (cited in Saintsbury 1999 p. 3 emphasis added).

Much like the influential support extended by the likes of Coubertin and Roosevelt at the turn of the 20th century, Prince Philip extends his blessing to the functional value of amateur boxing for the boxer and the society s/he lives in nearly one hundred years on. The values of 'fair play' and 'sportsmanship' and the cultivation of a 'tough' and 'disciplined' mind and body are clearly propagated as core to the meaning and value of amateur boxing as an athletic experience and social practice. Equally, the ethos of volunteerism is recognised as a central tenet lubricating the beliefs of those spending their free time facilitating boxing for the benefit of amateur boxers. A clear illustration of the prevailing ideology through which contemporary amateur boxing is deemed beneficial for both the boxer and the society s/he lives in, is evidenced in Saintsbury's publication "*In Praise of Boxing – an exposition of a great sport*" (1999) presented to Parliament in defence of amateur boxing. Saintsbury tirelessly forwards the notion of the 'Noble Art of Self-Defence' by claiming boxing instils in many young men from underprivileged backgrounds a disciplined fortitude, health benefits, wholesome morals and often deters a life of crime:

"Many schools can claim that, by teaching law-abiding boys to defend themselves and law-breaking boys to accept the sportsmanship of the ring, playgrounds became happier places." (p. 5)...It is well documented that the appalling increase in youth crime is drug related; what does not appear to be recognised by these same authorities

is that the drug culture and boxing are incompatible. For the boxer a healthy lifestyle is essential; he must eschew drugs but also alcohol, tobacco and late hours. Good health must be his aim and moderation his rule of life” (p. 20)

From this point of view, the social significance of amateur boxing for both the boxer and the society s/he lives in clearly upholds functional benefits engineered through the nurturing altruism of the dedicated army of volunteers who, in turn, instil in boxers ‘the sportsmanship of the ring’. It is interesting to note, however, since the poor results of Team GB at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games were attributed to lack of financial support for elite athletes sources of funding are now made available for international boxers (see Hill 2007). The World Class Programme, a scheme funded by the National Lottery and administered by Sport England, has been designed to facilitate international success via the long-term nurturing of talented boxers. More precisely, high calibre amateur boxers are effectively rewarded through economic principles (see ABAE Official Handbook, 2003 pp. 49 – 53). The case of Amir Khan the seventeen year-old silver medallist in the Athens 2004 Olympic Games illustrates this point. After much speculation as to how the ABAE was going to ‘keep him’ from the lure of lucrative offers made by eager professional boxing promoters queuing to acquire his signature, they finally proposed a financial package estimated at £75000 per annum (see *Boxing Monthly* Oct. 2004)⁴.

It seems reasonable to suggest, therefore, that the contemporary era of amateur boxing symbolically validates monetary instrumentalism alongside the ‘honour’ of representing England in prestigious international tournaments, most notably the Olympic Games. Thus, monetarism can be seen to encroach upon the voluntary ethos of altruism through which amateur boxing is perceived to serve purpose as a socialising agent. Equally, the receipt of funding in relation to athletic development seems to blur the dichotomy between amateur and professional boxing. As is discussed below, the literature offers detailed arguments as to the social significance of amateur boxing to those who choose to channel their aspirations in and develop through its competitive infrastructure.

Socialising the inner-city ‘rough’

Theorisation of the social significance of amateur boxing in Britain has been limited to Sugden’s (1996) ethnographic analysis of the Holy Family amateur boxing club, situated in the notorious New Lodge estate of ethno-religiously divided Belfast in Northern Ireland. Sugden (1996 p. 101) discusses the nexus of deviant social mores defining the everyday existence of the amateur boxers he based his findings on:

“In certain respects the New Lodge is not unlike inner-city, low income housing estates throughout the United Kingdom. Juvenile misbehaviour follows a familiar

pattern and includes such things as alcohol abuse, car theft, joy riding, petty theft, vandalism, gang fighting, sexual promiscuity, solvent abuse and some drug taking and drug dealing”

For Sugden, the (often deviant) cultural fabric defining life on the New Lodge instils the prerequisite traits in boys and young men for boxing to appear appealing in the first place, and equips them with the attributes to persist with the rigours of the sport thereafter. As such, Sugden argues the prototypical boxer derives from “...a social environment within which having scant regard for authority, being cocksure and reckless are valued attributes in a rough-and-tumble, dog-eat-dog daily routine” (p. 99). Accordingly, inner-city boys are attracted to boxing because it offers a socially legitimate outlet resonating with their ‘cocksure’ and ‘reckless’ identities. Once socialised into the disciplined rituals of training, however, amateur boxing clubs serve to instil a measure of order, continuity and an ethos of fellowship to inner-city youth. Also, for “...kids who are ‘tough-tough’ and who have little else going for them” (p. 183) amateur boxing gymnasiums serve as a sanctuary from the unregulated and far more destructive violence of say, sectarian terrorism in Belfast and drive-by gangland shootings in Hartford, USA.

By this measure Sugden insists that the athletic practice of amateur boxing is perceived serves purpose as a ‘rational’ recreation. Nonetheless, he maintains that any notion of civility associated with the practice of amateur boxing is an essential contradiction to the ethos called upon for boxers to succeed in the ring. Sugden argues the athletic experience of amateur boxing requires participants to exercise paradoxical traits. On the one hand, they must develop a high propensity for disciplined fortitude necessary to develop a high level of fitness and learn the skills of boxing. On the other hand, they must maintain a healthy dose of ‘rough’, ‘hungry’, ‘cocksure’ or whatever else demeanour to be able to maintain the intensity to overcome opponents in the combative challenge of boxing. Coaches are well aware of the traits needed to secure ring success and are therefore adept at harnessing the ‘rough’ identities of young men who have come under their guidance. In this way, under the paternalistic guidance of coaches, amateur boxing clubs can be understood as nurturing environments in which heart-felt beliefs lubricate essentially civilised interactions among participants. As much as the logic of coaches is well-meaning, however, it is applied so that boxers can handle the physically demanding and sometimes harsh challenge to succeed in the ring. As such Sugden argues that, for juvenile ‘roughs’, amateur boxing can justifiably be considered a fun and essentially beneficial physical recreation on its own terms. Nonetheless, he maintains as youngsters mature they become captivated by the single-minded appeal of the sport. In doing so, they learn to increasingly identify with the performance capabilities and achievements of

older boxers who have displayed the necessary ‘hungry’ fortitude to attain a measure of success. In order to emulate their older and talented peers they too seek to progress the performance hierarchies of amateur boxing competition. In this way, a steady stream of aspirant boxers effortlessly become socialised into accepting the rather harsh, albeit athletically codified, ethos of boxing competition. It is at this juncture that the ideology of amateurism lubricating the meanings and values of amateur boxing-practitioners conflates with the harsh realities of their ghettoised life-circumstances. By cultivating a moral dimension that delineates “...the boundary between aggression and violence” (p. 129) amateur boxing coaches subscribe to a belief system of non-tolerance toward unregulated ‘street’ violence. The amateur boxing community is thus able to reinforce its identity as a legitimate sporting culture that survives despite the violence, crime, drug dependency and a host of other deviances endemic within these communities. Thus, by implication, the athletic ethos of amateur boxing competition makes ‘sense’ only through rather harsh and limiting life circumstances subscribed by poverty. More specifically, as is discussed below, Sugden argues the lure of stardom and the opportunity to earn millions in the professional boxing entertainment industry exerts overbearing symbolic power over aspirant amateur boxers.

Symbolic power and economic necessity

For Sugden (1996), the ideology of amateurism lubricating the value and belief systems of amateur boxing-practitioners are inevitably reduced to merely legitimising the profit maximising concerns of the business impresarios controlling the professional boxing entertainment industry. Sugden (1996 p. 181) describes this process as being a ‘farm system’ whereby boxer’s desires are progressively orientated toward the professional ring:

“...amateur boxing, almost from its inception, has been incorporated into the farm system which recruits and trains professionals. The amateur boxing club provides the link between the two worlds. In this regard, while amateur boxing can be, and perhaps should be, viewed as a sport in its own right, it must also be seen as a means for the development of professional boxers”

As young men mature and commit more of their time and effort to amateur boxing in a bid to scale the ‘hierarchical performance’ (Morgan 1994) structure of competition they inevitably come to perceive professional boxing as a viable career option. Coupled with already disadvantaged life-circumstances and enamoured by the possibility of earning otherwise unattainable economic rewards and the associational promise of social mobility, young men are eager to fulfil their destinies as boxers. This orientation is largely tacit because amateur boxers have constructed social identities almost wholly made meaningful via the aspirant ethos adopted during training and competition. Sugden point out, however, that for the vast majority who opt to pursue a professional career the occupational culture of boxing is

unprofitable and highly dangerous. By these terms, the belief that amateur boxing serves purpose as a personal and social good legitimises and reinforces the profit maximising ethos of the professional boxing entertainment industry. In turn, by way of paradox, professional boxing is an athletic practice premised upon commercial gain and therefore is geared to exploit boxers stock in trade – their ability to entertain by physically abusing their opponents and their own bodies. As Sugden concludes, “...the meaning of boxing within the subculture is constructed in such a way that fighters are led to conspire in the exploitation of their own disadvantage” (p. 186).

Albeit offering richly detailed and logically reasoned arguments as to the social significance of amateur boxing the following points of critique of Sugden’s thesis are worth raising. No doubt Sugden’s initial case study of a US gymnasium catering for both amateur and professional boxers revealed a heavily ingrained ethos of professionalism (see Sugden 1987; 1996)⁵. As such, an established ‘farm system’ channelling amateur boxers toward a professional orientation was firmly in place. In this particular context of analysis, therefore, many (but not all) boxers were freely socialised into a professional outlook subordinating, at least in Sugden’s eyes, the significance of amateur boxing. The criticism here, particularly in England where two clearly defined codes of boxing exist, is that a reliance on variables denoting economic impoverishment to illustrate the symbolic power professional boxing exerts over amateur boxing-practitioners, almost wholly subordinates the possibilities of amateur boxing as an athletic experience and social practice on its own terms⁶.

Sugden further exhibits his pre-occupation with amateur boxing as exclusively a practice of ‘the ghetto’ by placing great emphasis on the notion of ‘hardness’ that many academics associate as a euphemism of daily existence in poverty-stricken Britain that, by definition, also propels young men to pursue boxing as their chosen sport. For instance Sugden insists John, a ‘serious boxer’ at the Holy Family ABC and also an economics undergraduate at Queen’s University in Belfast, aspires to box as “...a means of keeping in touch with the more elemental aspects of his own nature, which he also seeks to control” (p. 110). He goes on to contrast John’s ‘primitive’ interest in boxing with his intellectual character he displays in university lecture theatres by insisting that, apart from being somewhat of an oddity among his fellow boxers, John’s academic aspirations have to be reconciled with his desire “...to keep one foot firmly grounded in the street culture of north Belfast” (p. 110). Seemingly, for Sugden, there is a contradiction between a quest for academic achievement and the demands set of a sport rooted in the elemental desires of mankind. It is clear, therefore, that apart from severely restricting the athletic properties of amateur boxing to a primitive human urge and/or

a consequence of poverty, he necessarily disregards the possibilities of boxing as, for instance, a 'tool' compatible with academic achievement or any other developmental capacity. Surely, whether amateur boxing is violent, civilised, hard, educational, aggressive, moral or else, the start point and perhaps end point of analysis is better arrived from an informed deconstruction of the athletic properties of amateur boxing as an experiential phenomenon. Failing to fully understand boxing from the practitioner's perspective runs the risk of erroneously misrepresenting its culture.

In short, although Sugden throughout his richly evoked and cognizant ethnographic analyses makes reference to the possibilities for intrinsic emancipation, ultimately any such consequences are considered illusory due to the structural determinism of capitalism at the 'rough' end of the social scale. Further still, the symbolic power exerted by the promise of the exorbitant economic rewards realised by the few superstar professional boxers, reinforces the sense of futility associated with the guiding rational-recreation tenets defining the value system of the amateur boxing community as it is lived in and through the harsh realities of poverty. As much as this standpoint is hard to resist, while stressing economic considerations above all other human motivations and actions, it is also the case that Sugden subordinates the cultural identity of amateur boxing to the extent he more or less dismisses the sports potential for engendering possibilities for cultivating self-awareness, self-development or any other self-actualisation of one's humanistic potential (see Cashmore 1982).

3.5 Professionalism and Boxing

Outside of Shipley's (1989) social-historical study scant analysis exists detailing the social significance of amateur and professional boxing in England. Thus far empirically sustained theorisation of the occupational culture of professional boxing has been exclusively gleaned from US-based research. Accordingly, a normative typology has emerged; 'the professional boxer' is male, young, African-American and knowingly or unknowingly driven to pursue professional boxing as a consequence of life-circumstances limited by poverty. Professional boxing from this vantage of examination takes on meaning as one of the only viable and/or legal means to escape the predicaments of unemployment or low status work, a criminal lifestyle, prison, drug addiction, general hopelessness and any other bleak consequences (see Weinberg and Arond 1952; Furst 1971; Hare 1971; Sugden 1996; Wacquant 2004). It is clear, therefore, that professional boxing as anything other than an athletic/social practice of the ghetto remains under-examined. In this chapter discursive issues informing 'British ways of professional boxing' are discussed. Interspersed within this overview the main body of theory

evaluating professional boxing as it exists in the US is considered in a relational capacity to the aims set of this study.

Professional boxing in England: foundations and developmental perspectives

Although the literature concurs that professional boxing emerged from the outlawed practice of pugilism sometime in the last quarter of the 19th century, there is disagreement when considering the formative social processes contributing to the development of the modernised (gloved and rule-bound) code of professional boxing (see Brailsford 1988; Shipley 1989; Sugden 1996). Such arguments are an important consideration when wishing to interpret the meanings and values manifest in contemporary English professional boxing and equally important in critically evaluating existing discourse.

According to Brailsford (1988), as society evolved so did the expectations of audiences paying good money to be entertained by sporting spectacles. This shift in consumer demand reflected the prevailing winds of scientific exactitude characterising the era of modernity. Moreover, elite boxers and other sportsmen were expected to display rather more refined ‘scientific’ displays of athletic virtuosity in competitive challenges framed by recognisable rules and regulations pertaining toward fair play, as opposed to cruder spectacle of brute force and endurance displayed by pugilists of yesteryear. Thus, a professionalised code of boxing emerged from the ashes of pugilism, adopting the same Marquess of Queensberry Rules as the amateur code. In effect, Brailsford argues consumer expectations stimulated the ‘sportinisation’ processes necessary for the future development of professional boxing.

The stimulus for reform arose under the influential governance of the National Sporting Club (NSC) during the 1890’s. A strictly middle-class institution, the NSC upheld an identity that was “...respectable [regulating] highly controlled contests under strict rules” (Brailsford 1988 p. 159). The sanction of the Lonsdale Belt in recognition of champions at different weight categories (as used in present-day boxing) arguably afforded the NSC the role of, “...an institution that set standards, defined and refined codes, with officers and members whose conduct was above reproach, being wealthy, middle-class businessmen” (Harding 1994 p. 3). It should also be acknowledged that the NSC afforded boxers association with a ‘respectable’ and thus influential social clique out of the reach of the vast majority of the populace during the dawn of industrial Britain. One could argue, therefore, that from the outset the NSC afforded its membership, both patrons and boxers, access to an ‘elitist’ and lucrative field of free market enterprise. The NSC, however, was predisposed to upholding the ‘old’ customs and traditions of pugilism, as Brailsford (1988 p. 159) observes:

“The Queensberry Rules in their first form sanitised the sport they had known out of all recognition, and they were particularly reluctant to surrender the concept of fighting to exhaustion. Various compromises eventually produced the Queensberry Rules of Endurance, the basis of the modern rules of professional boxing”

Unfortunately Brailsford’s research concentrates on the social history of pugilism and therefore precludes extending analysis informing modern professional boxing. Nonetheless, his arguments are of interest in that he situates the culture of professional boxing as being intimately aligned with the customs and values of pugilism. This is an important consideration when seeking to evaluate the more ‘sportinised’ code of professional boxing and its proximity to the amateur code. In particular, if the NSC upheld a measure of legitimacy as a middle-class institution, it should also be noted that long established cultural mores such as the style of combat and gambling propensities were also emulated as of yesteryear. As Harding (1994) argues, “This alternative point of view [the intent and purpose of the NSC] stressed the way the Club used its powerful, albeit benevolent, dictatorship virtually to control pro-boxing at the highest level purely for its own amusement” (p. 3). If, as Harding continues, the truth lies between the extremes of “...the romantic elitist and the pragmatic commercial” (ibid), the literature contributes two perspectives to this issue. Both frames of thought are useful when seeking to evaluate the subsequent social processes shaping and defining the contemporary culture of professional boxing in England.

From pragmatism to aesthetics

Sugden (1996) is critical of the new-found legitimacy afforded the commercialised subculture of professional boxing. He argues the rules and regulations codifying professional boxing contests merely afforded a vestige of athletic legitimacy to what, to all intents and purposes, remained an entertainment industry premised on the same brand of brutal exploitation as bare-knuckle pugilism.

In an alternative frame of thought, however, Shipley (1989) pays heed to the rather more grounded cultural meanings and values the working classes attached to professional boxing. He argues professional boxing soared in popularity when industrial workers “...became able to afford sixpence regularly each week for extra entertainment” (p. 91). The new-found economic prosperity among workers allowed ‘small hall’ professional boxing to become a popular outlet of entertainment in virtually every city in England. Subsequently, professional boxing promotions attracted regular audiences that were not only culturally conversant with the lore of boxing but also intimately acquainted with the lived experience of the ring, either having boxed themselves or by being personally associated with boxers. Thus, Shipley argues a distinct feature of professional boxing in pre-1950’s England was the audience’s admiration of

the ‘art of boxing’, that included displays of refined defensive skill and fair mindedness towards one’s opponent. As evidence for his arguments, Shipley (1989 p. 93) forwards the following explanation as to why boxers, such as world light-welterweight champion Jack ‘Kid’ Berg who, despite competing in as many as twenty-one contests involving two-hundred-and-sixty-two rounds of boxing in 1925, avoided brain damage:

“Small hall crowds appreciated defensive skills, and would applaud artistry in avoiding punches; delicate footwork was admired, and style was important to the audience. Their level of understanding of the art in boxing encouraged skill and discouraged sluggers”.

Shipley’s argument appeals to the aesthetics of craftsmanship to define the practice and meaning of professional boxing in a way that departs from normative discourse of boxing as deriving meaning solely from the rough identity of boxers and the society that spawned them. It must be noted, however, despite such evocations of skilful artistry, Shipley’s assessment of a boxer’s health is clearly subjective i.e. he fails to support his argument with any form of evidence. It would be more accurate to say that boxers like Jack ‘Kid’ Berg, despite partaking in an uncharacteristic (especially by today’s standards) amount of fights, did not seem to suffer from *undue* or *obvious* outward signs of ill health. Also Berg was a champion boxer with many victories under his belt and no doubt benefited from influential support (training, sponsorship and management) aiding him in ways beyond his ‘artistic’ athletic talents. Moreover, he is not representative of the vast majority of professional boxers, be they ‘artisans’ or ‘sluggers’, many of whom he probably out-punched to defeat. It should be noted, therefore, that by focusing only on the success stories of boxing heroes of any particular decade it is possible to distort, or anaesthetise, much of the lived experience of the majority of anonymous boxers. In short, in an era when the expression ‘punch-drunk’ became common articulation, Shipley fails to account for the many boxers who in all likelihood did suffer from brain damage despite the boxing public’s admiration of artistic boxing. It has to be noted, therefore, much as boxing was an expression of working-class culture that was understood as fair-minded, skill orientated, artistic and the like, such notions lapse into idealist typologies not supported by evidence. Further, by relying on ideal types of ‘the English working-class’ and ‘tradition’, Shipley’s arguments omit examination of the manifold intra-cultural relations shaping and defining the athletic experiences and social relations of professional boxers as a consequence of power relations structuring the professional boxing entertainment industry. It is this issue that is considered next.

Uncovering the key to success - ethnicity and professional boxing

Perhaps the foremost intra-cultural issue associated with professional boxing, both as a sporting subculture on its own terms and as a social practice in the wider context, is the prevalence of ethnic migrants who often fight their way to success and fame in the boxing ring. The link between the social significance of boxing and the central issue of racial discrimination, by which newly arrived migrants typically reside in impoverished circumstances in all powerful Westernised societies, emerges as the foremost concern of the literature. As Sugden (1996 p. 188) argues, there is a clear relationship between ethnicity, poverty and professional boxing:

“ In boxing clubs in Detroit, Las Vegas and Miami, Americans from poor backgrounds sweat it out with even poorer contenders from South Africa, Nigeria, Puerto Rico, Nicaragua, Ireland, the former Soviet Union and Cuba. In this way First World and Third World poverty have become merged in the shadow of First World opportunity and affluence to produce a maximum yield for the professional ring”

Due to the prevailing discrimination faced by ethnic minority groups on a daily basis, much literature argues sporting stardom is perceived as one of the only feasible options to escape the poverty-trap. In particular, the boxing ring and of course the prizes it dangles to the few of star status, perhaps above all sports, is perceived to be one of the most direct means of ensuring a measure of parity in a frame of competition regardless of race, colour or creed (see Cashmore 1982; Holt 1989; Sammons 1990; Cashmore 1995; Sugden 1996; Polley 1998). Thus, the significance of boxing for ethnic minority boxers has been widely perceived as one that provides the belief of opportunity, assimilation, respect and mobility. The literature has discussed the significance of professional boxing as such a forum, particularly when making reference to the prominence of ‘black’ champion boxers. This issue is considered next.

‘Black’ participation and boxing

The first sporting institution in Britain to acknowledge the ethnic discrimination existing directly or indirectly in all sports was professional boxing. In 1948 the British Boxing Board of Control (BBBC) was the first governing body to remove the colour bar that prevented ‘alien’ boxers from challenging for national prominence (Shipley 1989). The new ruling by the BBBC allowed ‘normally resident and domiciled’ boxers to compete for British titles as long as they had resided in the UK for at least ten years (see Cashmore 1982; Polley 1998). Despite such an apparently assimilative measure, the dismantling of the segregation policy did of course prevent a generation of newly migrated boxers from competing for home honours. Thus, it was 1970 by the time Jamaican born Bunny Sterling was to become the first ‘black’ British professional boxing champion, by winning the middleweight title (Shipley

1989; Polley 1998). The intervening decades since have seen numerous Afro-Caribbean descendant professional boxers achieve British, Commonwealth, European and World honours. The overall number of 'black' professional boxers is an overrepresentation in relation to the UK's 'black' population, and their success ratio is also noticeably disproportionate to other social groups in the boxing subculture. Contrastingly, other sports such as golf, tennis, cricket, swimming, rugby union as well as management and administration roles in most sports remain underrepresented by 'black' participants (see Cashmore 1995; Kew 1997; Polley 1998; Sleaf 1998; Horne et al 1999). So, why the prominent success ratio of 'black' boxers?

Weinberg and Arond's (1952) seminal sociological study on boxing depicts success in the ring as reflecting the waves of ethnic migration into developed Western economies. Their much-cited table of US boxing champions indicates that as ethnic groups gain a foothold in society and improve their social standing they relinquish hold of the boxing hierarchy. In this way first the Irish, then Jewish, then Italian and finally African-American (and more recently Latino-American and Eastern-European) boxers dominate. According to this logic, ascendancy in the boxing hierarchy matches the chronology of migration and by implication necessity driven by poverty. If one considers that the commercial infrastructure of professional boxing in England is arguably seconded only by the US as the most lucrative in the world, then it is also sustained by a capitalist ideology shaped through a colonial history characterised by "...deep-seated and systematic prejudice" (Sugden 1996 p. 188). As Polley (1998 p. 152) argues, 'black' boxers and footballers are commonly associated as having been produced as a consequence of the sparse physical environment they grew up in:

"They [boxing and football] are all relatively cheap; they can be played at playground and scratch level with a minimum of equipment; and they are relatively accessible through school, youth club, and sports club settings in working-class urban environments where most black Britons have primarily lived"

The prevalence of ethnic minority, specifically 'black', professional boxers in England is therefore thought of as a reflection of poverty and the discrimination sustaining this condition. Furthermore, in the modern era of 'spectacular' (Shipley 1989) media representations glorifying the performances of elite athletes, professional boxing furnishes illusory aspirations for many young 'black' men striving to escape poverty and prejudice faced on a daily basis. In turn, the lack of any real opportunities to succeed in an economic system when only a few stars reap all the rewards while the rest compete for meagre earnings perpetuates the illusion of opportunity while, in fact, solidifying social disadvantage (see Holt 1989; Sammons 1989; Sugden 1996; Polley 1998; Horne et al 1999). In this way, boxing reflects and reinforces the racism that is deeply ingrained throughout all capitalist societies. The coherence of this

argument is supported by the fact that ‘black’ populations often languish in large numbers at the bottom of the socio-economic scale and reside on mass in the ‘sink’ estates of England’s inner cities (see Collins and Kay 2003). Accordingly, the central issue of poverty undoubtedly has to be taken into account as social positioning is an overwhelming force in asserting the human condition, with economic necessity a powerful motivation for men to risk their health fighting for a living.

There are limits to this thesis however. As DeGaris (2000) asserts, a dominant typology has emerged typifying ‘the professional boxer’ as a predominantly African-American young male, poor and more often than not somehow prone to deviancy (see Weinberg and Arond, 1952; Furst, 1971; Hare, 1971; Sugden 1996). This ideal type of ‘the boxer’ has in turn informed arguments of ‘professional boxing’. It is apparent therefore that issues of ethnic minority participation (especially ‘black’ participation) in British professional boxing have been depicted as being analogous to the normative typology of ‘the boxer’ formulated in academic discourse thus far, i.e. a ‘black’ US cultural-type. As a consequence, despite a lack of empirical analysis, professional boxing in England is equally defined as a consequence of material poverty, urban deprivation and social discrimination. In short, a stereotypical and deterministic discourse has emerged associating ‘the boxer’, her practices, her motivations and consequently her opportunities exclusively in the terminology of racial prejudice and other associational indices of ‘ideal type’ determinism.

Accordingly, the literature has virtually ignored, or at least obscured, the possibilities of ‘alternative’ dimensions informing our understanding of professional boxing. Most notably, precious little is said as regards ‘other’ (i.e. non-‘black’) ethnic or racial variables in relation to the occupational culture of professional boxing in England. A quick glance at any weight division would reveal boxers who may claim English, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Indian, Pakistani, Jamaican, African, Greek-Cypriot, Eastern-European, Arabic, Romany/Gypsy and other ethnic identities. This diversity may further be delineated by crude and often overlapping characteristics such as colour, regional north-south identity or religion (‘white’ English-northerner, ‘black’ British, British Muslim). The lack of recognition of these variables precludes a fuller investigation of the social-cultural identity of ‘the boxer’ and consequently the meanings and values lubricating his/her practice of professional boxing.

Jarvie (1991) argues social arrangements, or “power arrangements” (p. 4), enable different groups to shape norms and codes of organisation and practice in sports. Boxing in England has a long historical tradition and therefore is better understood as a sporting infrastructure

that is constituted of diverse groups, illustrating a social dynamic not only apparent in ‘institutionalised’ organisation (governing body and business) but also among the ‘informal’ relations and practice-communities of practitioners. A fuller investigation of the relational and/or variable aspects of ethnicity within and beyond the professional boxing subculture would broaden the scope for evaluating structural arrangements contributing to the athletic experiences realised by professional boxers. With these points of consideration in mind, it is evident that ‘the market’ underpins professional boxers athletic experiences and serves to structure, in one way or another, *all* vantages in terms of ethnicity or else. Discourse articulating English professional boxing as a commercial enterprise from the 1950s onwards is discussed next.

Professional boxing and television

As has already been stated earlier in this chapter, Shipley (1989) argues cultural specific meanings and values epitomised the practice of professional boxing in pre-1950s England. He goes on to argue a pivotal transition occurred due to boxing becoming a “...spectacular sporting entertainment” (p. 95) for a burgeoning home centred television audience. Shipley argues the impact of televised consumerism “...encourages boxers to drop craft because producers assume that viewers prefer knockdowns, and the machine in the living room has had a recent tendency to reduce artistry in boxing” (p. 110). As such, the culture of small-hall boxing steadily became redundant as professional boxing became increasingly geared towards satisfying a mass and more lucrative televised audience’s expectations. As Shipley (1989 p. 110) argues:

“A boxing match is a story which is constructed before the eyes of the spectator, it has a flow of action which shapes the whole, and the perpetual editing of contests, both amateur and professional which are not shown live, has trivialised the sport. Such commercial packaging ruins the story and almost eliminates pure endeavour, an important element in the history of boxing. Secondly, the producers of television love a winner and abhor a loser, a feeling which has never been natural within the boxing arena. Television has done away with the traditional cheer for the loser, and it promises to remove eventually all the subtleties in the ancient sport in favour of the aggressive strong man...Television sells boxing with power as the magic ingredient and it sells the sport short on skill and tactics”

Shipley’s reasoning for the demise of ‘pure endeavour’, ‘artistry’, ‘a cheer for the loser’, ‘skill and tactics’ evolve from his criticisms of the hyper-commercial nature of professional boxing in America. He argues the ‘American style of boxing’, or “...two-fisted infighting, going forward territorially, always aiming for the knock out and the quickest possible finish to a contest” (p. 98), also become standard practice in England. Yet again, Shipley’s evaluations on the merits of ‘style’ in the practice of boxing are subjective and therefore speculative.

Nonetheless, from Shipley's argument we can gain a useful insight into the relationships between social development and the cultural dimensions shaping and defining the athletic experience and social practice of professional boxing. The literature examining US professional boxing is discussed next in order to further evaluate professional boxing as an athletic experience interpreted in and through social context.

Professional boxing as labour of the disadvantaged

Sugden (1996 p. 188) offers the following evaluation of the "...capital enterprise of professional boxing" (p. 51), arguing:

"Clearly, professional boxing never was and never has been the spontaneous product of urban poverty. It was one of the earliest developments of a sport entertainment industry which now has an extremely lucrative worldwide market. As a commercial endeavour, boxing has always been 'owned' and controlled by wealthy groups of people for whom the ghetto provides a reservoir of willing labour, not a residence".

In citing the profit motive of business entrepreneurs as the central driving force sustaining the professional boxing subculture, Sugden (1987; 1996) sees the athletic vocation of boxers as 'a labour of the disadvantaged'. Although acknowledging the intrinsic qualities of boxing his arguments emphasise the quest for attaining economic wealth, or at least a livelihood, as the primary motivation of professional boxers. As both producers and products of their labour, professional boxers are in effect owned by those staking a claim in their performance such as the promoters, managers, trainers, television executives and more abstractly the audience. As such, boxers have no choice but to fall prey of market forces premised on profit maximisation and effectively cease to control their destinies.

Sugden concurs with much literature (see Weinberg and Arond 1952, Hare 1971, Sammons 1990, Wacquant 1998b) when he argues, "...to make one contender it takes the exploitation of many others who will not succeed" (p. 187). Compounded by a physically draining and damaging career span that enforces early retirement, he argues boxers are soon back in the streets of poverty disillusioned and defeated by their inevitable failure to achieve their dreams. Furthermore, the boxer's unique repertoire of skills and sense of identity is of no use in mainstream society. Thus, poverty and lack of transferable social, educational and employment skills enforce a difficult and maladjusted retirement for many boxers. By these terms, disadvantaged young men are used and abused as commodities of an entertainment industry that economically exploits and physically damages them. He insists that the occupational culture of professional boxing, "...with the possible exception of prostitution" (p. 189), invariably results in one of the most direct forms of exploitation. Sugden concludes that

boxers believe that professional boxing can be a viable means to achieve economic prosperity and social mobility is largely illusory and therefore represents a hegemonic consequence of class subjugation in capitalist societies.

Despite the clarity of Sugden's thought process, it is worth pointing out that Sugden arrives at his conclusions by largely assuming success in professional boxing to only represent the monetary rewards of those fortunate enough to enjoy elite or star status. This is so at the expense of the vast majority of 'dupes' and/or 'dopes' residing in the undifferentiated mass of the lower rankings. Boxers are duped, and presumably are dopes, precisely because they believe professional boxing is a viable means to escape poverty and are thus inevitably exploited by those controlling the business strings of the boxing-entertainment industry. By advocating such a formula for understanding the underlying truths of professional boxing, Sugden relies squarely on the notion that boxing represents a money making venture disguised as a legitimate athletic preoccupation. Sugden's (1996) line of argument is made clear through his reasoning why weight categories were introduced in professional boxing. He tells us the introduction of four weight classifications – bantamweight, featherweight, welterweight, and middleweight – only gave the appearance of making the sport fairer and safer (p. 31). He maintains the weight classifications were instigated as a feature of commerce whereby increased opportunities among the pools of aspirant boxers primarily benefited those controlling the purse strings. Introducing a range of weight classifications simply afforded promoters the opportunity to sanction more championship fights, thus generating increased public interest and consequently profiteering potential through market expansion. This line of thought, however, precludes any consideration of boxing participated in as an equitable and thus fair athletic contest. If it is correct to acknowledge that the ethical justification of boxing as an athletic challenge resides in pitting two opponents against one another in an equal frame of rule-bound competition, then anyone versed in the athletic practice of boxing would inform Sugden that any amount of weight differential between two boxers substantially handicaps the smaller opponent, to the point that the contest ceases to be equitable and as such fair. The rationale for weight divisions in this sense ensures physiological parity and therefore can be considered ethical, an altogether differing interpretation that focuses exclusively on exploitative motives levelled from 'above'.

Also apparent throughout Sugden's arguments, is that despite clearly commenting on the commercial exploitation of boxers there is a distinct absence of data as to the earning potential among the divisions of boxers, or their financial arrangements with managers and trainers. A clearer understanding of the occupational culture of professional boxing would be better served by disclosing any such details. For instance how much does a boxer earn in a contest?

Does he box part-time or full-time? Is professional boxing considered a career or a hobby? What expenses are occurred? How much does the manager earn? Does the boxer feel he gets physically hurt? How often does he box? These are questions that are crucial in determining criteria when judging exploitation, disadvantage and oppression or else. Left as they are, Sugden's criticisms rely on economic variables that nonetheless remain undisclosed and as such unsubstantiated.

In short, by articulating professional boxing exclusively in the terminology of subservient labour, all other possibilities associated with the athletic practice of professional boxing are all but dismissed. In a similar ethnographic research agenda of a comparable professional boxing gymnasium situated in the US ghetto, the interplay between the boxer and society is discussed in rather more fluid although ultimately equally deterministic terms.

Professional boxing as transcendence

Loic Wacquant (2004) formulated his arguments while fully participating among professional boxers for a period of three years. He too accounts for economic and social determinism when evaluating the motives of the professional boxers in his study. He states, "There is no denying that entering 'pro' boxing partakes of a project of material uplift and economic mobility" (1998a p. 326). Wacquant's begs to differ from previous discourse, however, when he argues that many less demanding options are perceived to exist to escape the poverty trap. For instance, athletic youngsters from the ghetto often prefer higher profile team sports such as football and basketball with the added bonus of educational packages thrown in. Also, the illegal street economy provides the opportunity for 'fast money', a far easier option than the years of dedication required of pursuing boxing seriously. Wacquant also downplays the "...occupational myth of the hungry fighter" (1998a p. 327) held by much of the literature. He speculates a positive correlation between elevated social status and success in the ring, as most of the boxers in his analysis came from established working-class backgrounds as opposed to the most deprived sectors of the ghetto. As such, Wacquant insists that focus on material and economic constraint alone does not sufficiently explain why one would persist in the practice of professional boxing.

With the above in mind, Wacquant poses the question why would anyone opt to pursue and persist with professional boxing? He argues boxers conceive of their bodies (i.e. themselves) in three overlapping dimensions: "...craft, sensuality and morality" (Wacquant 1995 p. 131). In particular, the boxers in his study envisaged their actions as moral due to sacrifices undertaken in intense training regimes and monastic-like dietary restrictions, regulations of social and family life and for the weeks before a fight sexual abstinence. For Wacquant such

'sacrificial-regimes' have an overwhelming impact in integrating and defining physical, psychic and cultural truths of boxing. He insists boxers are at liberty to experience highly intensified and self-actualising realities in a similar fashion to other 'high commitment' practitioners such as artists, monks and scientists. Nonetheless, he asserts that the distinction demarcating boxing from other 'sacrificial' disciplines is made explicit when taking note of the specificities of the boxers 'habitus' (see Bourdieu 1984):

“[Boxing]...offers not so much an opportunity for economic betterment as the promise of social difference and even transcendence: the professional ethic of sacrifice enables boxers to tear themselves from the everyday world and to create a moral and sensual universe '*sui generis*' wherein a transcendent masculine self may be constructed.”

Wacquant (1998a p. 325)

As such, Wacquant argues boxing exists in symbiotic-opposition to, rather than as merely a reflection of, the ghetto. He concludes professional boxers strive not so much for the opportunity to acquire economic gains but rather seek transcendence from the mundane and often violent existence of ghetto life. Throughout his series of publications however, Wacquant is quick to stress boxing constitutes a "...skewed and malicious passion" (1995 p.523) and is often an invincible frontier between self-possession and dispossession. Wacquant (1995 p. 522) is at pains to articulate the underlying sense of futility and contradiction felt by boxers:

“In the end, there is no escaping the fact that, whether victorious or vanquished, a boxer leaves bits and pieces of himself in the ring. Every fight, every round, every punch that connects chips away at the living statute of aggrandised virility he is striving to sculpt with the clay of pain, sweat, and blood. At some level, deep down, boxing is horrifying even to fighters (and trainers) and it violates their sense of humanity, though they learn not to feel and show this, including to themselves, as an imperative requirement of their membership in the Durkheimian 'church' of prizefighting.”

In his essay, "*A fleshpeddler at work: Power, pain, and profit in the prizefighting economy*", Wacquant (1998b) sketches some of the wider forces shaping the ambiguous sense of freedom and constraint experienced by professional boxers. While acknowledging much causation to Sugden's (and others) emphasis of the role of social dispossession as a precursor to exploitative submission, his findings differ in that he claims to offer the "...only sociological study of the pugilistic commerce from the ground up" (p. 1). In this way, unlike other studies whose analysis of the boxing economy rely on top-down deconstruction, he concludes *collective* processes sustain commercial ideologies leading to, on the whole, exploitative practices and relations. As Wacquant (1998b p. 1) states, boxers openly acknowledge their chosen occupation as an ill-reputed business:

“With virtual unanimity, fighters, trainers, managers, and promoters readily admit that theirs is a commerce run on manipulation, chicanery, and deceit, an open “meat market” where the strong survive by devouring and discarding the weak.”

Wacquant articulates his arguments by relying on an in-depth case study of a singular matchmaker, Mack. He argues the pivotal role of the matchmaker is to negotiate bureaucratic, economic and pugilistic variables⁷ in order to stage a boxing promotion. For Mack the political economy of professional boxing is an enterprise much like buying and selling stocks whereby he seeks to satisfy a two-fold consideration in order to provide the promoter with the best possible options by which to profit from: the supply of boxers and the satisfaction of the audience. Mack categorises boxers in his “portfolio” (p. 6) accordingly: boxers are hierarchically stratified as ‘champion’, ‘contender’ or ‘prospect’, then ‘journeyman’ and at the bottom ‘bums’, ‘tomato cans’, ‘stiffs’, ‘trial horses’ and ‘washed up boxers’. Wacquant (1998b p. 5) maintains the analysis of competitive professional boxing should be viewed within the parameters of this categorisation:

“...a matchmaker’s job is to hire out bodies for boxing shows called “cards”, featuring a “main event” (in ten rounds) preceded by up to five “preliminary” bouts (four- to eight-round contests) composing the “undercard”, and to match them in ways that are satisfying from both athletic and financial standpoints. He is a *broker*, a crucial intermediary between boxers, managers, and promoters, as well as the hidden master of ceremony on fight night”.

Wacquant (1998b) sees matchmaking variables as constituting “constraints” (p. 8) of which the matchmaker seeks to overcome in order to produce an entertaining and above all else profitable boxing promotion. In this way a “...ticket seller” (p. 12) is matched against inferior opponents so as to acquire a winning streak prolonging his popularity. This necessarily instrumental focus means that matchmakers exercise a high degree of emotional distance in their relations with boxers. By treating boxers like commodities, as opposed to living flesh and blood human beings, Wacquant posits matchmakers are motivated by “...blood money, begotten by sweat, pain, and tears” (pp. 23-24). Thus Wacquant concurs with Sugden when he states boxing much like prostitution, “...carries weighty moral baggage” (p. 24). Furthermore, promoters exert a monopolistic control over most boxers’ careers in the Chicago area, more so in recent years as the decline of boxing promotions throughout the US has substantially decreased opportunities to compete. Accordingly, boxers knowingly submit their fate in the hands of promoters because, “It is they who are chasing the chance to get on cards, not the other way round” (p. 21). The scarcity of work accentuates “...a thick veil of secrecy” (p. 24) as the norm amongst boxers, coaches and managers who rarely speak of monetary transactions. This secretive agenda allows matchmakers the opportunity to extort money by “...double dipping” (p. 24), namely taking their pay from the promoter *and* an undisclosed cut

from the boxer's purse. This is easily achieved because the promoter-boxer transactions are as a whole not personal. Wacquant concludes, although boxers are generally aware of their vulnerability to practices of extortion due to their lack of control over economic transactions, often referring to matchmaker's as 'pimps' and 'slave drivers', their "...Hobbesian individualist worldview they hold" (p. 29) tacitly accepts the matchmaker's motive toward personal gain. As Wacquant argues, "Whichever way you look at it, money turns up as the true agent of separation and the true cementing agent in the world of professional boxing" (p. 30). As such, Wacquant argues boxers willingly collude in their own exploitation.

In sum, although Wacquant offers considerable variance to previous analysis, he persists in forwarding the normative profile of 'the boxer' thus far identified in the literature: an African-American male whose habitus derives from the US ghetto. As such, by relying on a criterion of analysis that is binding to the US ghetto it is possible to distort or preclude alternative factors defining the meaning and value of professional boxing as an athletic experience.

¹The sense of 'autonomous-entrepreneurial' acumen displayed by Figg is a cornerstone in the commercial development of pugilism and defines much of the cultural identity of professional boxing today.

²Coubertin was said to be greatly disappointed to see boxing dropped from the 1912 Games in Stockholm (see Mueller 2000).

³The St Pancras boxing club is still in existence since 1884.

⁴Amir Khan turned professional under the management of the premier boxing promoter in the UK, Frank Warren, in 2005

⁵A dominant ideology of professionalism exists in many US boxing gymnasiums (and other sports) for much of the 20th century and beyond.

⁶It is worth remembering the amateur boxing community extends across regional, national and international boundaries and if a close relative with professional boxing, is far more widely practiced with as many as two million officially registered boxers in more than 190 national federations (see Saintsbury 2000).

⁷The matchmaker is pivotal due to the leverage s/he is at liberty to exercise when negotiating any proposed boxing contest, as when astutely considering the style, competence, experience and weight proximity of 'the opponent' lined up to box a 'connected' boxer.

Chapter 4 – In the field

4.1 The research journey – A confessional tale

Prior to presenting the impressionistic account of this study of boxing it is necessary to bring into focus the ‘sense-assembly procedures’ (Brewer 2000) through which I, as a boxing ‘insider’, arrived at a point of data collection analysis and interpretation of ‘other’ boxing-practitioners understandings, identities and actions. A thorough account of the research journey helps clarify the authority of this study to contribute towards a plausible and credible account of boxing-practitioners’ ‘reality’ constructions and my theorisations of them henceforth. However, it is also necessary to highlight the ways in which my position changed while conducting this research, both during the period of data collection and the time lapsed since. By documenting and analysing this process of reflexive self-awareness, as a consequence of the complexities and difficulties encountered while conducting ethnographic fieldwork and, simultaneously, engaging in dialogue with the meta-language of social science (Sugden and Tomlinson 2002), the findings of this research may be represented in far more nuanced and ultimately ‘plausible’ and/or ‘credible’ detail (Brewer 2000). Moreover, the reader is afforded a critical vantage to certify the quality of the data collected, the interpretative standpoint(s) through which knowledge claims have been made and the overall legitimacy of the final representation of findings documented. Also, as Fleming (1992) points out, the research experience documented in this way may also provide the basis for relevant guidance for future research. This chapter, therefore, reflexively maps out the research journey.

An emergent ‘messy’ enterprise

The reality of conducting this ethnography was far from being a systematic and disciplined ‘post-postmodern’ (Brewer 2000) academic enterprise seemingly conducted through the foresight and intuition of many years of experience, both as an academician and researcher. I feel to portray such an impression would not be doing justice to the holism of the research task undertaken both in terms of an investigative research endeavour and also as a developmental learning experience. Rather, the findings presented throughout this thesis incrementally and messily emerged during the five year period spent in the field and during the period (two years) of ‘writing-up’ and amending the thesis. Thus, theory building merged with the evolution, negotiation and self-recognition of my insider identity as ‘the boxer’ and evolving identity as ‘academic researcher’ throughout the time-span (and beyond) of this research agenda. Albeit in no way mutually exclusive stages, in the following sections of this chapter I

document in detail the procedural and technical aspects of the research enterprise, namely: gaining access to the fields of inquiry; developing an insider boxer-researcher identity; the insider processes leading to data collection, analysis and interpretation; and the processes undertaken to textually represent the ‘realities’ documented. The discussion henceforth is thus mindful to convey the (albeit always messy and overlapping) journey through which I reflexively arrived at the knowledge claims presented throughout this thesis.

‘Insider’ identity in action

The pragmatic, strategic and theoretical rationale (see Fleming 1995; Wheaton 1997) for conducting ethnographic research among English amateur and professional boxers was from the outset premised upon my insider boxing identity, in particular my ability to adopt a research role as a ‘real’ (i.e. competitive) boxer. Pragmatically, access to my local boxing club - the Luton-Gym Amateur Boxing Club (a pseudonym from here on in referred to as ‘The Gym’) - was unproblematic. Strategically, my substantial experience as an amateur boxer enabled me to gain a professional boxer’s licence. Henceforth, as a ‘real’ professional boxer, I was in a position to investigate the rather more subterranean subculture of professional boxing in and around Luton and London. From then on a comparative investigation of amateurism and professionalism in the athletic/social practice of boxing could be fruitfully conducted. Theoretically, the critical lens guiding this research would be informed from a methodological vantage unique to, yet by fully acknowledging the work of, previous sociological and other studies of boxing.

In broad terms and for the greater part of the research journey I grew to recognise my researcher identity in line with Pink-Dandelions’ (1997) typology of insider roles in qualitative methodology:

| | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| COVERT INSIDER TO THE CONTEXT | OVERT INSIDER TO THE CONTEXT (Professional Boxing Luton and London) |
| COVERT INSIDER TO THE GROUP | OVERT INSIDER TO THE GROUP (The Gym ABC) |

As an ‘insider to the group’ among the Gym-milieu I endeavoured to cast an analytical eye on the athletic/social practice of amateur boxing; a life-world context I was familiar with. Simultaneously, as an ‘insider to the context’ of professional boxing in England - i.e. as a fully competitive professional boxer yet not a bona fide member of a given professional boxing gymnasium - I investigated the athletic/social practice of professional boxing in England. The task of sustaining this ‘dual’ insider identity was labour intensive in that I trained alongside the Gym amateur boxers for three nights per week and accompanied them to tournaments on a weekly basis. In addition, as an active featherweight ‘pro’ boxer, I made twice-weekly forays into the professional boxing universe for sparring or additional training. Initially my investigative forays into the professional boxing universe were undertaken as a fully competitive ‘pro’ practicing his trade in the few pockets of professional boxing in and around Luton. Thereafter, after a period of insider identity transformation (read on), I collected qualitative data from two gymnasiums situated in London - ‘Boxing Inc’ (a pseudonym) in North London and ‘The Workhouse’ (a pseudonym) in South-East London – for separate periods of ‘observant participation’ (Wacquant 2004) lasting four and five months in each respective gymnasium. The building blocks to conducting a comparative examination of amateur and professional boxers’ interpretative frameworks, athletic identities and actions were thus set in motion. If this comparative element can be broadly described as a dual consideration, as will be discussed next the task of elucidating understanding necessitated a messy, emotionally draining and many a time physically and intellectually disorientating endeavour.

Carving out a research role

As a novice professional boxer I sought to acquire insights into the experiential requirements and associated cultural logics of ‘fighting’ (in the professional sense) as opposed to ‘boxing’ (in the amateur sense). Encompassed within this time span are one eight-round professional contest and many ‘serious’ sparring sessions with ‘champion’, ‘contender’ and ‘journeyman’ professional boxers in different gymnasiums in and around the local Home Counties region. Simultaneously, I trained alongside and in due course coached Gym amateur boxers, accompanying them to tournaments on a regular basis. As time wore on, however, I (as ‘the professional boxer’) became increasingly disgruntled with the lack of training facilities and the level of coaching acumen available to me locally and, perhaps more tellingly, harbouring a nagging intuition that *‘this just does not feel right’* (read on).

Over the ensuing period of eighteen or so months, although retaining my professional boxing licence, I lost much of my appetite for training and in a *‘burned-out’* manner let much of my

more rigid, or 'sacrificial' (Wacquant (2004) training disciplines slip away (read on). Interestingly, by way of apposite contrast, Wacquant (2004) discusses how once having discovered the boxing way of life while conducting ethnographic research among professional boxers in Chicago, he suffered from deep depression upon his disengagement from the field to the extent he seriously considered retiring as an academic of world renown to take up boxing as his main vocation. Either way, boxing-practitioners compare the process of withdrawal from competitive boxing to the withdrawal a heroin addict is subjected to during the protracted detoxification phase (Wacquant 2004). In the context of this research, acknowledging and understanding the disorientating processes of reflexive mediation informing my lack of desire to box – i.e. getting to grips with the processes leading to my consciousness transformation from an active amateur boxer 'crossing over' to the professional code of boxing and finally lurching towards rather apathetic non-participation, to progressively adopting the identity and consciousness of 'the academic researcher' - is pivotal to the clarifying the sense assembly procedures through which I collected, analysed and interpreted data and thereafter presented the contextualised findings of this research.

Among the amateurs

Initial contact with the Gym community of amateur boxing-practitioners was made back in 1998. As a second year undergraduate student I sought out the club with the aim of preparing to compete in the upcoming ABAE senior national boxing Championships. The Gym became to all intents and purposes my 'second home' for the remainder of my athletic career, of which encompassed many club level contests and two national senior ABAE Championships campaigns¹. The Gym also served as my training base for my sojourn in the professional world of boxing as encapsulated in this research. My presence among the Gym-milieu by the time data collection commenced for this study was therefore an established one to the extent that I had forged firm relationships among significant others pivotal to the functioning of this group (in particular figurehead and gatekeeper 'Coach') largely through having 'paid my dues' in the ring while attaining national standard success. Moreover, it is probably correct to say that throughout the research period I was *the* senior boxer, both in age and accomplishment, among the cohort of other 'regular' amateur boxers training at the Gym during that time.

Accordingly, my status among the Gym-milieu eased much of the demands typically required of ethnographers to negotiate a trustworthy presence among the subjects analysed, unlike my investigation of professional boxing (read on). I was therefore able to exercise an 'unobtrusive familiarity' in both front and backstages during training and competition while freely interacting with Gym-boxers, significant elders (such as Dads, coaches, accomplished boxers from other clubs and regions etc), ABAE officials, medical staff and generalised others

(spectators, fans, laypersons and even detractors of boxing). As a familiar and accepted member of the Gym-milieu, therefore, the issue of gaining entry and thereafter negotiating acceptance among this particular cohort of boxing-practitioners, in particular the authoritarian influence of gatekeeper ‘Coach’ was unproblematic. Far more taxing, however, was the requirement to gain analytical and interpretative distance from my subjective understandings of boxing per se, intertwined as they were within my own and other amateur boxing-practitioners normative belief systems of what boxing intuitively was and was not. Over time, uncomfortable internal dilemmas, sensed and felt as much as logically inferred, progressively forced me to reflect upon and re-evaluate the socially constructed truths informing my own and other Gym-practitioners interpretative frameworks, athletic identities and actions (read on).

Among the ‘pro’s’

In contrast to my presence among the Gym community, my attempts to establish insider status among professional boxers were far more demanding. In order to access the professional boxing subculture I assumed the identity of an experienced amateur boxer seeking out a professional career. As an ‘open class’ amateur boxer I was in a position to be granted a professional boxing licence by the British Boxing Board of Control (BBBC). Having passed the procedural interview with Robert Smith, the assistant General Secretary of the BBBC at their headquarters by London Bridge², I undertook the required medical procedures and signed a standard ‘Boxer/Manager agreement’ with ‘Manager-Jim’ (a pseudonym). This legally binding contract allowed Jim to manage my affairs for one year. The fact that Jim tried to steer me toward signing the three-year maximum tenure allowable by BBBC regulations, as opposed to our pre-arranged verbal agreement for a one year contract and the rather unnerving experience of taking the necessary MRI brain scan at a Harley street health clinic, was the first indication that I was about to enter a different world! Regardless, upon receiving my professional boxer’s licence³ I was granted insider access to the ‘real’ world of professional boxing in England.

As a fully participating professional boxer the insights gained from data collected during the first eighteen months of the ethnography were essentially filtered via my autoethnographic endeavours (see Sparkes 2000; 2002). This phase of the research was of great benefit in allowing ‘insider’ engagement with the web of sensual, symbolic and emotional dimensions fabricating the cultural experiences collectively realised by the professional boxers I was sharing space with’. Also, my identity as a bona fide ‘pro’ afforded me an insider vantage of social interaction among significant others and generalised others whose demeanour towards

my 'status' was an invaluable insight of the social norms and cultural aesthetics defining the values, beliefs, relations and actions, logical to those steeped in the professionalised code of boxing in England. Analytical issues quickly emerged that, in turn, were compared and contrasted in relation to my (evolving) understanding of amateur boxing.

Following the first eighteen months of autoethnographic data collection and my subsequent withdrawal from the rigours entailed from the professional boxing ring, I ventured into London to actively collect data from the 'The Workhouse' and 'Boxing Inc' gymnasiums. As an anonymous yet athletically capable and culturally conversant 'participating observer' (Hammerseley and Atkinson 1995), or perhaps more accurately stated 'observant participant' (Wacquant 2004), I trained alongside and collected data among professional boxing-practitioners three to four times per week over a two year period. In that time my insider status was consciously modified and unconsciously evolving into the identity of the fully participating although non-competitive boxer. Thereafter, the platform for negotiating access and forging relations among the boxing milieu's frequented was as an '*ex-pro*' looking for a '*shake out*' (work-out) while visiting London.

Whereas I had previously been very much 'up front' in my intentions to box, be a '*real*' boxer in cultural idiom, I consciously kept my underlying intent as far as participating in competitive professional boxing discreet. If probed as to my presence on the gymnasium floor by boxers, their acquaintances or coaches (the foremost gatekeepers of entry into the '*pro*' universe), I would typically forward the non-committal answer of, "*I've had a few fights previous in the amateurs, not bad...ABA standard...never cracked the big one though. On the tale-end of that I had a few 'pro's' just to say I'd been there done that. In any case I'm well in my 30s now so just enjoy a workout and keep myself from getting too much out of shape. In fact I'm a student again and doing a project on professional boxing...*" My intention was to establish rapport with the professional practitioners by working out in the gym premises on a regular basis by declaring my insider credentials unobtrusively as possible. Moreover, my aim at readily disclosing a self-confessed expiry date as a '*real*' boxer was to avoid having to negotiate the ring space once again and the all-or-nothing '*seriousness*' entailed.

By this stage I was fully aware that to be considered a '*real*' practitioner of a '*passion laden institution*' (Wacquant 2005a) such as the gymnasium life-worlds of the professional boxing universe in England necessitated answering the call to '*action*'. More to the point, regular '*quality*' sparring is a requirement for professional boxers to develop the skills and fitness levels necessary to compete successfully and as such is a serious affair. To conduct oneself

appropriately and learn, as opposed to being *used* for someone else's learning, requires a purposeful commitment to be displayed on a regular basis during sparring sessions with some of the hottest talents in domestic, European and World boxing. Perhaps more importantly, to be a 'real' boxer in this way inspires a contract of allegiance with significant others (the coach and the management) who as gatekeepers of gymnasium life-worlds function as 'arbiters of opportunity' beyond it - i.e. '*show us you want it and we'll do the rest*'. By modifying my insider identity into a 'ex' boxer who was well-versed with the ring who had paid his dues, I aimed to utilise my experience to fashion a credible presence on the gymnasium floor, become part of the furniture as it were, yet also avoid being drawn into the all-or-nothing seriousness entailed of 'real' professional boxing. By that time it had become clear to me that if I were to submit to the prevailing system of values and hierarchical relations fuelling the intensive nature of professional boxing competition, not only would it be difficult for me to sustain this research endeavour but also (to degrees) my health would be compromised. This strategy, still very much reliant on my ability to box, both enabled and hindered the research process.

As I often found out in my interactions with amateur boxing-practitioners (read on), initial mention of '*research*' or '*study*' when conversing with professional boxers was almost wholly dismissed, perhaps even seen as eccentric or worse still strange, in light of my foremost gymnasium identity as an '*ex-fighter*'. It was many a time when my afterthought, particularly after initial probes at introducing my research objectives into conversations fell on rather perplexed or nonplussed expressions, was to take a step back and concentrate on what I and other boxers were there to do, box. At that stage, albeit maintaining a measure of insider credibility, I was nonetheless an outsider to the established groups of professional boxers and their associates of both gymnasiums. Intuitively I sensed that much work needed to be done for me to build the appropriate trust and intimacy for me not to appear intrusive, threatening or just overly familiar. My strategy thereafter was to communicate my insider know-how of boxing as the principal means through which to build relationships with other boxing-practitioners.

Although my *priori* experience as a competitive boxer gave me licence to interact with other professional boxing-practitioners with a measure of identifiable pedigree, in as much as I often shared conversations with boxers I was training alongside over common opponents and/or acquaintances, there were many unforeseen and rather 'hidden', verbalised and non-verbalised, cultural dimensions defining our interactions that I was unfamiliar with and was, at times rather awkwardly, compelled to negotiate. Just some of these were: the self-

presentation demeanours and speech idioms adopted among and between diverse ethnic/racial groups of boxers during training; the shifts in mannerism between and among boxers during ‘casual’ and ‘serious’ social interactions; the demeanour of significant others (coaches, managers, promoters, relatives of boxers) towards me. More notably, my insider identity implicated the rather more discreet agendas of significant others vantages of intent within the rather intimate gymnasium spaces I was intruding on. It quickly became apparent that there was no hiding from the fact that my status and consequently ‘worth’ as an experienced, and thus ‘real’, competitive boxer intimately bore significance to a professionalized sporting subculture that danced to the tune of commercial transaction premised on ‘spectacular’, and thus highly intensive and often brutal, athletic competition. Thus in quick time my presence was perceived through a commercial value logic that appraised and judged me, or my body-capital, in terms of commodity exchange (see Beamish 1993; Ingham 2004; Beamish and Ritchie 2006). It was here that my rather reticent insider identity both stimulated access to and interpretation of data yet, simultaneously, undermined my quest to gain deeper access.

In terms of forging an identity among the professional milieus of boxing I was studying, it was difficult to penetrate the triadic bond defining the relations between boxers, coaches and managers unless being drawn into the value system of commodity exchange - namely my physical capital in exchange for the coach’s expertise (or pugilistic capital) and the manager’s business acumen (or social capital) in a bid to mutually accumulate economic gain. It was usual for coaches residing as gatekeepers of the ‘*pro*’ universe, after initially showing a level of interest, to consign my identity as a rather peripheral although accepted, or at least amiably tolerated, ‘*keep fitter*’ or at best ‘*ex pro*’. In short, my evident resistance at ‘*being serious*’ effectively marginalized my presence in the London gymnasiums frequented. As such, developing rapport with boxers, particularly on the gymnasium floor and under the surveillance of significant others, was often a tricky issue. I soon came to appreciate that in order to develop and sustain a level of trust among the practitioners of both professional boxing gymnasiums analysed a prolonged and dedicated research endeavour was necessary.

Moreover, by having from the outset advertised my insider identity to gain access into the world of professional boxing in London, I felt that to maintain my insider status it was expected of me to fully engage in the real professional boxers stock in trade – serious sparring and even more serious fighting. In effect, by resisting the demands and hierarchical social relations deemed necessary to fully participate in ‘real’ professional boxing I found myself, during that phase of the research, in somewhat of an impasse. On the one hand, I was still intent on conducting myself, and perhaps more tellingly still *saw* myself as, a ‘real’ boxer. On

the other hand, I had voluntarily compromised my 'real' status as a participant boxer and thus subjugated my insider credentials. Therefore, I had effectively constructed self-imposed barriers to gaining access to the 'real' world through which I still reflexively defined my own self-worth. As such, I found this to be a difficult process to fathom and *egoistically* accept. Thus, as much through self doubt and status ambiguity, I remained a peripheral practitioner of both professional boxing gymnasiums analysed. Nonetheless, it still remains that the advantages of being an experienced insider of boxing per se were considerable, not least in affording vantages of interpretation uniquely positioned for unearthing data otherwise inaccessible from merely observing proceedings (read on).

Data Collection: Observant participation

Over the extended period of fieldwork as a boxing insider and the application of a mixed bag of data collection techniques consisting of observant participation, unstructured interviews, video recall and review of a wide variety of academic, popular and insider literature, I was able to collect rich data through experiencing, communicating and reflecting upon boxers verbalised and non-verbalised realities. Data were collected from multiple subjects, contexts and through different guises: while attending coaching seminars run by the ABAE; while having formed Uncle-like relations with Gym-amateur boxers as their coach; when fraternising with parents as a guiding figurehead responsible for the well-being and success of their son; by being party to front and backstage negotiations involving matchmaking, financial issues, personal disputes and other gossip. At the same time I occupied the identity of a fully competitive professional boxer undertaking the rituals of '*making weight*', early morning '*roadwork*' and regular sparring and partaking in back and front stage rituals of professional boxing competition. Additionally, I remained observant as an 'invincible' spectator watching high profile contests (both live and on satellite broadcasts in pubs) and also as an academic discussing and listening-in upon perspectives involving the social significance of boxing.

Following the broad consensus among ethnographic research texts as to how qualitative data are collected (see Miles and Huberman 1994; Fetterman 1998; Brewer 2000; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; 2007), I recorded in note form everyday practices and social interactions engaged in or observed. I tried to get into the habit of sketching out the social dynamics of the gymnasium milieus such as observing the rituals and norms contributing to the maintenance of and/or contest for social status and hierarchy; noting the content and tone of conversations between members and the various points of view, values and attitudes made by significant actors; the sequence of events leading to behaviour patterns, squabbles, ritualistic actions and

social interactions; and the social composition of focal events such as ‘weighing-in’ and ‘fight night’ itself, on my writing pad as soon as I could after the event itself (for instance when travelling home from London by train or when finding a quiet moment at a boxing tournament). This practice was difficult to maintain, however, mainly due to the fact that as a fully participating boxer I was simply too engrossed in the activities at hand and by the end of a training session or competition simply too tired and/or pre-occupied to ‘shift gear’, as it were, and think and act analytically. On the main, I chose to word-process notes on my computer either at home or at the university the day following the event if possible, or at least during a convenient slot away from ‘boxing-time’, preferring to gather my thoughts and reflect in a quieter environment away from the action. In the more studious environment of the University I made a record of events, conversations and Gym-boxers actions from, what I considered at the time, a faithfully described ‘objective’ standpoint. Alongside my descriptive notes I added my subjective thoughts on particular situations, actors, points of view discussed and the like.

It is worth stating at this juncture that I needed to learn how to do this much in line with the unfolding complexity of the field of inquiry per se. Accordingly the first year of data collection in particular was a stop-start and rather frustrating experience. At the time I was very much submerged in the realities of the professional boxing ring and I found it difficult to ‘see’ the world engulfing my athletic identity further than my self-interested focus to compete in the ring. Moreover, I reflexively validated the associational logics and truths through which the practitioner community defined the cultural norms of boxing I was submerged in. As much as I tried to create analytical ‘distance’ between my subjective understandings of boxing and the cultural norms I was seeking to analytically comprehend, the enforced contemplative mindset adopted (of a critical disposition) imposed what felt like an oppositional ‘objective’ force impeding my desire to ‘go at it’ (read on).

Data Collection: Interviews

In addition to observant-participant data collection I interviewed nine Gym-boxers and three coaches of amateur boxing clubs based outside of Luton towards the end of the second and mid-way through the third year of this research. The interviews were open ended discussions of each individual’s participation in and understanding of amateur boxing and lasted from thirty minutes to one hour each. The interviews of Gym-boxers took place away from the boxing gymnasium, mostly in pubs in and around Luton town centre during off-peak and crucially quiet mid-week days, on one occasion at a boxer’s home and once in my office at the university. I interviewed the three coaches during a coaching seminar hosted by the

ABAE that lasted two consecutive weekends. All interviews were tape recorded at the express consent of the individual and were transcribed the days following the event. In addition to such dedicated interview procedures, I also taped conversations or explicit points of view from issues I posed amateur boxing-practitioners during several tournaments. My intent was to collect 'natural' data from key amateur boxing-practitioners during their participation in focal events scenarios of which I felt would contribute rich perspectives to this research.

Nonetheless, although data collected via the interview method was to prove of considerable value in the final analysis I feel it was an under resourced tool at my disposal. Upon reflection I now realise that a more concerted effort to collect unstructured life-history data would have added valuable contextual detail to my understandings of other Gym-members experiences of amateur boxing. Subsequently I can now more fully appreciate the extent that interview data, particularly of the life-history variety, can augment a 'structured-polyphonic' (Giulianotti 2005) dimension to any research endeavour. Just as importantly, interview data can aid the researcher in more fully perceiving how and why the axes of his/her insider (or else) identity inform the sense making procedures of data collection, analysis and interpretation through which his or her knowledge is constructed in relation to other 'fellow' boxing-practitioners.

This issue was exemplified by my reflecting upon the processes through which I was able to forge a basis of trust with the subjects interviewed in order for them to feel ease of disclosure. My initial attempts to interview 'regular' participants training at the Gym during the first year of this research proved rather fruitless. Having gained permission to interview a number of Gym-boxers I often found it difficult to elicit open and sufficiently detailed responses from them. My questions would be saturated by thinly articulated responses such as "*I don't know why I like it (training)...I just do*". To overcome the interviewees' reticence (many of whom were of schoolboy age) I found it necessary, at times overpoweringly, to interject my own opinions and perspectives. Also, at that phase of the research, I sensed that the research agenda was still in its infancy and therefore I felt unsure as to the consequence of interviewing subjects about issues that held no clear meaning to me. Therefore, at that phase of the research process, I became rather hesitant about the rationale guiding the interviews and consequently the likely value of the data generated to informing the aims of this research.

Upon reflection I now recognise that my self-perceived 'stature' as a boxer (rather than that of a researcher), in many ways hindered my application in conducting fruitful interviews. More to the point, some years on from my initial attempts to conduct interviews I can fully appreciate the extent that I reflexively validated my own (self-perception of) 'status' among

the Gym milieu of participants before my endeavour to be an analytically orientated researcher. Thus, albeit barely consciously, I was in effect ‘looking’ for responses from the subjects interviewed that in some way confirmed my reflexive understanding of what boxing is and is not. By definition, I was searching-out my preferred sense of self as ‘the boxer’. This issue became especially pronounced due to my perception of the cultural insularity, or distance, exercised by the majority of Gypsy-Romany boxers attending Gym training nights, more often than not diligently supervised by adult guardians. It need be stated here that although a sense of fellowship presided among the Gym milieu as a consequence of their common attachment to amateur boxing, a submerged yet ever-present dubiety was often palpable between the ethnic divisions in attendance. My perception at the time was that an ingrained sense of suspicion or at least guarded mannerism was harboured by the Romany boxers, expressed via non-(verbalised)expression toward ‘outsiders’. This perception, however accurate, undermined the possibility of, or my ability at, forging the required trust and intimacy to collect valuable interview data that would more fully inform a fascinating cultural standpoint through which to examine the social significance of amateur boxing among the Gym-milieu of practitioners. Equally, I clearly pre-judged their interpretative capacities from a standpoint through which I sought reflexive self-validation as ‘the boxer’, ‘the researcher’ or else.

Another major consideration tapering the substance of data collected hinged upon my dismissal of individuals who trained at the Gym for a short duration before never been seen again. Although I made note of this pattern of behaviour I was unable, or unwilling, to explore in more detail their experiences and understandings of amateur boxing because, as ‘newcomers’, I had not made a concerted attempt to forge the acquaintanceship for me to request an interview. Their perspectives are therefore largely omitted from the research findings. Also, I was rather blinkered in my initial and on-going identification of the majority of senior Gym-boxers as being not much more than ‘novice’ boxers. Although I feel it is correct to infer that their interpretative capacities were restricted in accordance to their experiences of athletic attainment, I can see now that I also inadvertently judged and to degrees *subjugated* their standing and corresponding vantage of ‘reality’ within the Gym-milieu.

Following Sparkes and Smith (1999 p. 76) discussion of athletic identity, embodiment and gender, my own insider identity was, in ways unrecognisable and/or not readily acknowledgeable by me, “...associated with the construction and maintenance of specific forms of embodied, hegemonic masculinity”. That is, as a ‘real’ boxer I constructed a

masculine sensibility reflexively predisposed to hegemonic sporting ideals of dominance, self-reliance, drive, competitiveness and aggression (Connell 2005). Moreover, the value-rationale associated with adopting the demeanour necessary for the maintenance of stature within the boxing universe becomes conceivable as a consequence of the physically intensive and inherently aggressive masculinising experience of participating in a combative sport such as boxing. Further still, despite adopting the stylized demeanour of 'respectful' and 'honest' sociability according to the moral discourses and social contingencies specific to the boxing universe (see Birrell and Donnelly 2004), I can see now that my perception of my status as a boxer was, in part, an expression of masculinity that "...constructs itself relationally by marginalising and subordinating various 'others'" (Sparkes and Smith 1999 p. 81).

That said, it also needs to be understood that the cultural context through which Gym members practiced amateur boxing was far too complex and fluid to allow a static consideration of how insider status and/or hierarchical modes of masculinity were communicated and understood. Rather, the 'gendered positionality' (Wheaton 2002) between myself and other members were also layered through with our respective axes of class, 'race', ethnicity, age and religious identity. Thus, multiple and fluid processes of 'othering' were relationally and dynamically at work. Nonetheless, by reflexively unpacking my (self-styled) 'insider' boxer identity and the fluidity of its nature in relation to other boxing-practitioners through time, space and cultural context, I gained a clearer sense of the dynamic and complex dimensions through which experience, identity politics and power among the Gym-milieu took form and subsequently were played out and/or transformed.

At the same time as I was collecting data among Gym amateur boxers, I was grappling with the socio-cultural dimensions through which I attempted to forge an insider identity to investigate the life-worlds patronised by professional boxers in Luton and London. My intention was to negotiate a credible presence among professional boxing-practitioners allowing me to collect 'rich' qualitative data. Nonetheless, although my insider identity was to prove valuable in gaining access to the milieus accessed, it also presented (as much self-imposed) barriers of integration and/or insider acceptance. In particular, I was unable to forge the necessary intimacy with other boxers that would allow me to collect in-depth interview data. This was mainly because I found the all-consuming task of adopting the normalised modes of impression management and culturally prescribed codes of conduct necessary to retain a valid identity as a 'fighter', yet also critically evaluating these processes, incredibly difficult to sustain. Again, an understanding of other professional boxers life-histories would, I feel, have added important contextual detail to their lived meanings and constructed actions

not possible to infer merely through association gained from the immediacy of subcultural gymnasium space, time and sociability and public venue of competition.

Moreover, as an ‘insider to the context’ (Pink Dandelion 1997) of professional boxing I was nonetheless ‘an outsider’ to the social, symbolic and material dimensions defining professional boxing as a post-industrial, city-urban, South-East London tradition and or whatever else socio-cultural context. It is acknowledged, therefore, that much of the cultural nuance specific to those particular geographical locations and material environments have, at best, only thinly and/or fleetingly been grasped. Thus, as always, it is openly recognised that much work needs to be done to achieve the composite sociological depth necessary to fully contextualise the many rather exploratory, one might say transient, experiential observations and social engagements accounted for in the final representation of this study’s findings. Accordingly, within the reflexive parameters acknowledged thus far, the processes through which I sought to contextualise the data generated throughout the research are discussed below.

Contextualising the field

I sought to facilitate contextual detail to the observant-participation and interview data recorded in diary form by adding insights gained from insider and more public boxing related literature such as boxing magazines, governing body correspondence, the popular press, biographies of boxers, investigative journalism and filmed documentaries on separate files alongside fieldwork notes. In addition to such dedicated primary and secondary data collection methods I fulfilled academic criteria for satisfying procedural stages of this thesis in the form of report submissions, repeated perusals of the literature, the methodological how’s and why’s of ethnography and theoretical standpoints to the significance of sport/boxing in society.

The active process of collecting qualitative data from multiple respondents via a mixed bag of methods and through a rich variety of contexts also encouraged a natural form of triangulation (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Brewer 2000). As Miles and Huberman (1994) argue, a finding is verified or at least made plausible “...by seeing or hearing multiple instances of it from different sources by using different methods” (p. 267). The strength of the ethnographic method in enabling the researcher to gain access to the multiplicity of meanings, values, relations and actions upheld within small-world social settings that, in turn, over the protracted period of submersion allows the ethnographer to gain a nuanced understanding of the power dynamics at play has been widely observed (see Hobbs 1988; Sugden and Tomlinson 2002; Wheaton 2002; Bourgois 2003). Nonetheless, in recent times, the denial of positivistic criteria

of validation when seeking to interpret social phenomena has displaced the commonly upheld legitimising strategy of triangulation with the notion of ‘crystallization’ (Richardson 2000a). As Silk (2005) argues, the notion of triangulation is based on the domain assumption that there is a fixed point or object that can be triangulated and thus adheres to the positivistic axiom there is a ‘true’ and thus repeatable reality to be validated. Richardson (2000a p.934) offers the following justification for ethnographers seeking to crystallize their findings, given the crystal:

“...combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach. Crystals grow, change, alter, but are not amorphous. Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colors, patterns and arrays, casting off in different directions. What we see depends on our angle of repose... Crystallization, without losing structure, deconstructs the traditional idea of validity, and crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic. Paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know. Ingeniously we know there is always more to know”

According to Richardson’s definition of crystallization above, the process of ‘knowing’ throughout this research endeavour was emergent in congruency with the unfolding understanding experienced as a consequence of the reflexive processes of insider identity negotiation, uncertainty and (re)construction. Moreover, in addition to utilising observation and interview qualitative data collection techniques, my embodied presence and intuition as ‘the boxer’ became “...the research instrument *par excellence*” (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995 p. 19). Following Wacquant (2004 viii), I was conducting sociological analysis “...from the body, that is, deploying the body as a tool of inquiry and a vector of knowledge”. By experiencing the embodied logics of ‘real’ amateur and professional boxing it was possible to elucidate vistas of reality that, when theorised, augmented the comparative examination of amateur and professional boxing as perceived from the ‘boxer’s point of view’. Also, by gaining a more contextualised sense of my perpetually evolving ‘status’ among other boxing-practitioners I was able, over much time, to situate my own insider intuition in parallel with my more analytically minded and academically informed agenda (see Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). Thus, my interactions among ‘friendly’ or ‘antagonistic’, ‘trusted’ or ‘duplicitous’, ‘respected’ or ‘inferiorized’ boxing-practitioners were as informative as they may have reacted among other social-actors during similarly culturally coded interactions

That said, the first year and-a-half to two years of data collection training alongside and also analysing the Gym-milieu of amateur boxing-practitioners while simultaneously competing as a professional boxer proved to be a physically demanding, intellectually challenging, emotionally draining and, not least, confusing experience. With the benefit of hindsight that only time and persistence can offer, instances when I would vehemently reject much of the

literature's criticisms of boxing and the significant periods that I was unable to 'see' anything new to add to my field-notes was an indication that my vantage of analysis was firmly situated in my 'nativeness' as a boxing-practitioner. By documenting the reflexive processes through which my insider boxing identity evolved in relation to my deepening academically informed (self)awareness, it is possible to more fully understand the sense making procedures through which I and other boxing-practitioners, to degrees of relativity, constructed interpretative frameworks, athletic identities and actions.

Becoming analytical

By the time of entrée into the field as a novice researcher I had invested much time, sweat, blood and ambition as a competitive amateur boxer and had also abandoned my amateur status to contest one professional contest some months before the commencement of fieldwork, of which I won. My decision to 'turn pro' at the 'old' age of thirty (most professional boxers are thinking of retiring when approaching their thirties) was not incidental to this research project. The opportunity to tread the waters as a professional boxer while simultaneously been granted the opportunity to conduct a PhD research project of the cultural practice I was captivated by satisfied a two-fold hankering. In the first instance, I was able to fulfil my ambition to pursue the athletic challenges set by professional boxing before father time got the better of me. Reciprocally, the opportunity to intellectualise my past and future engagement with the 'The Noble Art' and, not least, the unanticipated opportunity to carve out a career in academia was intrinsically and pragmatically too good to miss. My work biography up to the point I began my undergraduate studies had been varied and of (what I considered) a temporary nature. I chose to describe my stints spent working in factories, labouring on building sites and farms, working nights in warehouses, selling and a host of other casual occupations both in the UK and abroad as 'colourful'. Nonetheless, I was also aware that my experiences of work resembled that of the mass of 'working poor' (Young 2007) in the UK who are lowly paid, largely unfulfilled and accordingly 'just getting by'.

Whatever suppositions may be made regarding the socio-structural dimensions through which I negotiated a sense of social/working identity, it is safe to say that as a novice researcher with only an undergraduate level of education I had little, if any, appreciation of the magnitude of the academic terrain that lay ahead as a PhD candidate. Rather, my formative standpoint for analysing and interpreting boxing was, consciously and unconsciously, grounded in the cultural praxis of the practitioner community I was an integral part of.

Re-defining a sense of place, character and culture

Although my insider identity enabled relative ease of access and a measure of acceptance among the milieus of boxing-practitioners studied, as time unfolded it became apparent that the agenda set for this study required a double-submersion in what amounted to a rather complex practical and intellectual ethnographic commitment. Moreover, the practical and intellectual magnitude of managing a dual insider research role as an amateur and professional boxing-practitioner became incrementally apparent as the research journey unfolded. This process of ‘awakening’ to the research task at hand I formatively attribute to my increasing appreciation of the pragmatic demands entailed of maintaining the research role as a ‘real’ professional boxer. Of secondary significance (although this would change) was my improving academic literacy.

By the beginning of the second year of data collection, while ‘living the same life’ as other boxing-practitioners, deepening analytical issues emerged gradually revealing the vast socio-cultural and power laden dimensions that lay hidden beyond my subjective understandings of what boxing is and is not, both as a boxer and social actor more generally. This realisation more fully took hold when I accessed pockets of professional boxing in London. Moreover, this geographical shift of focus demanded a broader scope of consideration be applied to the alien (to me) ‘cultural materialism’ (Hughson et al 2005) through which boxing signified meaning and value⁴. For instance, Robson (2001 p. 40) demonstrates how specific and historically situated structures of feeling and patterns of culture give rise to very distinctive modes of masculinity characteristic of the South East London habitus⁵. Accordingly, the athletic practice of boxing to a young man in his late teens or early twenties making his professional debut at the Elephant and Castle in South-East London and watched by his grandfather and father who had also competed there generations since, for instance, may take on a signifying quality remarkably different from my own and others socialised externally to this cultural-specific vantage.

It became apparent that in order to achieve a fuller understanding of the culturally embedded and multi-vocal logics informing professional boxing-practitioners interpretative capacities, athletic identities and actions, a prolonged and purposeful submersion was needed among a succinct practice community. The length of time and effort necessary to do so, and likely difficulties encountered along the way, should not be underestimated. After relatively prolonged and often perplexing and frustrating participant-observation periods in the two London gymnasiums studied, it dawned upon me that the analysis of professional boxing would have to be formulated almost as an adjunct to the main body of analysis of the Gym-

milieu's practice of amateur boxing. Accordingly, it is openly acknowledged that the findings presented of professional boxing in England are of a rather exploratory nature in relation to the more fully 'saturated' (see Silk 2005) analysis of the Gym community's practice of amateur boxing. To put it simply, to achieve the desired level of sustained immersion among the professional boxing-practitioners studied in Luton and London, in order to comprehensively contextualise their lived meanings and constructed actions during that moment in time and space, I would have had to compromise my endeavours to formulate an in-depth understanding of the Gym-milieu's practices of amateur boxing.

Going academic

It is worth pointing out that for a significant period of this research it was far more alien for me to sit through a departmental meeting at University than it was to participate in a two-hour workout in a professional boxing gymnasium. Nonetheless, as the research journey progressed, my understanding of boxing (as well as familiarity with the working culture of higher education) evolved in tandem with my developing grasp of the canons of academic orthodoxy. Much like Hobbs (1988) before me, by digesting the theoretical debates, methodological concerns of academic literature and becoming more conversant with the cultural nuances demanding of negotiating an identity within academia, I avoided remaining 'native' by going 'academic'.

Accordingly, a process of 'academic awakening', as it were, served to inform my own and other practitioners' understandings of boxing. Moreover, if I was able to freely interact with other boxing-practitioners from an associational vantage of knowing, over time it became increasingly apparent to me that the reality I was at liberty to access, share and communicate was as much articulated through intuition and/or symbolic association as it was reasoned discursively by way of deliberative logic. This realisation only arose after a protracted period of up to two years and more of solid ethnographic submersion, much in tune with my developing understanding of the historical, sociological and methodological debates informing this research. Two pivotal texts in particular allowed me to slowly and incrementally comprehend my evolving situatidness in relation to the field of inquiry.

As have been discussed fully in chapter 3, the study of boxing in society has benefited from John Sugden's (1996) and Loic Wacquant's (2004) excellent ethnographies. I was instantly drawn to and identified with, and perhaps sought solace in my 'reading' of, their culturally grounded understandings of boxing. Nonetheless, my initial interpretations of either author's work shifted over time as a consequence of my improving academic literacy, namely my

evolving capacity to more clearly comprehend the contextualised vision of their discussions. More profoundly, both author's understandings of boxing and their positioning as inquirers within their respective fields of analysis, held an influential affect upon my own learning curve as a novice academician/ethnographer. Ultimately, the rationale of both scholars thesis on boxing, once comprehended in sociological terms, greatly influenced the direction, depth and style of my own understandings of boxing that, in turn, contributed to the production of insights and claims made in this research.

Initially, while reflecting on Sugden's writing I harboured considerable ambivalence, if not a measure of reflexive disdain, towards his essentially deterministic understanding of boxing as a cultural practice of the dispossessed and powerless in society. Noting that Sugden paid homage to the early Chicago School of ethnographers analysis of, "...subterranean aspects of social life which...either border on or are the very centre of that area of social life designated as deviant by the guardians of social order" (p. 201), I felt aggrieved at his insistence that his own research of the boxing subculture was comparable to previous studies of drug users, social misfits, delinquent gangs and football hooligans (see pp. 201-202). More poignantly, I felt Sugden succumbed to a stereotypical view of boxers as being poverty stricken, powerless, desperate and often deviant 'roughs' who were in various ways co-opted by the structural determinism of a life eked out at the basement end society. Thus, to me, his depiction of what 'boxing' represented as an athletic practice was rather crudely stated. In particular, I questioned the extent that Sugden had truly captured the essence of boxing as an athletic experience. Moreover, I was critical of the credibility of his 'odd-job man' (p. 2)⁶ insider identity through which he felt was a credible vantage among 'real' boxing-practitioners through which to formulate an accurate representation of the cultural practice of boxing. The following extract guided my initial thought processes:

"Vic is a six-foot two-inch white heavyweight with the head of a bulldog, supported by a massive neck and sloping shoulders. (Vic's eyes lit up the first night that I came to the gym – because of my size he assumed that Mack had brought me down to spar with him). I had every intention of being a fully fledged participant observer and 'doing a bit' when I first went into the club. However, once I saw Vic and realised what was on his mind I reached for the broom and water bottle, *rationalising* that the role of part-time janitor / corner man would be sufficient for my research purposes"

(Sugden 1996 p. 74 emphasis added)

My initial comprehension of Sugden's rationale of the risks inherent from sharing the ring with Vic was, to say the least, rather dismissive. Albeit it was perfectly understandable that having never boxed before he was wary of the potential risks inherent, I estimated that his

refusal to experience boxing for 'real' was at the expense of communicating, negotiating and therefore truly understanding boxing as a lived experience. Moreover, I felt that he reflexively came clean as to the deterministic criteria he judged and evaluated the possibilities of boxing as an athletic/cultural practice, and even, the capacities of boxers as human beings. Nonetheless, having returned to Sugden's thesis multiple times over the duration of fieldwork and during the analytical period of writing and re-writing, my standpoint has changed somewhat. It has become increasingly apparent that there is no doubt Sugden's series of case studies capture the lived meanings of the boxers researched with admirable ethnographic detail, comparative richness, clarity of logic and theoretical sophistication. Following my readings of Sugden over the course of this research agenda, I was incrementally *forced* to acknowledge that it would be folly to not consider the structural impositions of poverty surrounding the vast majority of boxing gymnasiums in England and the web of micro and macro structural dimensions and power relations shaping and defining boxing as an athletic experience, social practice and cultural phenomenon. Further still, as my reading of academic literature expanded I was drawn to, identified with and gained rich comparative insights from many published qualitative studies of social groups and their cultural practices defined as deviant or criminal (see Taylor 1993; Armstrong 1998; Robson 2000; Winlow 2001; Bourgois 2003; Winlow and Hall 2006).

Loic Wacquant's (2004) ethnography was equally significant in shaping and defining this research. His series of articles and published book, *Body and Soul: notebook of an apprentice boxer* (2004)⁷ is also mindful of the deprived social environment through which the informants of his study inferred logic to the value of their chosen sport. His detailed analysis of a boxing gymnasium situated in the 'black' ghetto of South Chicago explicitly documents the deprived, crime ridden and stiflingly limiting circumstances experienced daily by the exclusively African-American group of boxers he trained alongside (see pp 17-31). However, his intent on focusing on the reasons why boxers *persisted* with, as opposed to logically assuming they were *pushed* into, boxing afforded a worldview that, to degrees, I instantaneously and wilfully identified with.

Although finding Wacquant's depth of thought and academic prose initially hard to follow, I was instantly captivated by the way his research 'spoke' to me. Wacquant's theorisation of boxing, although producing countless empirical similarities to Sugden's analysis of US boxers and, differed in as much as he incorporated a phenomenological frame of analysis to understand US boxers' reality constructions. Wacquant achieved this by transgressing the space between researcher and the ring in a bid to understand "...how boxing 'makes sense' as soon as one takes pains to get close enough to it to grasp it with *one's body*" (2004 p.7 original

emphasis). In seeking to explore the embodied meanings and sensations boxing held for the cohort of professional boxers in his study Wacquant, with admirable dedication, participated in all facets of a boxer's training regimen. In fact, as a finale to his research, Wacquant boxed in the preliminary stages of the Chicago Golden Gloves, a state sponsored programme of competition for amateur boxers. He labels his phenomenological ethnographic approach as 'carnal sociology':

“[carnal sociology is]...a fruitful conduit for gaining an adequate command of the 'culture' at hand, that is, a major *technique of ethnographic investigation and interpretation* in its own right. And one that is especially well-suited to capturing the visceral quality of social life that standard modes of social inquiry typically purge from their accounts”.

(Wacquant 2005 p. 465 original emphasis)

Through his fully participating research role Wacquant was able to access, elucidate and theoretically examine the visceral logic that was felt and sensed by boxers as much verbalised as a consequence or by-product of deliberative reflection. For Wacquant the distinctively, “...sensorial and emotional” (2004 p. 15) pedagogy through which boxers learned to box served to fabricate a highly toxic cultural aesthetic geared towards self-discipline, craftsmanship, 'honorary' respect for others as for self, self-denial and differed gratification, the glorification of an autonomously 'heroic' masculinity manifesting as an adventurous risk-orientated spirit. Nonetheless, far from relying on how boxing was kinetically experienced by boxers from 'the inside', Wacquant applied his phenomenological comprehension of boxing as a way of rethinking how culture and the self can be tied to analysis of wider structures of power and domination. Moreover, he operationalized Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) concept of 'habitus' to theorise why and how the material, social and symbolic dimensions framing 'black' US boxers marginalised life-circumstances, in complex ways, undermined their cultural agency. The thrust of the concept of habitus is that human beings acquire specific mental and physical dispositions shaped and defined by the culture (specifically class and its relationship to race and gender) they are socialised through since childhood (see Robson 2001; Tomlinson 2004; Hughson et al 2005). From this standpoint, individuals acquire 'taste' prerequisites in relation to the cultural group they are socialised through and feel they belong to (Bourdieu 1984). Thus, an affinity exists between the class habitus of any particular group and the perceived nature of a sporting practice (Hughson et al 2005).

By utilising the concept of habitus to more fully understand US professional boxers constructed logics, Wacquant asserts that the taste prerequisites entailed as a consequence of the deprived and often dangerous daily existence characteristic of the US ghetto nourishes a cultural aestheticism through which boxing, in spite of the brutalities inherent, is perceived to

be rational, relatively safe and even moral. In this way, the cultural practice of boxing, in ideological and practical terms, is functional as a ‘civilising and masculinising machine’ (2005 p. 458) in spite of the all too often morally decaying social context it resides within. Nonetheless, the boxing gymnasium only functions in this way because it is *bound to* the realities of an unjust and all too often inherently dangerous and violent ‘street life’. Thus, paradoxically, the ‘moralistic’ cultural production of boxing among the group of boxers he based his findings on ultimately derived meaning precisely because of the hyper-masculine, deviant and often criminogenic cultural norms endemic of everyday life in the ghetto. As Wacquant (2005 p. 460) puts it:

“...while it [boxing] is a life-affirming medium so long as it holds boxers inside its grip, boxing cannot be the definitive “antidote” to the allure and deadly dangers of “fast life” in the inner city that it would aspire to be: aside from the physical wreckage it necessarily creates, prizefighting deeply depends on the ghetto for its raw bodily materials, unprocessed masculine libido, and cultural support”.

Wacquant’s thinking considerably served to inform my own understandings of boxing. As ‘the boxer’ gradually turning ‘academic’ I was forced to acknowledge the extent matters of my own and other boxers taste and stylistic orientations and meanings were divergent despite the associational truths of our shared passion for boxing. Moreover, I was once again forced to consider, or perhaps more accurately stated *forced* to acknowledge, the manifold contradictions I often felt and sensed in relation to my involvement in boxing. More explicitly, the possibility that conscious/unconscious childhood socialisation processes were prevalent since I, as an Anglo-Greek immigrant male of no explicitly class-specific cultural identity, forged an identity as ‘the boxer’ among ‘other’ boxers upon my arrival in the UK were brought to the fore.

Socialising ‘the boxer’?

If unanimity exists within the literature it is that boxing is to all intents and purposes a working-class participant sport (see Weinberg and Arond 1952; Furst 1971; Hare, 1971; Gorn 1986; Brailsford 1988; Holt 1989; Sammons 1989; Shipley 1989; Sugden 1996; Polley 1999; Wacquant 2004). Having been born and raised in Greece for the first ten years of my life in comfortable economic circumstances, I do not claim a strong working or middle class cultural affiliation in terms of defining my sense of social identity since my arrival in the UK. Nonetheless, the following commentary penned by Hargreaves (1986 p. 101) round about the same time as I started boxing as a schoolboy, offers a degree of causality to the structural arrangements through which boxing became my chosen sport:

“The dislocated working-class with a preponderance of semi- and unskilled manual workers, the unemployed and the unemployable, and an increasing proportion of

people in ethnic minorities, has a relative low involvement in the more organised, institutionalised forms of sporting activity, due to the relative weakness of the social network, the low accessibility and availability of alternatives and inability or willingness to comply with middle-class norms”

My newly acquired social standing since arrival in the UK could explain the attractions boxing held for me in the following way: A dual-national immigrant from a one-parent female headed household hailing from a ‘rough’ council estate was always likely to be attracted to the low-cost, individualistic and assertively masculine sporting outlet of boxing. From this standpoint, having adopted the social profile of ‘the (half)-immigrant’ since my arrival in England, the appeal of boxing was a means for me to construct an assertive sense of individuality in an alien and at times hostile environment. Reciprocally, it can be inferred that the male dominated sporting subculture of boxing provided a paternalistically nurturing environment lacking at home. In this way, through displaying a degree of talent and the necessary fortitude to apply myself during training and, crucially, accrue success during what is perhaps the prototypical individualists sport accessible within the urban, working-class landscapes of British society, I was encouraged to yearn for and prove a very pronounced masculine self-worth. Whatever structural and agential dimensions apparent, one post-boxing and by this stage academically informed experience in particular caused me to re-evaluate the possibility of me failing to realise a submerged consciousness that may in part inform the folksy analogy of ‘the hungry fighter’.

Toward the end of the data collection period of this study I revisited the neighbourhood where I spent formative years in the UK growing-up from a ten-year-old boy into a fourteen-year-old youth (and schoolboy boxer). As I walked by my old home, primary school and other landmarks by this time vague in my memory, I was staggered at the deprivation of the part of the estate where my family once lived. This, by anybody’s standards, was ‘rough’ England; a modern day slum with all the hostility and hopelessness that the heady mix of (relative) poverty, dispossession and material decay imposes on daily life at the bottom of the social pile. Amidst the rubbish, graffiti, burned out cars and boarded up tenements I noticed discarded syringes, a chemical scourge not prominent in my time on this estate over two decades ago. I felt anger at the helplessness in the air, the sense of defeatism saturating much (but not all) of my old neighbourhood. There seemed no improvement and if anything, certainly even, there was degeneration and a hardening of the human face where one could almost smell apathy in the air. As far as my attraction to boxing is concerned I found myself contemplating if my desire to compete in a combat sport and thereafter conquer, or tolerate even, my fear of fighting and the inner determination that resulted on the most part in success, was in consequence to my early socialization into the ‘rough’ physical and cultural

environment in which I spent my early years since emigrating to England. On the other hand, abiding memories of school, playing football on the common, the opportunity to practice many other more 'civilised' sports, hanging out with my friends and attending youth club discos and such like were invariably happy and I cannot recall, in my young consciousness, any overriding concern with the pressures of life. Even when my family moved to an idyllic village on the outskirts of town I still chose to jog the three miles to and from the boxing gymnasium and wilfully, not to mention joyfully, persisted with my sport of choice.

Nonetheless, through the disclosure of the sociological dimensions serving to inform my (UK based) identity in this way, it can be speculated that I adopted a rather autonomous understanding of boxing, arguably one removed from the dominant culture that normalised its presence and function in society. Perhaps boxing became a personal challenge of which I adopted a 'jab-and-move' fighting style in some way resistant to other boxing-practitioners 'hardy' working-class tastes deemed 'unpretentious' and above all prototypically 'masculine'. In this way, it could be inferred that I forged a stylized sense of boxing, and my sense of 'boxer-self' as a consequence, somewhat distanced from the normative cultural aestheticism expressed and desired by many of the research subjects.

Of course such assertions can only be speculative and by definition lapse into ideal type typologies that fail to do justice to the capacities of other boxing-practitioners to exercise cerebral and expressive judgements of 'taste' and their capabilities to interpret and exercise humanistic practices and relations. This point made is ever the more pertinent when acknowledging the athletic virtuosity of many elite standard boxers typically hailing from the most successful amateur and professional boxing clubs in the UK. Neither, I feel, do ideal type typologies of 'rough' or 'civilised', whether of a particular socio-cultural practice or the actors who choose to define their identities through it, necessarily do justice to the complexities inherent in adequately and credibly understanding the multi-cultural meaningfulness of social life more generally. As Wacquant (1995) observes of professional boxers in the US, their passion-laden passion for boxing is a skewed and malicious one as there is no escaping the "barbaricness" (p. 520) of their quasi-religious attachment to their craft. This terminology was used by one boxer interviewed by Wacquant to convey the brutal nature of boxing; its 'hardness' and the society that in differing permutations identifies with it. When seeking to understand the complexities inherent of human expression and action, therefore, connections need to be made as regards how that agency repeatedly and organically engages with forms of structure and influence (see Tomlinson 2004 p. 167). Both my own recollections and the accounts from boxers in Wacquant's study indicate the complex and dynamic nature of the agency-structure quandary.

That said, I acknowledge that as my appreciation of the synthetic inter-relations between agency and structure serving to define my own and other boxing-practitioners lived meanings developed, I found it increasingly difficult to allot symbolic value to my constructed identity as ‘the boxer’. This process of ‘dis-enchantment’ evolved over a relatively short yet emotionally disorientating time. By documenting this process of identity transformation as gleaned from the sensual, symbolic and emotional dimensions experienced as an ‘insider’ researching the field, it is possible to more fully unravel the layers of reflexivity informing my own and, subsequently, my understanding of other boxing-practitioners logics of boxing.

‘The boxer’ in crisis

During the first two years of this research agenda I was in a position to experience first-hand what is known among professional boxing-practitioners as *‘living the life’*. As an active featherweight professional boxer I had to develop the physical conditioning and mental focus necessary to maintain my weight limit that, in turn, is a pre-condition to compete successfully. Equally so, I was fully aware that the task of maintaining peak fitness was necessary in order to avoid, or at least minimize, the inevitable *‘wear and tear’* that haunts all professional boxers as they progress through their careers (see Sugden 1996; Wacquant 2004; Woodward 2007). This research role enabled me to experience and thereafter communicate a myriad of insider realities including: the tranquillity of five am runs; the exhilaration of arriving at peak fitness; the easy-going camaraderie and bravado experienced among professional boxers occupying changing rooms designated *‘blue corner’* (or ‘the chances are you lose corner’); the solitude of contemplating a contest to become real in the days and hours before the event; winning and losing; getting paid for my efforts and manifold other ‘fight game’ practices and relations. As time wore on, however, I lost much of my appetite for training and in a ‘burned-out’ manner steadily retreated from the rigours of competitive professional boxing.

I found this to be an uncomfortable period in which the seeds for developing a critical attitude towards the cultural ‘truths’ informing my own and other boxers’ interpretative logic and constructed athletic identities and actions fully took form. With the benefit of hindsight some years on from that period, I can see that further than stretching to sustain a highly intensive and all-consuming sporting challenge on top of the rigours entailed for producing PhD quality research findings, I had also developed a mindset that encouraged much analytical, introspective and theoretically critical scrutiny. In particular, as I delved deeper into the analytic mindset of the academic researcher, I re-evaluated the truths upheld among other boxing-practitioners and my symbolic attachment to the *‘pro’* code. By doing so, I inevitably

cast a critical outlook upon the cultural codes and mores through which I had forged relationships and value attachments through the practice of boxing.

For instance, when undertaking the ritual of 5 am ‘*road work*’ in the guise of a professional boxer it was usual for fresh ideas and thoughts assimilated during an uninhibited sleep-state to converge in floods as I listened to the music playing on my personal stereo. The fledgling ‘*pro*’ met the fledgling academic in this sense in a bid to conceptualise and contextualise ‘objective’ understandings of boxing as an athletic experience and as a social practice. What are the differences between ‘*amateur*’ and ‘*pro*’? Do I feel different? Should I do it this way, act in such a way or think these thoughts? How do other boxers perceive their own actions, interpret my actions, understand this or that value orientation, relationship or practice? Is my ‘status’ as a professional boxer perceived to be mutual, as a mutual-other, a respected insider or a ‘*dreamer who’s got no chance*’? Is boxing really the sporting equivalent of prostitution? Am I simply inventing academic absurdities and contemplating too much? It all turned out to be a heady undertaking.

Further, like many of the professional boxers I came to observe during this research, was the realisation that in my early thirties I simply ‘aged-out’ of what is a ‘*young man’s game*’. Perhaps I was discovering that professional boxing was not for me or, worse still, I was not up to the challenge of the ‘real thing’ and I belonged with the ‘recreational’ amateur code. By equal measure, perhaps years of disciplining my mind and body to maintain my weight classification and contend with the sheer physicality and emotionality of boxing training and competition, experienced on a daily basis, had taken their toll. Accordingly, like the majority of boxers approaching the thirty something chronological marker a toning down of lifestyle beckoned. When I heard the sentiments of a champion professional boxer in the changing room of a London gymnasium while shaking his head wearily with an air of resignation that, “*I’m just sick and tired of being punched on all the time...too much give and take mate...too much give and take...boom, boom day in day out [grinning wearily] I need to chill out and return to normality...*” I had, over a relatively condensed time-span, come to feel the same way.

In what felt at that time as ‘paralysis by analysis’ my motivation to train with the verve and dedication I had cultivated over a number of years steadily declined. Increasingly, I entertained doubt when estimating the intentions of those round me while questioning cultural truths and moral codes of boxing per se and my ever transforming identity, torn as it was between two strikingly differing, even oppositional, lifeworld logics; the physical expressivity

and emotive spontaneity demanded by boxing and, by way of apposite contrast, the academic lifeworld logic of non-physicality and incessant deliberative reflection. As time wore on, I increasingly perceived boxing from a detached standpoint rather than that of a focused and necessarily self-centred athlete submerged in the visceral and emotional tunnel-vision of athletic competition. In short, by internalising the critical discourse of the literature, the symbolic heroism through which I enchanted my identity as ‘the boxer’ was dulled. My days as a fully-fledged competitive boxer had started to peter out.

Nonetheless, by having lived-out the processes leading to my identity transformation it became possible to revisit old truths held and evaluate new ones through processes of embodied engagement and introspective disengagement. Over time, this all-consuming iterative process of ‘engaged retrospection’ contributed to the contextualised representations of the research findings. As has been indicated, these processes were far from a sequence of discrete systematic stages of analytical rigour through which I progressively gained academic enlightenment. Rather, the process of data collection, analysis and interpretation was a continuous endeavour that was guided by the ethnographic commitment to analytic induction and grounded theory (Brewer 2000). Nonetheless, it is possible and necessary to identify the series of procedural steps through which, over much time, the vast quantity of fieldwork data generated was ordered and re-ordered in a way that allowed me to interpret and represent the final production of knowledge presented in this thesis.

Gaining focus

As time progressed, data collected from the field and insights gained from the literature meshed with my developing reflexive awareness to complement and add to my insider understanding of boxing. In turn, I began to formulate a clearer picture of the power dynamics through which boxing as a cultural practice was lived-out by the practitioner community of boxers. Although the gathering of data was a perpetually messy process, over time and in phases concepts that formed the building blocks of theory were generated allowing for the discovery of theory from data, or as was more the case, to mesh theorising with data collection and offer retrospective theorisation (see Bryman & Burgess 1994; Miles & Huberman 1994; Wheaton 1997; Silk 2005).

Accordingly, by way of academically informed theorisation and fieldwork driven embodied introspection, my insider identity became a looking-glass medium affording vistas to engage with the field of inquiry that would not be possible from solely observing boxing-practitioners during work and play and/or merely listening to interviewees accounts of proceedings.

Moreover, the distinctly phenomenological emphasis to interpreting the data captured the web of felt and sensed emotional realities that, semi-consciously, symbolically lubricated meanings, values and beliefs logical only to those steeped in the cultural practice of amateur and professional boxing. Further, comparison of data collected from multiple sources within the amateur and professional boxing universes helped, over a prolonged period of time, in the identification of patterns of behaviour contextually, spatially and temporally.

My initial attempts to try and make sense of the mass of data collected was through identifying emergent themes, issues, contradictions, patterns of communication, belief systems and the like that 'jumped-out' at me when reading and re-reading my notes. Initially, as has been indicated above, it was particularly tricky for me to see anything to 'write about'. As time progressed, however, my attempts became more focused through clarification of the analytical schema guiding this research, namely the overlapping themes of 'socialization into', 'cultural production within' and 'career progression through' (see Donnelly 2000) amateur and professional boxing. Albeit perpetually grappling with the field as an 'insider', through persistence I began to develop a more 'detached' contextual appreciation of the data generated by developing a series of codes and sub-codes to label emerging phenomena.

Initially reliant on my insider intuition, that was progressively informed by academic reasoning, I concentrated upon identifying, labelling and, in due course, conceptualising the pivotal social dimensions defining boxing-practitioners reality constructions. As time wore on, the 'folk' (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007) practices, social relations, value orientations and belief systems of the boxing milieus analysed, that I would have previously considered logical, common-sense or simply did not pay heed to, did indeed 'jump-out' at me (from the page or in the field) in moments of revelation. Just some 'revelatory moments' include: the 'subtle narcissism' (as opposed the cosmetic narcissism integral to, for instance, the bodybuilding subculture - see Klein 1993) conveyed by boxers when studying their form in strategically placed mirrors; the 'conformist' obedience displayed by boxers of all ages, capabilities and status to the instructions of head-coaches; the mannerisms of 'outsiders' as they entered a boxing gymnasium for the first time; the concentrated yet 'relaxed' focus exhibited by professional boxers when training and sparring; the unguarded emotions displayed by boxers pre and post contest in the 'private sanctuary' of the changing rooms.

Having noted (mentally and in written form) the sensuous, symbolic and emotional dimensions felt and sense while in the fields studied, as the research process unfolded the task at hand was to re-visit emergent issues, themes and patterns of continuity or hidden

ambiguities, distortions, falsehoods, paradoxes, contradictions or competing explanations of the various observations made. Invariably this undertaking was a protracted, messy and confusing one, with my attempts at formulating a contextual understanding of amateur and professional boxing a frustrating experience often appearing futile or at least incomprehensible. Nonetheless, the ongoing effort of coding the plethora of emergent data proved to be a pivotal sensitizing procedure enabling me to analyse with increasing clarity the life-worlds studied.

Writing, interpreting and learning

Throughout the process of ethnographic data collection, content analysis and coding I also sought to further my understanding of both the field of analysis and the academic discipline of sociology by qualitatively recording in written form the following areas: a historical overview of the social development of amateur and professional boxing in England; detailed accounts of pivotal actors encountered within the field of analysis (coaches, managers, 'real' boxers, significant other/guardians); key focal events in the field that signified collective pivotal significance among amateur and professional boxing-practitioners (such as 'grass-roots' and 'championships' competitions, weighing-in procedures, sparring). Again, throughout the period of fieldwork this practice was overwhelmingly messy in that I was as yet unable to formulate patterns of clearly discernable sociological interconnectedness between what had become a mass of thought patterns, behaviours and belief-systems held within and/or in consequence of still emerging conceptual themes, contradictions and paradoxes. Nonetheless, the ongoing process of qualitative description and analysis and my improving ability to write and think coherently and logically was in itself a pivotal form of analysis.

Approximately five years into this research and having officially ended fieldwork I undertook the final phase of 'writing-up' this thesis. Unbeknown to me at this stage, the task of writing-up proved to be a protracted, immensely challenging yet ultimately analytically enriching task. The technical and rhetorical skill necessary to capture and convey the multifaceted and multi-vocal dimensions fabricating the cultural production of boxing was/is for me an immense intellectual challenge. Moreover, the procedure of logically and coherently 'getting things on the page' enabled me, through ongoing dialogue with the meta-language of social science, to more comprehensively analyse and interpret the field. By grappling with the reflexivity entailed in producing this representational quandary the final more fully contextualised understanding of my own and other informants' vantages of boxing reality were formulated.

The ethnographic findings are thus impressionistically textured through a broadly, although not exclusively, Weberian approach - *verstehen* (see Morrison 1995; Swingewood 1999;

Donnelly 2000; Cantelon and Ingham 2002; Giulianotti 2005; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Augmenting the interpretative approach to data collection a range of theoretical perspectives have been integrated within the ethnographic narrative in a way that evoke a richer understanding of the web of phenomenological, social and symbolic processes shaping and defining the lived cultures of amateur and professional boxing studied. In addition, theoretical concepts articulating the macro power relations of contemporary social existence have been utilised to open up more objective dimensions impacting upon boxing-practitioners interpretative capacities.

A word on ethical conduct

As in all research there are, of course, ethical dilemmas that the researcher must grapple with from the conception of a research project and throughout the research journey itself. The ethical standards expected of social science and the often difficult ethical conduct called of academic researchers have been addressed by Homan (1991) in particular and also by ethnographic methodologists (Silverman 1993; Fetterman 1998; Brewer 2000; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007) and a large number of ethnographic researchers who conducted insider research of some sort (see Hobbs 1988; Pink Dandelion 1997; Wheaton 1997b; Sands 2002).

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) identify five issues that need to be addressed by ethnographers: informed consent, privacy, harm, exploitation and consequences for future research. In the context of this study, ethical decisions regarding the maintenance of informants' dignity through the avoidance of deceit or even the perpetuation of a form of exploitation were brought to the fore. Moreover, the researcher has also to consider the implications of research findings being made available for a wider public audience in light of material being published, both for the subjects analysed and the reputation and legitimacy of future social research initiatives. Arguably, these issues were all the more problematic for me as an 'insider' conducting ethnographic research among friends or at least familiar acquaintances. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) contend, ethical issues have a 'distinctive accent' (p. 209) in ethnographic research due to the specific characteristics of the research process and the researcher's role within it. Brewer (2000 p. 89) too elaborates on the ethical issues implicit to ethnography:

“Ethnographers are perhaps unique among social researchers in sharing the lives of the people they study. This means that they cannot, as Fetterman (1998: 129) writes, work as if in a vacuum – they pry into people's innermost secrets, witness their failures and participate in their lives – which means they must operate a code of ethics that respects their informants. Many go further, by arguing that this ethical code should respect the integrity of the discipline and the interests of future researchers who may wish to enter the same field”.

Throughout this research, ethical issues were operationalized in accordance with the necessity to make decisions within the cultural context through which I strove to maintain an ‘overt’ research capacity. The rationale for being overt about my research agenda was based on the ethical requirements to avoid impairing subjects human dignity through deceit of my research objectives and, when necessary, guaranteeing and preserving their privacy and confidentiality (Brewer 2000). More to the point, I felt it paramount to avoid deceiving research subjects many of whom I’ve been intimately associated with and continue to hold in high regard. The prospect of causing research participants harm was thus, from the outset, simply not on the agenda and the likelihood of me doing so was/is a hugely problematical burden associated with having conducted this research. That said, the rationale and indeed integrity underpinning the value of ethnographic research dictates that essentially intimate perspectives of research subjects will emerge and unavoidably will be ‘revealed’ so as to credibly inform the contextually inferred standpoints of interpretation. As was the case during this ethnography, the field of inquiry by definition ‘opened up’ and incrementally revealed vistas of exploration that, unexpectedly, challenged my own insider ‘truths’ and consequently the web of cultural meanings, values and beliefs through which I communicated and shared a sense of mutuality, belonging and friendship with other boxing-practitioners. Accordingly, the notion of keeping subjects informed of the research agenda at all times smacks of the unattainable ‘ethical absolutism’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007) which, for instance, is reflected in the ethical guidelines of professional bodies. Rather, the ethical stance adopted throughout the research process, or perhaps more accurately stated emerged as I reflexively re-positioned myself among the social milieus analysed, follows Hammersley’s and Atkinson’s (2007) definition of ‘ethical situationism’:

“...what is and is not legitimate action on the part of researchers is necessarily a matter of judgement in context, and depends on assessment of the relative benefits and costs of pursuing research in various ways. This point of view usually places particular emphasis on the avoidance of serious harm to participants, and insists on the legitimacy of research and the likelihood that offence to someone cannot be avoided.”

Much like previous insider researchers (see Hobbs 1988; Pink Dandelion 1997; Wheaton 1997b), as an insider to both the Gym-group and the professional context of boxing in Luton and London I found that maintaining strict adherence to the ‘overt’ research principle impossible to maintain. As Homan (1991) has critiqued, I felt that for me to religiously adhere to the principle of informed consent would infer disclosure of a frame of critical analysis totally incongruent with the cultural logic informing boxing-practitioners understanding of boxing during that time and place. Thus, even though the subject matter of my research aims was not alien to research subjects, the act of repeatedly introducing my academically informed

focus to my everyday interactions with other boxing-practitioners would, I felt, have imposed a placebo effect on my 'insider' status upon the research setting.

More to the point, if I had carried out the ethical obligation to be overt as a researcher at all times I have no doubt that I would have confused, or worse still, been treated with suspicion by, the vast majority of boxing-practitioners. Undue emphasis placed on my identity as a researcher run the risk of either contaminating mutually established 'interaction norms' (Goffman 1967; 1990) by breaching sublimely coded culturally conversant expectations of communication and self-presentation, or alienating members with an academically inferred preoccupation they neither wished to understand nor cared about. It was often the case when attempting to introduce my research objectives to Gym amateur boxers to receive exasperated and quizzical responses like, "*you know that...don't you do it...?*" Likewise, instances when I attempted to discuss my research objectives with professional boxers were rather ineffectual and deemed totally out of context in that time and space. My immediate feeling was that my inquisitiveness seemed to arouse suspicion as much as rapport. Accordingly, despite openly conversing about my research objectives with anyone showing an interest in my academic agenda, on the main my relations with boxing-practitioners were maintained on the basis of our friendship, or simply familiar acquaintance, shared through the cultural logic of boxing as an athletic/social practice. Thus, virtually at all times, my identity among the boxing-practitioners studied remained that of 'the boxer' more so than someone who "*knocks about at the university*".

It became apparent to me over the duration of this ethnography that the ethical idealism informing the principle of informed consent is riddled with further inconsistencies. For instance, the absolutist ethical principle informing the practice of informed consent declares that participants "...should be allowed to agree or refuse to participate in the light of comprehensive information concerning the nature and purpose of the research" (Homan 1991 p. 90). Nonetheless, throughout this research the assumption that informants necessarily shared an interest in my research objectives or, in fact, wished to be informed of them, at least in academic terms, is erroneous. The reality was that the academic nature of my agenda held little interest for many of the boxing-practitioners I encountered. Further still, it was necessary to 'disguise' the critical nature of the research. Disguise of this sort was necessary from two standpoints. In the first instance it would have been folly of me when in conversation with aspirant professional boxers to introduce the argument that professional boxing can, from a critical sociological perspective, be compared to say, prostitution. If I did, I'm sure I would have been ostracized, or worse, by the boxing-practitioners at hand and branded as 'smug', a 'mug', a 'nutter' or else. Secondly, I often felt it pertinent, and necessary, to acquire consent

and in return guaranteed confidentiality via insinuation, particularly when interviewing Gym-boxing practitioners who were also familiar acquaintances. The need to insinuate confidentiality, as opposed to explicitly guarantee it, was at times necessary due to my constant vigilance that relations among myself and other Gym-members were interconnected through friendship patterns coded through norms and expectations demarcating 'respectful' or 'disrespectful' etiquettes of behaviour. Acknowledging the need to guarantee confidentiality would thus imply a declaration of mistrust, dubiety or at least gossip and run the risk of implicating respondents in a 'slagging of' agenda aimed at the expense of familiar Gym-acquaintances. In such instances, I felt it more prudent and indeed more dignified to exercise sensitivity and respect for the cultural nuances, values and beliefs defining norms of sociability that many boxing-practitioners upheld in high regard or indeed passionately cherished.

Also, if the nature of my necessarily 'disguised' disclosure of the critical nature of the research held undoubted resonance with the subjects under scrutiny, it is worth bearing in mind that my explications to them could only be formulated in relation to my own evolving and necessarily subjective and thus censured comprehension of the still evolving academic rationale. Further still, the degree of 'insidership' and thus acquaintance or familiarity I was able to deploy was in no way static as it fluctuated in terms of status within settings, among different social grouping and between individuals throughout the different stages of the research process. Thus, my status as a 'real' boxer was a research tool that needed to be negotiated at all times within the spatially and temporally variable fieldwork contexts analysed. In turn, my negotiated insidership within the multiple contexts of the field influenced my role as researcher. Consequently, although I deemed the research agenda to be at all times overt, in the process of negotiating and re-negotiating my 'insider' positionality among other boxing-practitioners, through necessity, my researcher identity proved very much inconsequential or even a hindrance. Accordingly, again through necessity, the overtness of my research agenda was often rather 'submerged' during day-to-day fieldwork proceedings. As such, I overtly sought to acquire respondent consent and mentioned the need to guarantee confidentiality only in significant circumstances, as when gaining permission to interview.

Following Pink Dandelion (1997), the main ethical concern arising from this research was not the act of obtaining consent from informants as it was considering the consequences of having done or not done so. The issue of vigilance towards the ethical code of harm avoidance for informants is thus brought to the fore. In a bid to ensure confidentiality and anonymity I have ensured all informants and clearly identifiable 'landmark' structures such as gymnasiums and housing estates have been allotted pseudonyms. Nonetheless, as Wheaton (1997) commented

of the windsurfing subculture, the boxing subculture too consists of a microcosm of 'faces' and gymnasium life-worlds easily identifiable to insiders of boxing. This was particularly the case when taking account of my long standing association with the Gym-milieu of practitioners within the localised context of amateur boxing in Luton. In the case of professional boxing, although I was a rather more peripheral member of the research setting, it remains that professional gymnasiums are patronised by identifiable 'faces' of repute among the insider community and, in many cases, the public at large. Thus pseudonyms do not necessarily guarantee anonymity and confidentiality.

Accordingly, I feel the most prominent ethical problem that arose during this research was the critical frame of analysis adopted by me when interpreting the values and actions of a number of pivotal actors featuring prominently in my representation of the Gym-milieu's practice of amateur boxing, namely: 'Coach' and my representation of the cohorts of Romany-Gypsies involvement in amateur boxing. As the research evolved I felt it necessary to portray my own and other boxing-practitioners relationship with Coach in detailed terms. Quite simply put, as is fully stated in the next chapter, without Coach organising the Gym it would not exist. Therefore it was imperative to place his role as the sole organiser of the Gym under the magnifying glass in a bid to portray the significance of his value-rationale underpinning his daily actions that also, by necessity, held overwhelming significance to all Gym-boxers athletic development. It is imperative to state, therefore, that my aim in documenting Coach's actions in considerable detail has been to add clarity to the sociological critique of amateur boxing as opposed to explicitly critiquing the character traits of Coach per se. Accordingly, the ethical stance that I uphold for doing so is that by 'revealing' moments between myself and Coach, and my accounts of other Gym-actors lived meanings, I was able to add layers of contextual clarity fabricating the cultural production of amateur boxing at hand. Nonetheless, in doing so, I concede it remains that it can be interpreted that my portrayals of Coach, and perhaps other individuals or groups (specifically the Romany-Gypsy boxers) featuring in my account, have been unflattering.

From an ethical standpoint the question arises of whether their right to privacy, confidentiality and anonymity or even that their 'right to reply' has been breached. The argument I put forward is that although I recognise sensitive issues and subsequently critical portrayals of key individuals and groups thoughts and actions have been documented, I have exercised an adequate degree of self-censorship of data that may potentially manifest harmful repercussions to their reputations and/or future relations. Thus, I was careful to only document potentially sensitive data that have been gleaned or conferred to me from a 'public' vantage of disclosure. In other words, none of the data exposed in my impressionistic tale of amateur and

professional boxing has at any time been offered to me in confidence. Rather, I made sure that the discourse through which I portrayed the subjects informing this research was publicly stated to me and other actors without a hint of reservation as to the ‘sensitivity’ of disclosure. Moreover, the sentiments documented were expressed on many occasions in the presence of a variety of actors albeit through differing idioms, circumstances and contexts. Thus, as always, the sentiments and actions of the subjects documented in this research have been interpreted as relative of the wider social context, or the agency-structure synthesis through which boxing-practitioners construct interpretative frameworks, athletic identities and actions.

The ethical stance adopted in light of the issues raised was/is as follows. Although what may be deemed to be ethically sensitive disclosure of issues and events arising throughout the research journey may have arguably resulted in somewhat unflattering portrayals of certain actors coming to light, in order to preserve the sociological integrity of this research it is acknowledged that is not possible to unproblematically study the individual in isolation from the social. Following Wheaton’s (1997b p. 170) argument, if I chose to omit every ethically sensitive sentiment and/or practice from my impressionistic representations of the fields and actors studied, then not only would I have succumbed to the ‘Ivory Tower’ ethical stance espoused, I feel from a rather insular institutionalised rationale, but also, and far more worryingly, the representations of this research would undermine and/or obscure the all-important standpoints that matter most – those of the subjects of this research.

ENDNOTES

¹ Prior to my arrival at the Gym I had competed in the Senior ABAE amateur boxing Championships on two previous occasions

² The Board had to sell these premises in order to raise funds for negligence damages awarded to Michael Watson after his near fatal injuries in a fight with Chris Eubank in 1991; BBBC offices are now in Cardiff.

³ This is an innocuous beige-brown passport holder that nonetheless granted me licence to forcefully and legally kill, or be killed, while engaging in athletic competition.

⁴ As much literature indicates the structural characteristics contributing to inner city realities in London’s vast conurbations bare a strong resonance to previous ethnographies of boxing located at the heart of ghetto’s situated elsewhere in the world (see Harrison 1983; Hobbs 1988; Sugden 1996; Robinson 2001; Wacquant 2004).

⁵ Robinson (2001) argues that specific modes of class based masculinity inform the stylized presentation and on occasions actions of some of the most notorious football hooligans in Britain, South East London’s notorious Millwall fans.

⁶ Sugden adopted this persona in his ethnography of a boxing gymnasium in Hartford, US (see Sugden 1987; 1996).

⁷ This work by Wacquant has received high accolades throughout the academic community to the extent a special issue of *Qualitative Sociology* (Vol 28, No 2, Summer 2005) published a ‘Symposium on Loic Wacquant’s Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer’. Wacquant duly defends points raised by the various academics contributing to the symposium in a subsequent issue of *Qualitative Sociology* (Vol 28, No 4, Winter 2005) in his essay ‘Carnal Connections: On Embodiment, Apprenticeship, and Membership’

4.2 An impressionistic tale of boxing from the 'inside'

The literature has thus far insightfully examined the social significance of boxing for social actors inhabiting impoverished, criminogenic, racially and ethno-religiously divided neighbourhoods in the US and Northern Ireland (see Sugden 1996; Wacquant 2004). The focus of this study aims to further our understanding of the cultural significance of boxing as practiced within the English societal context. More succinctly, the practice of boxing in England (and worldwide) is demarcated into two unique, albeit closely related, amateur and professional codes. Thus it need be acknowledged that as social phenomena spatially and ideologically demarcated into two separate codes or cultural 'fields' (Bourdieu 1984) - the 'institutionalised-amateur' code and the 'commercialised-subcultural' professional code - boxing constitutes two distinctive sites of cultural production through which practitioners learn and enact unique behaviours, norms and values. To this extent, it is worth repeating Kidd's (1996 p. 84) argument for the potential benefits gained from participation in competitive sports:

"It cannot be said that sports alone provide such moments, but those of us who have experienced them would agree the formative potential is there: Much of our important knowledge about ourselves and others was gained through the challenges and reflection sports encourage"

In as much as it is correct to recognise that participation in sport is indeed developmental there are no guarantees as to the affects of socialisation into and through the mores and customs of any particular sportive context. As Kidd (1996) is correct to point out, as much as sporting engagement has the potential to be humanely developmental it can be, and often is, pathological (see Blackshaw and Crabbe 2004). The task of evaluating an inherently antagonistic sporting practice such as boxing, therefore, requires careful consideration of the web of sensorial, social and emotional dimensions through which boxing practitioners, in complex ways, construct identities. From this frame of examination this section of the thesis aims to offer an impressionistic examination of the socio-cultural dimensions through which amateur and professional boxing practitioners embody unique life sustaining modes of behaviour and value orientations. In a bid to unpack the web of lived dimensions inherent, theoretical approaches attuned to empathetically interpreting boxing practitioners understandings of boxing have, in the first instance, been utilised.

Insider Verstehen as a method of 'seeing'

For Max Weber (1930) non-economic factors alongside or independent from economic influences define the cultural dimensions through which social-actors interpret and understand themselves and their life-circumstances. Significantly, Weber's sociological imagination

upheld a frame of analysis that incorporated an interpretative agenda empathetic towards the subjective orientations people proffer to their actions – *verstehen*. Moreover, his interpretative stance emphasised the power to human agency when seeking to analyse the cultural production of any given social practice (see Morrison 1995; Donnelly 2000; Giulianotti 2005). As such, he rejected the economic determinism of Marxist theory (see Jarvie and Maguire 1994; Morrison 1995; Swingewood 1999; Cantelon and Ingham 2002). The significance of utilising Weber’s theoretical standpoint to examine the socialisation processes through which boxing practitioners embody life sustaining modes of behaviour, therefore, is that it becomes possible to interpret boxing as a cultural phenomenon not solely determined as a consequence of material deprivation.

By way of introduction to this critical study of amateur and professional boxing in England, the following chapter seeks to evoke the cultural aestheticism through which schoolboy amateur boxing is lived within, and accordingly understood through, the late-modern moment of contemporary social life in England. A thirty or so strong group of social-actors collectively identifying themselves as the Luton-Gym amateur boxing club (a pseudonym), joined a vast cross-section of other amateur boxing clubs attending the ‘focal event’ (Brewer 2000) of schoolboy amateur boxing in England in the year 2004 – the Schools Amateur Boxing Association of England (SABAE) annual ‘Championships Finals’. Their collective focus centred on the welfare of a talented fifteen year-old boxer, Dodger, who had successfully negotiated a series of regional and area tournaments leading to this prestigious ‘Final’s’ day. Fuelling their mix of excitement and nervy anticipation was the knowledge that he faced a stern ‘hierarchical performance’ (Morgan 1994) test of character where ‘the best’ who beat ‘the rest’ could lay claim to the status of National supreme in his age and weight classification. Moreover, he could also be chosen to represent England on the elite stage of international competition.

A special day out

The day started with a convoy of cars heading toward the Gorsebrook Leisure Centre situated on the outskirts of London. Leading the way was Coach, having packed his people-carrier with an assortment of boxers, his wife Kate, two of his grandchildren and myself in the co-driver seat responsible for guiding him via the network of motorways, roundabouts and designated junctions for prompt arrival at our destination. Thankfully our journey was straightforward so the usual tension at the prospect of late arrival due to losing our way was averted affording all concerned and not least Dodger following in Dad-Jim’s four-wheel drive packed with a half-dozen family members, a smooth opening to the day.

The atmosphere in the car was characteristically subdued with small talk on the state of affairs in local boxing the mainstay of conversation among the adults, while the youngsters sat in mute silence attentively listening-in or dreamily staring out of the car windows. As Coach edgily took stock of the time he was informed of immanent ‘speed traps’ on this final part of the journey. Casting a cursory glance at the speed dial Coach, by way of retaliation to this unnecessary imposition, took stock of the wider context shaping and defining his social identity. In a rare muse of the ever-changing social order impacting upon his life beyond the daily trials and tribulations entailed of organising the Luton-Gym ABC, he voiced the following opinions:

“Ever since this country joined up in the EU right...Luton...in fact this country as a whole...has gone down the tubes. They seem more intent on nailing good working people [we by-pass the luminous yellow speed camera at the designated miles per hour] than doing anything about all the shit going on today. Listen, I have only been on the dole once in my life and that was because it was a horrible winter and I could not work. I’ve been brought up with basic values...to work hard...to take care of my family...to have basic moral values handed down by our religion. That’s how most Irish got on in life. It’s the same for the Polish, the Italians’, they all came here to work. That’s how I was brought up, it’s what I believe and it’s how it should be. Now look at the state Luton’s in right now and see how many have come in with no intention of working. Its ridiculous and its only getting worse. How many Indians’ and Pakistanis’ do you see claiming, rubbishing the place and into crime...now it’s the turn of the Kosovans’, the Turks’, the Africans or whoever else they’re letting in...And all they want to do is take the bread out of your man going to work for some pointless speed limit! Everyone is digging their heels in and it’s just getting shitty. And you know what? As I get older...one...my body is literally falling apart...and two...I just don’t want to live in Luton for the rest of my life...it’s just not a nice place anymore and it’s getting worse. Nah no way! Alex, I’m getting older...[rueful smile]...I’m getting weary, I’m still arguing with her [nods toward Kate and grins]...I’m still grafting and hating it. Running it (the Gym) is so bloody hard sometimes but in many ways I need it...I know that. But I rush home from work, have a bite to eat...or not...straight there, then I’ve got all the rubbish from the Dads who are always moody...yet they don’t realise it is only me doing the organising...this and that...continuous and all I want is to see the boys winning...”
[Our destination came into view and all focus is diverted toward the business at hand, gaining that all important win for boy and club...]

We turned off the motorway and made our way towards a vast complex consisting of a large sports centre, fast-food outlets, Chinese and Mexican all-you-can-eat restaurants, a multi-screen cinema, bingo hall, bowling alley and something called an ‘Indoor Football Fantasy Experience’. The ‘leisure park’ was part of a larger commercial estate of sprawling retail stores, vast storage-depots, office premises catering for financial and media businesses and a scattering of rather more decaying industrial warehouses. A busy network of motorways

leading to and from London and the Midlands provided access to a steady stream of customers. In many ways the modes of consumption on offer is what Ritzer (1993) would have in mind when critiquing the standardisation of contemporary social life in his *'The McDonaldization Of Society'* thesis. If, as Ritzer argues, the modes of efficiency, calculability, predictability, standardisation and control ensuring the global spread of McDonalds fast food restaurants contribute towards, or are a consequence of, the dehumanised face of contemporary society, this metaphor could be applied to this leisure 'oasis' (see also Miles 2001; Giulianotti 2005). Situated for convenient access from the urban overspill of Greater London, the entertainment made available sought to offer value for money by enticing consumers to seek globally 'exotic', although familiar nonetheless and thus reassuringly 'safe' pleasures. The all-you-can-eat £5.50 buffets of Asian and Chinese cuisine, American styled quick-serve beef burgers and fries, the cheery façade of bingo halls and bowling alleys, the latest fantasy arcade games and a selection of Hollywood epics were all made available in an enticingly no fuss, no quibbles package at regular and easily repeated intervals. The rather drab exterior indicated that the economic viability of the businesses within the complex appeared to be its convenience, particularly for family groups with young children or commuters who decided to stop for a coffee and a quick snack before continuing their journeys. As the customers wandered to and from the array of options on offer they appeared content in the knowledge that their hard earned money would secure sensations reminiscent of their last excursion to a similarly standardised 'leisure-zone'. This appeal was further enhanced because the orderly networks of roads and roundabouts teeming with traffic that got them there in the first place, and perhaps the routines of regulation and censorship experienced as part of the course throughout their daily working enactments were temporarily and no doubt gratifyingly suspended...

The Gym collective's attention was directed toward a modern indoor sports complex with a garish exterior of blue tinted glass illuminated by a huge neon sign advertising a series of upcoming musicals, 80s revival pop-bands, comedy acts, roller-skating discos and keep-fit classes. Jutting out from the blue façade, brightly coloured water slides deposited excited adolescents into swirling pools while their guardians lounged on deckchairs strewn on an artificial beach front decorated with fake coconut trees. Making their way into the complex a steady stream of customers dressed in sporting attire chatted amongst themselves and swapped pleasantries with other regular users. Another discernable cohort of customers seeking to enter the leisure centre were family groups, smartly dressed and huddled together with an air sombre expectation etched on their faces. Also milling around the foyer were burly-looking men busily parading to and from the complex with mobile phone in one ear while co-ordinating teenage boys uniformly conforming to the stylized attire preferred by

many working class youth in contemporary Britain – designer tracksuits, trainers and matching baseball caps. A more careful observation of a number of those boys among them would note their hollow-cheeked, lean-bodied appearance and detached mannerism from those around them.

The vivid buzz of anticipation emanating from the groups crowding the entrance to the leisure complex alerted the ‘regular’ users to the possibility of a rather alternative recreational culture in their midst. If, for the regulars, a near instantaneous and rather ‘leisurely’ recreational gratification was exchanged for the purchase of entrée, the recreational ethic about to be enacted by the young men milling around these same premises required the acceptance of a physically and psychologically demanding fortitude whereby injury could be a direct consequence. In order to understand how and why the ‘leisurely’ orientation is pursued by the cohorts of boxing-practitioners congregated for this focal event of the schoolboy amateur boxing in England captivates their interest in a way anathema to the ‘regular’ users within their midst, the following chapter offers a glimpse of the emotional, sensual and symbolic aesthetics through which they choose to invest their time and energy.

For boy and club

Inside the arena Dodger appears distracted as no doubt he ponders his impending challenge to become National Schoolboy amateur boxing champion. Looking very boyish with tracksuit tucked-into-socks look (more than likely to display his latest pair of designer trainers) he carries a large sports bag over his shoulder that looks odd as it’s nearly as big as his own pint size stature of 42 kg and matching height. Forming a nervy adult embrace responsible for his well-being are Dad-Jim, Coach and myself flanking him on either side. Accompanying us are the rest of the Gym contingent albeit in a rather more carefree and relaxed fashion ‘*having a laugh*’ although they too anticipated Dodger’s contest with an air of nervous tension.

With all the Gym-group gathered inside the leisure centre Coach assumed his ‘*fight-night*’ persona of crossed-armed seriousness. He intermittently muttered under his breath as the Gym youngsters excitedly wrestled each other to the ground or played games of tag in between the gathering of boxers, coaches, officials and supporters. Frowning he voiced his irritation to no one in particular, “*We don’t bloody need this. Today of all days is too important to be messing about and they should have a bit more respect for Dodger and the club...*” Raising his voice he proceeded to order the guilty parties to behave themselves appropriately while disapprovingly casting an irritated glance at their guardians. For Coach this occasion encapsulated many years of personal endeavour. Moreover, as the founder and sole organiser

of the Gym, he was well aware of his stature¹ among his immediate peers similarly responsible for their cohorts of boxing-practitioners. In particular, the prestige surrounding this pinnacle stage of the Championships entailed that Coach was not only preoccupied with the athletic challenge underpinning Dodger's bid to become national schoolboy boxing champion, but also of the synonymy of the Gym-members conduct as an ordered and smartly turned-out group reflecting standards of reliability, trustworthiness and honesty he sought to portray. For those sufficiently conversant with the occasion at hand therefore, Coach's rather pre-occupied mannerism and no-nonsense reproaches were understood as part of the course...

Making his way to and fro the backstages of the arena Coach recognised many other Uncle-like coaches along with their cohort of boxers. With greetings exchanged, '*a quiet word*' regarding '*a possibility*' for arranging a contest between respective boxers in forthcoming tournaments or merely the swapping of pleasantries and snippets of grapevine news and gossip would ensue in close quarter conversations, much as a ritualistic enactment confirming bonds of allegiance. Equally, with a steady rate of frequency, disdainful looks were cast toward a number of officials and rival coaches, stimulating Coach to whisper with considerable vitriol at the apparent dishonesty of his rival contemporaries! Clearly aggravated he was nonetheless equally aware that the magnitude of this competition included clubs from every region of England suspiciously unfamiliar to Coach thus side-lining, for that moment in time at least, territorial squabbles. In fact, with national prestige at stake a sense of solidarity presided among regionally affiliated boxing clubs, with an empathetic support displayed for the fortunes of neighbouring yet otherwise rival competitors...

In due time the daylong programme of competition got under way and the youngest hopefuls draped in silk gowns displaying their club's colours made their way to the ring. A packed audience of up to three-thousand people enthusiastically cheered the young boxers' display of skill, endeavour and bravery in hotly contested duals. At times, fans of well supported boxers raised the noise levels to a deafening crescendo of chants, feet stamping and electric horns blaring. The declaration of 'a win' was greeted with joyous celebrations from club and family supporters, while heartfelt Uncle-like consolation administered to, sometimes tearful, 'second best' finalists. At such times, a waive of commotion would spark in sections of the audience as family and friends of defeated boxers had to be pacified at the indignity of '*a robbery...no way we lost that one!*' In the midst of all the excitement the clock ticked on and it was soon time to escort Dodger to the changing room so he could get changed and collect his thoughts before undertaking the innately individualistic, yet very public, athletic challenge of schoolboy

¹¹ McNab (2001), in his critical report of the ABAE to Sport England, describes amateur boxing coaches as 'Father' or 'Uncle' figures.

amateur boxing competition. In a bid to gain a sense of the experiential, sensual and emotional reality of competitive amateur boxing the following commentary are the ‘live’ notes I made twenty-four hours after having ‘seconded’ the Gym youngster from his warm-up in the changing room, to the backstage of the arena and finally into the ring for his bid to become National Schools champion:

Time to make it happen

Just after the interval I leave the main arena to join Dodger, Coach and Dad-Jim in the changing rooms. I find Dodger meditatively lacing up his boots with Dad-Jim quietly sitting next to him looking tense. As I sit myself on a bench directly opposite them they both acknowledge my presence with a faint nod. Apart from us there is just one other boxer in the changing room, lying flat on his back with a towel draped over his head meditatively listening to his personal stereo. Those nerves...I remember them well and thank God it’s all over and done with! I try and gage Dodger’s state of mind. He seems immersed in his own private world while assiduously concentrating on lacing up his boxing boots. Having completed this task he sheds his meditative expression and jumps to his feet, shakes his limbs and proceeds to deliver bursts of punches accompanied by snorts and grunts of loudly exhaled air from his nose. His movements are fluid, very fast and have a rhythmical virtuosity about them. His actions steadily increase in intensity as he plays out in his mind the image of a fight about to become real in only a few minutes. He is indeed very, very ‘sharp’ and as a still maturing fifteen-year old ‘boy’ throws quick flurries of punches that in time, with ‘man-strength’ added to his armoury of speed, technique and timing may well develop into a force generating concussive power! Only time will tell if he will ever fully accentuate his full potential I guess, although I know too well that there is a long road to travel before developing into a seasoned senior boxer, with potentially many distractions or mishaps along the way.

I study Dad-Jim intently watching over his son. He places a pair of ‘focus pads’² on each of his palms and instructs Dodger to throw combination punches at them commanding, “...make every shot count, bang it in...that’s it...come on harder, H-A-R-D-E-R...good...” I remain respectfully quiet because I do not want to interrupt the father-son intimacy defining this rather tense moment in time. I am nonetheless dismayed at Dad-Jim’s insistence on “hitting H-A-R-D” (as he puts it) with every single punch thrown. To me, this mind-set is flawed from a technical standpoint and in many ways is at odds with my own sense as to what boxing should represent as an athletic challenge, particularly for schoolboy practitioners. By concentrating on ‘heavy’ punching, Dodger will have to set his feet firmly on the ground so he can maximise the leverage, or torque, necessary to execute a full range of motion and subsequently generate more power. As an amateur boxing contest is of a short duration³ demanding intense physical effort and split second instinctual-like (re)actions, by ‘looking’ for power as opposed to speed and accuracy in the delivery of punches it is possible for a skilful opponent to score with accurate (and hurtful) counterpunches by utilising the effective use of lateral movement. More so, the adopted mind-set to ‘be a banger’ encourages a quest to dominate your opponent through the application of physical force as opposed to the execution of technical (including defensive) skills, or ‘the art of hitting and not being hit’. I cannot help but feel Dad-Jim has never entertained, or simply has not got the necessary experience to

² ‘Focus pads’ are used to develop accuracy, timing and speed in the use of combination punching

³ Schoolboy boxing contests consist of just three rounds of two minutes per round

understand, the prospect of Dodger's maturation from boy to man (as is happening now) in relation to his skill development as a boxer. As Dodger matures he is going to be matched with increasingly stronger, technically savvy and all-round talented opponents (the path to 'pinnacle' national and international success only gets steeper!) If he develops elementary faults at this stage he will be found out, sooner rather than later, and boxing being boxing in a painful and ultimately disheartening way. Still, this after all is only my own opinion so, as there's a few bouts left before Dodger is 'on', I leave them both to it and return to the arena to watch the action...

I return to the changing room to find Coach sitting next to Dodger, Dad-Jim obviously very nervous having gone ringside to be with the rest of his family. Surrounding Dodger are a half-dozen Gym boxers offering club solidarity while their team-mate mentally prepares to face his opponent. Coach looks very tense, almost as if he is getting ready to fight himself and by contrast, or as a consequence, Dodger seems to have lapsed into self-doubt mode. He asks Gym-boxer Mike, "Have you seen him (his opponent)?" Mike (to my dismay) answers, "Yeah just now, he is fairly tall and he looked sharp, pretty good I'd say". Hardly confidence boosting stuff Mike I think to myself! Curious why Coach is allowing so much distraction around Dodger rather than 'getting him up' for the contest, I step in and order Mike and the rest of the boys to go and sit in the main arena. I then escort Dodger to an area cordoned off to the public and urge him to 'get your mind on it now Dodge and start thinking sharp'. I know the time immediately prior entering the ring is crucial as it can be a win-lose psychological battle. All one can do immediately prior a contest is attempt to 'lift' the boxer with timely words of encouragement, while refraining from overdosing him with too much tactical advice. By this stage it is basically up to him. All I can do is assume an air of confidence that hopefully will serve to shield Dodger from the intimidating and ever beckoning presence of the boxing ring just a few meters away. As I fane nonchalance, the arena fills with the deafening "ooohhh's" and "aaahhh's" as the crowd reacts to punches landed by the boxers battling it out in a 'lively one' just a few metres away...

The final bell of the contest taking place before us finally rings, the winner is announced and it is time to make our way to the ring. I squeeze Dodger's gloved fists, check his head-guard is securely laced and looking into his eyes offer, 'just relax son and let your talent do the rest...show him what you can do, eh!' He nods at me as if internalising my sentiment, twitches his neck and shoulders in a by now 'wired' state of being, snorts loudly through his nose and focuses his attention towards his opponent already pacing up and down the ring. Carrying a sponge, water bottle and spray I lead Dodger towards the ring, past his family and the Gym group sat ringside and the rest of the audience massed in the stand attentively looking on. As we approach ringside all Dodger's familial support is by now behind him and the illuminated ring beckons the lonely separateness between self and audience. He steadies himself within touching distance of the ring apron, while coming under the scrutiny of the judges seated abreast computerised touch-pads⁴. Striking a sharp contrast to such technological innovation is a rather officious looking ABAE timekeeper whose advanced age

⁴ Amateur boxing contests are scored by five judges who award points for accurately executed punches that land on the designated target area of the opponent with the appropriate force. Each judge uses a computerised touch-pad to register both 'red' and 'blue' corner boxer's tally. At least three of the five judges (seated separately on all sides of the ring) must press the score pad simultaneously within a one second time span for a punch to be tallied.

and thickly moustached and side-burned appearance complements the old-fashioned brass bell he presides over to announce the start and end of each round. Behind him, more smartly attired officials are busy scrutinising piles of ‘cards’⁵ and miscellaneous forms used to record the outcome of contests. Oblivious to any such administrative procedures, Dodger climbs the three steps onto the ring apron... for him ‘the loneliest place on the planet’ has just become real...

I assume my role as second-corner man with Dodger guided into the ring by Coach who paternally massages the back of his neck. I can hear Dodger’s mum, almost manically, screaming at the top of her voice, “Go on Dodger, WORK HARD...GET INTO HIM...go on Dodger!” Just in the periphery of my vision, Chris is perched as near to the ring apron as is permissible for non-officials snapping away with his camera. The referee, impeccably attired in white trousers, shirt and bow tie calls the boxers to him and instructs a fair contest. The animated chorus of encouragement from the Gym contingent punctuate the boxer-referee exchange, “be FIRST Dodger...come on this is the one...WORK H-A-R-D!” Both boxers retreat to their corners and hopping from on foot to the other get ready to commence battle. From the other end of the arena I hear an anxious female voice shouting, “Come on Kyle, box him...be sharp!” The announcer declares over the loudspeaker, “In the red corner [Dodger’s surname]...in the blue corner [opponents surname]...seconds out ROUND 1!” The sound of the bell reverberates around the arena and the contest begins.

From my view it quickly becomes apparent that Dodger is the superior boxer and he vigorously asserts his authority over the contest. Dodger’s punches are often ‘wild’ however and his attempts to force the action result in him and his opponent landing in a heap on the ring floor. He scrambles to his feet only to receive a stern reprimand from the referee. The shouts of encouragement from behind me continue, “Come on Dodger, WORK HARD son!” The action is intense and physically draining with fast and relatively powerful clusters of punches delivered from both boxers in blurring flurries. Many punches are avoided however, either through laterally evasive movement or by being ‘blocked’ on the gloves. As in most contests the percentage of punches landed is relatively small to the overall amount thrown. Even so, punches are delivered ‘with intent’ and from my vantage it is easy to see and even hear ‘clean shots’ land as they make a distinctive thud noise. Although the most effective ‘hits’ force the recipients head to rock back on his shoulders, alerting the judges to the scoring potential of the punch and attracting a collective ‘ooooohhh’ from the audience, in accordance to the weight and age of the two protagonists and of course the well-padded 10oz gloves used, no visible damage is apparent to either boxer...

The bell signals the end of the round and I quickly place the stool in the ring for a breathless Dodger to slump on, while Coach leans over him and calmly (almost tenderly) sprays water on his face and back and wipes it with a towel. As I rinse out Dodger’s mouthpiece, Coach nose to nose from his protégé instructs, “Keep pressing him and back him up, [stressing the point] you MUST push him back with lots of punches. Work hard, lots and lots of WORK...COME ON LETS GO!” The ABAE official calls “SECONDS OUT!” and Dodger jumps up from his stool with renewed vigour and determination to face his opponent once

⁵ All amateur boxers in England, having registered with the ABAE, are an identity ‘card’ logging the result of contests, standard of competition and health and safety record (injury received etc).

again. Rounds 2 and 3 take on a similar pattern, with Dodger edging the action although he looks increasingly jaded as the fight progresses. Finally, the six minutes of frantic physical and mental exertion is all over and an exhausted Dodger with head slumped on the corner post allows Coach to remove his gloves, head-guard and red 'sash'⁶. The referee invites both boxer's to the centre of the ring and amidst a rousing round of applause we wait with collective baited breath for the MCs declaration, "Ladies and Gentlemen, the 57th National Schools Boxing Championships Winner...by scores of 16 points to 5...in the red corner [Dodger's surname]!" A delighted Dodger celebrates by jumping in the air and precedes the ritual of visiting his opponent's corner as Coach and myself console the defeated boxer. The Gym members are all on their feet and with collective thumbs up and smiles celebrate Dodger's victory. A job well done and the Gym got a winner!

(Field notes [amended] March 2004)

With Dodger escorted by Coach to receive his medal and certificate from the ABAE officials, the Gym members collectively remarked on the contest in a celebratory yet strangely deflated, almost matter of fact, manner. Having returned with a medallion around his neck Dodger relayed snippets of his thoughts while searching for responses confirming his achievement, "*What did you think Alex, he weren't as good as the previous boy was he?*" Offering what I felt was an appropriate comment I answered, "*All you can do is beat the guy in front of you Dodge. You done great mate, National champion, brilliant!*" Minutes after winning his title, Dad-Jim took Dodger to a stand selling boxing merchandise. Before too long a beaming Dodger returned with a brand new pair of Adidas boxing boots. A jubilant father announced, "*He gets a new pair every time he wins a title!*" After half an hour of further collective commentary among the Gym contingent, concerns swiftly turned to making the journey homewards.

While Dodger was engrossed with stripping out of his sweat soaked boxing gear, Coach approached Dad-Jim and with obvious irritation chided, "*I've been looking for you lot for ages. Listen you all disappeared but I've been killing myself running around trying to organise a team photo. The guy's waiting now so Dodger better get changed again and we can get this thing done*". An obviously irritated Dad-Jim instructed a reluctant Dodger to put his soaked shorts and vest back on. Sensing the escalating tension Coach offered, "*Look...in order to let everyone know what has just happened we must put a bit of thought into doing things like this. Or else everything here today is lost because no one back home will get to hear about it and appreciate what has been achieved...*" In a by now near empty arena we all gathered in the boxing ring and the resident photographer, a regular 'face' at many boxing tournaments in and around London, took the snap. While we waited for the photographs to be processed on his

⁶ A red or blue ribbon, or 'sash', is customarily tied to the boxer's waist as a means of identification when scoring a contest.

laptop and printer, 'Mick-the-photographer' (also professional boxing manager, bouncer and film extra) kept us amused by showing us pictures of himself with a host of celebrities saved on his Desktop. He jovially informed us, "*that's me and Johnny Cash, mind you the younger ones think I'm talking about a Durex machine!*" With a sales pitch consisting of a non-stop stream of similar gags, memories were purchased at £5 a photo-print and £20 for a digital disc recording of the fight.

Finally the Gym cohort bade fair well to one another and departed along the motorway networks back to Luton and surrounding areas. Henceforth, as they negotiated the traffic on their homebound journeys, while inevitably contemplating the cultural minutia shaping and defining their life-circumstances, the symbolic immediacy of Dodger's achievement quickly transmuted in signifying form. Moreover, as is discussed below, Dodger's symbolic stature as Schools amateur boxing champion effortlessly, albeit multifariously, was interpreted and understood by the Gym cohort of amateur boxing practitioners alongside, or in synthesis with, the cultural dimensions through which Gym-actors sought to define meaning to their practice of boxing and, correspondingly, a sense of identity and space in society.

Celebrating the 'grit and heart' of a champion

One week post Dodger's victory, his achievement was made public in the following headline on the back page of the *Luton Mercury* (a pseudonym) – 'BOXING SPECIAL – *Ace Dodger 'can be Luton's new World Champ'*'. In joining a handful of boxers from Luton who have achieved elite national and international success at amateur and professional boxing, the reportage of Dodger's victory rightfully eulogised a protracted and hard earned quest to achieve 'pinnacle' sporting success from an exceptionally dedicated young athlete. As innocuous and in many ways righteous as this fragment of local journalism might appear to be, it is important also to recognise that it was reflexively read by the cohort of Gym amateur boxing-practitioners in far more penetrative signifying ways.

From an athletic standpoint, the signifying dimensions of Dodger's achievement in scaling the heights of schoolboy amateur boxing in England derived lineage with the few recognisable names of Luton town's amateur and, far more prominently, professional boxing lore. Moreover, the boxing folklore through which Dodger and significant and more generalised others proclaimed virtue to his accomplishment also served to symbolically validate the social significance of boxing. Equally, boxing as an athletic experience was (re)interpreted as a consequence of the shifting socio-structural dimensions through which Gym-actors made sense of their everyday patterns of work, rest and play and accordingly constructed their social identities. Moreover, embroiled within the web of lived sensual, emotional and symbolic self-

actualisation, the cultural (re)production of amateur boxing intertwines the 'hidden' macro socio-historical dimensions through which amateurism in the practice of sport was administered to the masses (Hargreaves 1986; Holt 1989; Shipley 1989; Sugden 1996; Polley 1998).

More to the point, the legacies of yesteryear are played out in the present day as a consequence of the voluntary endeavour of those key individuals, such as Coach, who spend many hours mentoring young hopefuls in hundreds of amateur boxing gymnasiums throughout England. Equally so, amateur boxing-practitioners enjoy the liberty to pursue their sporting passion only because of the army of officials ensure a yearly calendar of competition is organised and the regulatory 'rule book' ensuring fair play during competition is strictly upheld. By definition therefore, to truly understand the interpretative capacities amateur boxing-practitioners bestow upon their cultural agency, the interplay between the power relations serving to organise, yet simultaneously and unavoidably, impose constraints on those same values, beliefs and actions must be fully accounted for. Correspondingly, in determining the consequences of this social dynamic it is important to recognise that the lived experience of social life is never static and bound by a homologous commonality. Rather, human beings understand and act upon their immediate life-circumstances, which in itself represent the outcomes of developmental change and transformation (see Layder 1994; Ritzer 1996; Bauman 1998; Miles 2001). It is important to recognise, therefore, that in complex and variable ways the amateur boxing-practitioners informing this study sought to not only reproduce yet also negotiate and/or transform their agency in a way that validated their interpretative frameworks, identities and actions. In order to understand the complex and dynamic nature defining the couplet of power, cultural agency and athletic action, therefore, it is important to firstly gain an impression of the macro structural parameters through which amateur boxing-practitioners in Luton form social identities and, accordingly, construct interpretative frameworks.

Amateur boxing in England

Luton is an average sized town with an estimated population of 184,371 (Luton Borough Council 2003 [2001 Census]) consisting of a richly diverse population configured much as a consequence of its economic history. The town's evolution over the last decades has closely followed Daniel Bell's (1973) thesis, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*. Although the intricacies of Bell's arguments are widely disputed (see Miles 2001), the broad outline of his theory that society is transforming from an industrial to a post-industrial landscape is clearly born out in the changing social ecology of Luton town over the preceding decades.

The Victorian era saw the town associated with the hat trade⁷ before Vauxhall car manufacturers and other major industrial companies such as Electrolux, Skefco and Laporte transformed the town into a manufacturing-based local economy for much of the 20th century. The decline of the hat industry marked a shift of many social and cultural parameters. One direct consequence was the reconfiguration from female to male employment opportunities as the town increasingly provided for industrial and thus mostly masculine labour. Subsequently, Luton's burgeoning industrial infrastructure and advantageous proximity to the prosperous South-Eastern part of England gifted the town with a healthy blue-collar economy, strong enough to all intents and purposes avoid the Great Depression of the 1930s at a time when widespread recession left large swathes of the country in hardship (Devine 1992). In turn, the town's economic vibrancy attracted many waves of migrant workers from Wales, Scotland, Ireland and northern regions of England between 1921 and 1951. With post-World War II rises in prosperity ensuring the demand for consumer goods rose, Luton became a boom town in the 1950s and 1960s (Devine 1992). The influx of opportunistic ethnic-migration continued: large waves of Irish between 1951 and 1961; Commonwealth migrants from the Caribbean between 1961 and 1971; Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian migrants since 1971. Today, Luton's population is highly diverse with official estimates recognising 23% of the population as 'black' or ethnic minority. In recent years and mirroring global patterns of migration, a steady incoming flow of economic and asylum seeking residents of Eastern European, Chinese, Middle Eastern, Asian and African descent have also settled in Luton adding to a cultural mix that sustains over 140 spoken languages (Luton Borough Council 2003).

It is clear therefore, that 21st century Luton has inherited a buoyant economic infrastructure and rich multi-cultural vibrancy as a consequence of many decades of industrial 'blue-collar affluence' (Goldthorpe *et al* 1968a). Recent times however have seen a major decline of the manufacturing industries shaping and defining the town's economic infrastructure and socio-cultural fabric for nearly the whole of the last century. The most prominent transformation occurred when Luton's major industrial employer for four decades, the Vauxhall car manufacturing plant, all but ceased production by 2002⁸. The town's largest employer is now London-Luton airport indicating a post-industrial era of service, health and education shifts in employment and general modes of living nationwide. The continuing expansion of the airport illustrates the prominence of consumer led lifestyles and aspirations as millions embark on their holidays as never before. As is discussed next, this brief and necessarily broad outline of the shifting structural parameters contributing to the social-ecology of Luton town, allows for

⁷ Luton town's football club are nicknamed 'The Hatters'.

⁸ The closure of Vauxhall and other major industrial employers is put into context later in this chapter.

the social significance of amateur boxing to be discussed from a vantage of examination uniquely positioned from previous ethnographic studies of boxing.

Sport for all or sport for ‘roughs’?

As has been discussed fully in the literature review of this study, normative discourse of the social significance of amateur boxing has focused on the deterministic consequences of inner-city poverty, religious sectarianism and/or violent crime to afford explanatory understanding of the motive for young men to seek-out boxing in the first place and the drive to persist with the sport thereafter (see Weinberg and Arond 1952; Furst 1971; Hare 1971; Sugden 1996; Wacquant 2004). Therefore the literature, in one way or another, determines boxing as an athletic practice that appeals exclusively to the monolithic cultural type of ‘the hungry’ (as in determined and poor) and ‘rough’ (as in some way prone to deviancy) African-American or European youthful male.

Likewise, ethnically saturated and economically deprived neighbourhoods exist in Luton. The Dallow and Bury Park regions of the town are the near exclusive province of Muslim and Hindu ‘Asian’ populations; South Luton can loosely be recognised as an Irish enclave; the Hightown region has progressively gained an Afro-Caribbean mixed with Polish economic migrant identity over the last few years; Lewsey Farm and Marsh Farm are the two largest of a collection of ‘sink’ council run housing estates (Luton Borough Council 2003). Nonetheless, despite undoubted pockets of relative economic deprivation and ethnic segmentation⁹, it is also apparent that the totality of the town’s material, social and economic landscape encompassing leisure, work, schooling and community structures is compact and integrated enough to allow accessibility and familiarity between diverse ethnic groups and through socio-economic divisions. Wholly clustering and accordingly culturally claustrophobic structures of poverty are therefore not seen as the exclusive consequence for individuals to identify with and choose to practice amateur boxing. Rather, the significance of boxing as practiced at the Gym is considered as just one of many accessible, albeit not always desirable, choices to participate in athletic recreation among a prospectively wide cross section of Luton’s population. This analytical emphasis is thereafter forwarded as of relevance (if not exactitude) to other amateur boxing ‘little practice communities’ situated throughout the breadth of England’s social geography. By making such an allowance, this study is sensitive to a wider

⁹ Luton mirrors the nationwide picture that denotes a lower strata of society cluster in neighbourhoods characterised by public sector housing, below medium earned income and higher than average state benefit subsistence, crime rates per capita, incidence of absenteeism from work due to ill health and number of adults claiming benefits. It is not coincidental the most deprived neighbourhoods are densely populated by ethnic minority populations (see Luton Borough Council 2003).

range of possibilities associated with the interplay between agential freedom and structural constraint relative to the cultural production and athletic development in amateur boxing.

It is also worth stating that amateur and professional boxers hailing from Luton have shared the ring with opponents socialised in the ghettos of America, Northern Ireland, East London and elsewhere in the world. Whether it is possible to tease-out common sociological causations as to the reasons why individuals seek to face one another in the boxing ring, thus more fully squaring its social significance, or simply offer new and alternative configurations and possible consequences to a global sporting practice may, it is hoped to a significant extent, be borne out with the findings presented in this study. The next section of this chapter seeks to situate the Gym membership within the immediate physical environment of the community this particular amateur boxing structure 'represents'.

Amateur boxing and the community

Gym premises are located at the heart of the Stockdale (a pseudonym) council estate situated on the Southern borders of Luton town. The Stockdale in most respects offers the same socio-statistical typology as other council estates within Luton and much of England as a whole, namely: below the regions average disposable income per household, higher than average unemployment, number of residents with no employment skills and above average rates of crimes committed per capita (Luton Borough Council 2003). Nonetheless, many families have benefited from Government led initiatives offering the opportunity to privatise long-term tenancies at affordable prices. Studying the neat rows of semi-detached houses and well-maintained units of flats lining orderly streets, an unremarkable sense of domesticity cuts a picture of humdrum routine as residents carry out chores of gardening, car maintenance and DIY, or simply walk their dogs toward the nearby park area. This ambiance extends to the cultural mix of the estate with a substantial number of ethnic minority residents blending into the social fabric. Although daubed graffiti, the occasional burned out shell of a car and some pockets of less than salubrious tenements are in evidence, on the whole this estate give the impression of an, if not affluent, in no way excessively deprived community.

Situated just off the main square of amenities that includes a variety of shops, laundrette, fish and chips and Chinese take-away food outlets and of course the obligatory pub, is 'The Community Centre'. The hub of Stockdale's communal life, the Centre offers local residents a programme of recreational activities, educational programmes and public forums. These premises are also the home of the Gym amateur boxing club. It is immediately apparent therefore, that much like Luton's four other amateur boxing clubs (at the time of writing) residing in neighbouring council estates or in strongly identifiable working-class

neighbourhoods, boxing sustains its presence amidst the poorer communities of the town. From this standpoint, it is possible to conceive the council's endorsement of amateur boxing as the legacy inherited from Victorian rational-recreation missionary intent. Under closer scrutiny however, the appeal toward functional philanthropy as a defining purpose of amateur boxing lapses into an ideological representation not wholly compatible with the social identities and corresponding motivations and/or ambitions of Gym-boxers.

The 'drive' to box

Upon arrival at the Community Centre premises the first impression gleaned is the sight of adolescent boys and girls participating in makeshift games of football in the car park area at the front of the building, or simply hanging around busy doing 'nothing' other than the rituals of courtship and the like. As innocuous as this scene is, it underlines some immediate anomalies when conceiving boxing as an initiative appropriated by the Community Centre for the benefit of local youth.

In the first instance, it is clear the Centre serves as a focal point for local youths to congregate. What is not so clear, however, is the extent to which the Community Centre serves its purpose for engaging local youth's co-operative participation in order to foster self-development. A glaring example of evident miss-management is evidenced through the most prominent sporting initiative provided for the local youth - an outdoor basketball court. The game of basketball was initially introduced through Sport England as an 'Action Sport' initiative to be promoted in line with community regeneration policies some years since. With the programme of qualified coaching soon petering out however any interest, in any case minimal, failed to ignite and was replaced by the itinerant games of football outlined above. According to Jemma, the affable Centre manager, the plan of action as far as the local youths were concerned was one of "*keeping them out of harm's way*" as opposed to rather more purposive initiatives geared toward personal growth and social awareness. The policy of containment was reinforced through regular demands from Jemma and her co-workers for the youths to refrain from crowding the entrance to the building, daubing graffiti on walls, kicking their football against parked cars and any other minor misdemeanours.

As much as the Centre serves as an informal hub of sociability for local youth, almost to a number the members of the Gym arrive and leave by car from neighbouring estates in and outside of Luton. Training nights are thus clearly made apparent by a fleet of vehicles crammed in the car park, a sizeable collection of which are white-vans and four-wheel drives indicative of the 'working' identity of the Gym members, although the occasional sports car adds a conspicuous display of *'flash'* signifying the owners self-styled affluence and upwardly

stylized persona. Having parked, the boxers by-pass the local youths and enter the gymnasium premises. As insignificant as this daily occurrence appears to be, it also implies that if the social significance of this particular amateur boxing club is to be evaluated, it should be from a standpoint not entirely informed through the ideological rhetoric that decries boxing to be an antidote for the idleness leading to criminal and any other delinquent behaviour plaguing materially impoverished and socially deprived communities in England. Accordingly, the meanings and values upheld by the Gym cohort of boxers pronounce shades of grey by which the 'drive' to attend the Gym, in a literal sense when travelling to the premises and metaphorically the motivations to do so, focuses upon individual aspirations recognised and acted upon from a focus not wholly defined by, and thus understood wholly as a consequence of, the material environment and social context immediately surrounding the gymnasium premises. Taking this standpoint into account, the degree that Gym amateur boxing-practitioners find what they perceived they are looking for, and more importantly for those persisting with a competitive orientation, the expansive and constraining consequences of their actions thereafter, frames the analytical agenda of this study. The lived practices and relations serving to shape and define the normative value and belief systems through which Gym-boxers construct interpretative frameworks and actions is considered next.

Boxing as 'rational' recreation in Gym space and time

Upon entering the carpeted foyer of the Community Centre, the Gym is located in the main hall allocated for user groups. The immediate ambience of this space for anyone arriving before the boxers have commenced their training gives an impression far removed from celluloid depictions of downtown gymnasiums: dingy rooms strewn with fight posters, pummelled punch bags in various states of disrepair still swinging from the exertions of a boxer lurking in the background, a blood stained boxing ring with shady middle-aged men rolling dice while smoking cigars and the like. Such a populist representation casts only a glimmer of familiarity to the social character of the Gym community that, if attracting an exclusively masculine clientele, includes many siblings and sometimes fathers training alongside each other, while mothers and toddlers observe in the wings or can be found waiting in an adjoining room enjoying a cup of tea and a chat. Indeed, a striking feature of the Gym is the support offered by a core of Dads attending training sessions on a regular basis. Often volunteering lifts to 'unattached' boxers to and from the premises, lending a helping hand with the rudiments of gymnasium maintenance and even purchasing equipment for the use of *'all the boys'*, they considered their input as an integral feature of this community. Trevor elaborates on his attendance during most Gym training sessions in accompaniment of his fourteen year-old son Ben:

“I come here to support Ben obviously but I’m interested in all the boys really. If I’m honest all I would be doing at home right now is probably be fast asleep in front of the box. You know how it is, work all day, come in, switch the television on, have a bite to eat and that’s it, into the ‘morrow... Besides Jan (his wife) is working shifts at the airport anyway, so I just sit there on my lonesome so I don’t mind getting out. And you know... Ashley is my youngest and the other two, who are a fair bit older, I missed a lot when they were doing their thing. It was just a time I was doing lots of hours and I didn’t... well I couldn’t... spend as much time as I would have liked with them, seeing them grow-up and supporting them more I guess... So that’s another reason I like coming here, to spend time with him in what he loves to do”.

[Q] – Do you worry about him?.

“Nah...not really...I don’t think anyone gets hurt in amateur boxing, well I haven’t seen it anyway. I trust what Coach and you do with them and I’ve never had cause for concern, there’s never been a time when I thought hang on a minute...nah not really. It’s just that Benny’s always wanted to box, even when he was too young to start up boxing he did a bit of karate instead, but he was always keen to come here and box...so I’m happy with that”.

Richie in accompaniment of his 17 year-old son Dean is also in attendance on most training nights. In an equally casual tone he makes clear the recreational motive for his son’s and his own approach to boxing, in preference to the array of choices available for a young man on the brink of adulthood:

“The reason I’m here is pure and simple, Deano enjoys it...that’s it. I’m not the type to push it...you know what I mean Alex. He just likes to come down here, keep fit, train with the lads and he’s enjoying competing. You know, he’s at an age now...well he’s getting his own mind and well...[laughs]...if I tell him one thing or the other it’s just not happening...you know what I mean! Its been difficult the last year mind ‘cause he is flat out working so he’s been a bit tired...but next year he is at college doing a course so he’s all for getting into it proper like...I mean he’s out on the town with his mates now he’s got some spend...early manhood and all that...he likes a game of footi also...but...he’s a steady lad you know what I mean. He goes out with his mates but also likes his boxing...he likes doing his own thing away from the boys I guess and as long as he wants to...[emphasising]...he is enjoying what he is doing, what he is accomplishing and I’m happy to support him as much as I can”

The Gym occupies a rectangular shaped hall adorned with multi-coloured paintings of mum and toddler groups using this same space during daytime hours decorate the room. The only indication of its use as a boxing gymnasium are a series of large wall brackets sturdy enough to carry the weight of a variety of punch bags. More conspicuous is a large notice board filled with newspaper clippings and photographs proudly advertising the Gym boxer’s accomplishments over the last year. As the boys and adults congregate in the still empty hall to begin an evening’s training, it is not until the store cupboard is unlocked and punch bags,

speed balls, large sacks full of tatty boxing gloves, headgear and bundles of skipping ropes are dragged out and strategically put in their place and the makeshift ring is erected, that the Gym takes on its uniquely action-orientated boxing identity.

The Gym in action

The atmosphere is welcoming with an informal and relaxed camaraderie evident among the members who ‘*muck in*’ hoisting bags on designated wall brackets, lay the boxing gloves and headgear out in rows on a large wooden table and secure speed balls into their attachments. At the far end of the hall, Dads insert four metal posts in slots drilled into the floor and thread three sets of thick rope round each post to shape the focal point of this ‘little practice community’ (Burke 1998) - the boxing ring. With the cohort of boys and young men quickly changing into their training clothes, while late arrivals hurriedly scramble into the gymnasium, greetings are swapped with snippets of news and gossip on the performances of recent contests, or alternatively the performances of the weekend ‘*out on the town*’ variety recalled that, in turn, are inevitably accompanied by hoots of derision at the vivid recollections aired for public approval. It’s not long before a stereo is switched on and the rhythms of the latest dance music fill the gymnasium.

The fellowship displayed among the Gym-community ebbs and mutates in form slowly taking on an individualistic appeal. With the boxers ritualistically applying bandages to their hands or concentrating on threading laces into their boxing-boots, fathers depart or sit on the side-lines quietly conversing with one another while keeping a steady eye on their boy’s behaviour. The boxers take up space on the gymnasium floor, hopping from one foot to the other lightly shaking their limbs while studying their reflections in the many mirrors lining the gymnasium walls, as if in confirmation they are about to (re)construct a seriously minded masculine self quite distinct from the one they walked into the building with. With meditative expressions etched on their faces, the boxers intuitively tune-in to the pivotal identity and patriarchal figurehead of the Gym, Coach. Making sure he acknowledges Centre staff in a ‘*best keep them happy see*’ gesture to his ‘landlords’ while distractedly indulging in a joke aired from one of the Dads waiting in the sidelines, Coach assertively focuses his attention on a clock face displaying a four minute time span prominently positioned on the wall above the ring. As soon as the clock hand reaches zero, Coach bellows out the universal call of boxing gymnasiums worldwide – T-I-M-E! In an instance the ambience among the boxers transforms and the Gym life-world takes on a rather more seriously minded demeanour.

In unison the gymnasium erupts into an orchestrated explosion of movement and noise: skipping ropes whistling through the air; feet shuffling; the rat-tat-tat of gloved fists

rhythmically hitting speedballs; staccato-like grunts exhaled in sequence as singular and combination punches are thumped into leather punch-bags. In the middle of the gymnasium boxers skip in unison, while along one wall large mirrors strategically placed opposite the punch bags reflect back the ‘shadow-boxer’ to willing recipients intently studying every imaginary punch landed or avoided (although never taken!) In focused concentration besides them, boxers practice hand-eye coordination while executing flurries of light, fast and accurate punches on speedballs designed to rapidly rotate at the impact of force and thus encourage ‘reflex-sharpness’. Occupying the ring space, ‘shadow boxers’ duel with imaginary opponents delivering combination punches and simulating evasive blocks and defensive head movements while shuffling forwards and backwards.

Circulating among the boxers, Coach looks on intermittently correcting an individual’s balance, or points out a defensive vulnerability to a novice *‘admiring’* himself in the mirror. At intervals, he instructs the rudimentary range of punches: *‘Jab in singles, doubles and triples’*; *‘Straight Rights down the pipe, Hooks and Uppercuts!’* All are practiced in combination, with the aim of centring one’s balance to achieve maximum leverage while simultaneously moving the feet in forward, backwards and lateral direction so as to enable offensive and defensive movement with inch perfect and split second accuracy. With thirty seconds of the two minute round left to go, the boxers are urged to *“pick it up 90 per cent...COME ON LETS WORK”* and then, *“LAST TEN...come on...LETS GO!”* upon which all boxers skip, pummel the bags, speedballs or shadowbox to their utmost physical capacities. The next instruction of T-I-M-E! signals the end of the sprint and in an instant the commotion of movement comes to an abrupt halt allowing the rhythms from the ghetto-blaster to once again fill the room. For novice boxers this is a moment to suck in air and red faced regain their breath, while fitter and more experienced boxers quietly pace in tight circles, shaking their limbs in a bid to maintain flexibility and mentally attune for the next two-minute spring of physical and mental exertion. As soon as the thirty-second interval comes to an end the call of T-I-M-E! starts another two-minute round of ‘amateur boxing action’.

The scene played out on this typical Gym training night insights a ritualistic of endeavour directed at physically and mentally nurturing the aggressive spirit necessary to compete successfully in the boxing ring. For Early (1989) this time-frame of action is suited to what he deems as the proletarian culture of boxing. He states, “These men are honestly, and in a most ghastly way, *toiling*, and what is most striking is how much more grotesque this work is than, say, the nightmare of an assembly line” (p.328). By contrast or in accompaniment to Early’s observations, for those who profess knowledge of amateur boxing-as-athletic action technicalities adopted from the ABAE coaching manuals are preferred: physical conditioning

drills adapted specifically for the duration of amateur contests; the technical intricacies of balance, timing and hand-eye co-ordination; pivotal leverage; defensive head movements; ring control. Equally, the importance of developing an intensely competitive yet '*cool, calm and collected*' psychological disposition to enable the tactical mastery to overcome an opponent in a physically draining and potentially harsh frame of competition, yet display emotional neutrality in the heat of '*battle*', is encouraged at all times.

Nonetheless, by searching beyond the immediacy of such sensorial interpretations, one does not have to dig too deep to discover temporal expressions are often paradoxically distorted. For instance, amateur boxers are considered old from their late twenties onward¹⁰. Equally, the prolonged investment necessary to develop fitness and skill levels required to compete with a measure of success calls for almost bi-polar character traits. The time frame of amateur boxing action, in this sense, contrasts a remarkably disciplinarian disposition, diligently maintained over many years, with an instinctual competitive disposition predisposed toward emotive spontaneity. It takes many hours over many years spent during dark and cold evening nights, practising repetitive and physically demanding training regimens, to realistically attain the prerequisite standard of physical fitness, skill acquisition and mental aptitude to be able to compete on the elite national and international stage of amateur boxing. Yet the aspirations propelling such steadfast dedication can be ruined in a split second during the explosive, near instinctual, sprint-like experience of ring competition that lasts a maximum of eight minutes¹¹. More often than not, for 'the loser', the opportunity for redemption only comes at the same point of next year's competitive calendar, often against the same adversary.

In uncovering the, at times seemingly paradoxical, time-frame dimensions infused within the 'lived' logic of amateur boxing action it is important to acknowledge that, as a socially constructed cultural practice, amateur boxing has a history. When the call of T-I-M-E! sets the Gym life-world in motion therefore, a call mirrored in gymnasiums throughout the land, it is evident a strong thread of continuity exists between the time frame of present day amateur boxing practiced by Gym-boxers and their predecessors of generations gone by. Furthermore, clocks such as this one are to be found adorning boxing gymnasiums throughout the world. Designed to buzz the start and end of every three-minute round of boxing¹² while allowing a one-minute rest period, they set the rhythm of remarkably similar training methods in boxing clubs from London to Detroit, Johannesburg and Melbourne. This scale of global uniformity indicates that amateur boxing, much like other Olympic sports, is embedded in the dominant

¹⁰ ABAE rules stipulate retirement from amateur boxing competition is compulsory by the age of 35

¹¹ Elite amateur boxers compete over four two-minute rounds.

¹² The time frame at the Gym adheres to two-minute intervals of boxing so as to mimic the two-minute rounds required of amateur boxing contests.

social relations of capitalist liberal democracy (Ingham and Hardy 1984). In order to gain a fuller, more contextualised, understanding of the dimensions through which, discursively and practically, amateur boxing is consciously and unconsciously meaningfully interpreted by practitioners, therefore, the macro-structural forces that serve to define its temporal logic need to be understood.

Poverty maketh the man: Moralising discourses of discipline and self-respect

As has been discussed more fully in the literature review of this study, dominant academic orthodoxy has thus far relied on the constraining influences of ghetto-poverty as the primary motivational factor in framing boxers' aspirations to box in the first place and the motive to persist thereafter. This line of thought sustains both the arguments critical of the exploitation associated with professional boxing and, simultaneously, the strongly held belief of amateur-recreational boxing as morally upstanding and consequently functional 'tool' serving to combat the ills of society. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the cultural identity of amateur boxing as a participant sport in Luton and elsewhere in England is acutely working-class. The consequences of poverty therefore cannot be discounted. By virtual unanimity, the boxing-practitioners interviewed in this study were adamant amateur boxing served as a morally imbued disciplining regime profiting youthful social-actors against the ever present ills and subsequent dangers defining their sense of space and place in society. During a coaching seminar hosted by the ABAE, two coaches of amateur boxing clubs in the Home Counties region revealed deeply felt convictions of the social benefits engineered through amateur boxing:

“There’s so much good that can come out of boxing...the old saying about getting kids off the streets and keeping them from mixing with the rubbish that’s going on these days...the drugs and the guns and this sort of thing...I think if you go in the large inner cities its only too true, it does an awful lot for them. It gives them something to do, somewhere to be at, an outlet to look forward to that is positive for them...if nothing else purely as a means to channel their aggression in the gym...in a way that is safe and they enjoy it. They develop positive attributes as opposed to negative ones. Boxing is always under control...it is at my place anyway. I coach boxing as sports-science or...an art if you like. That’s the way I like them to develop as boxers and they’re trained up like that. It does them a world of good...it’s like they’re in the army...it teaches them discipline, self-respect and above all respect for others and that’s what it’s all about. Kids are kids and you get all types, all kinds of personalities...it’s always there...you’ll never take it away...but on the whole they’re good kids. As long as they’re behaving, learning and developing their skills in the ring under control then it’s of great benefit to them. I’d rather have my boy in the gym rather than on the streets, in the pubs or wherever out of control gone crazy”.

Mickey (Coach, March 2004)

The functional value of boxing as a cathartic measure preventing the ills of inner-city moral meltdown is in this case infused with army discipline, scientific exactitude and the expressive aestheticism of sport-art. By these terms the ideals of Muscular Christianity meets military (or perhaps factory) discipline by way of rationally diligent physical endeavour to mould the individual into a worthy member of society. Coach-Jim believes this ethos engenders a distinctively coded sense of masculine self-worth:

“Well I’m in it mainly because on the television news all you see is kids on drugs and everything and because I experienced...from the age of ten starting boxing, [with great emphasis]...it kept me off the streets...it gave me something to look forward to...it was a challenge to your body, your mind and...you meet a lot of nice people in boxing. I think...I mean [raising his tone] I know...most people in boxing are nice people...they’re not flash because they know they can look after themselves. The bullies out there in my eyes are the one’s who have to prove to other people that they’re tough. When you’re a boxer you know you are tough [looking at me intently] it takes a lot of guts to get in that ring! You get to know your own ability don’t you...”

Jim (Coach, March 2004)

The prevailing sentiments of coaches are also firmly believed by many boxers themselves. Gym-boxer Tanver elaborates when being asked if he thought boxing had changed him in any way:

“As it happens yeah a lot...if I hadn’t been boxing I think I would have been out on the streets hanging around with a bad crowd, you know. I mean perhaps taking drugs...stealing...you know. [Really?] Yeah, I think so because you look around and there’s not much you know...round Bury were I live there’s bad influences everywhere, and you take a look at a lot of the Asians out there...they are all at it you know...so I think boxing has taught me a lot...hmm...discipline.

[Q] – “You really think you would have got into drugs?”

“You never know, I think what boxing has done is kept me of the streets...definitely because when you think about it, every time you go to the gym it keeps your mind clean as it’s thinking about training.”

Taz (Boxer, 23 years old)

In the words of Taz and many other amateur boxers who were quick to express likewise sentiments throughout the period of this study, ‘profit’ from their participation in amateur boxing was expressed in the functionalist terminology of sport serving purpose as an innately ‘rational’, and thus worthy, recreation. From this standpoint, the athletic ethos defining the social identity of amateur boxing encourages a belief in the value of honest (i.e. disciplined and respectful) behaviour, a health conscious lifestyle and an expressive sensibility through which amateur boxers are at liberty to achieve a physically virile, even artistic, brand of self-actualisation. A prominent observation during the four years of data gathering among the Gym

membership, however, was the high intake of participants motivated to use the Gym and try their hand at boxing among the core of *'regulars'* only to never be seen again after a short commitment. If the whole hearted Uncle-like endeavour of Coach to inculcate such-like functionalist ideals deters the vast majority of those wilfully seeking out amateur boxing, then why so?

The puritanical logic of action...Lets get to work!

“...the Nuer have no expression equivalent to “time” in our language, and they cannot, therefore, as we can, speak of time as though it were something actual, which passes, can be wasted, can be saved, and so forth. I do not think that they ever experience the same feeling of fighting against time or of having to co-ordinate activities with an abstract passage of time because their points of reference are mainly the activities themselves, which are generally of a leisurely character. Events follow a logical order, but they are not controlled by an abstract system, there being no autonomous points of reference to which activities have to conform with precision. Nuer are fortunate”.

E. Evans-Pritchard (cited in Thompson 1967 p. 96)

Contrasting anthropologist Evans-Pritchard's account of the time-frame of the Nuer, a pastoral tribe living in the Sudan, with the normative conception of time in the Western hemisphere, E. P. Thompson argues that human actions are shaped and defined through the structural apparatus through which perceptions of time signify meaning and value. Moreover, he demonstrates that the decline of feudalism in England round about the 19th century allowed capitalist-bourgeois groups to impose a perception to the meaning of time in tune with their intent to maximise industrial productivity. As discussed in the literature review of this study, sport-amateurism in England originated from bourgeois cultural traditions shaping and defining the industrialised landscape of capitalist Britain from the 19th century onwards.

Amateur boxing in particular, as Shipley (1989) documents, was deemed to be an appropriate, or rational, recreation for the industrialised masses. The time-structure of the amateur sports-cultural formations spawned therefore, can justifiably be interpreted as a consequence of Victorian Puritanism whereby, as Baldwin et al (1999) tell us, “...time had to be used well but not wasted, in order to build ‘profit’ for the future” (p. 184). In this way, formally organised sporting activities for the urban industrialised masses, such as amateur boxing, were instigated as a virile means of engendering Muscular Christian ideals (Mangan 1981). Moreover, the ‘profit’ derived from rational-recreational sporting endeavour also took on moral vicissitude in lieu of economic instrumentalism, or more specifically the need to impose habits of discipline, sobriety and diligence to a manual workforce in order to maximise industrial output (see Hargreaves 1986; Holt 1989; Sugden 1996).

E. P. Thompson (1967) is also quick to point out however, if the time frame of “Puritan discipline and bourgeois exactitude” (p. 56) imposed by early capitalists in no small measure structured workers everyday lives, it was not necessarily all-powerful as individuals and groups interpreted, and thus negotiated and/or contested, the normative time structures from diverse standpoints. Accordingly, the cultural meanings of amateur boxing as a cultural phenomenon signify values of, “...relativism, meaning, value, power and conflict” (Baldwin et al 1999 p. 181) through which social actors construct identity and experience in and through their wider experiences in social time and space. In particular, the central issue of power is important when seeking to understand the meanings and values attached to the lived time-frame through which amateur boxing signifies value - the power to enrich one’s personal time albeit always in relation to, and therefore in consequence of, other people. Several prominent ‘lived’ power dimensions articulated by Gym-practitioners emerged during the period of data collection.

Cultural aesthetics at work: conformity, self-mastery and status

For individuals showing an interest in amateur boxing their initial commitment to simply enter through the doors of the Community Centre in a bid to seek-out the alien and, almost overwhelmingly, sensuousness world of boxing was considerable¹³. In the first instance, the boxing-milieu ‘at work’ is heard: the beat of the music; the thuds and growls of effort as punches are thumped into leather bags; instructions shouted out by coaches interspersed with the mechanical buzzer signalling each round of action; the whistles and groans of exhaled breath as boxers undertook their ‘punishment’. When the potential recruits entered (or not) through the doors, they quietly sought refuge by standing as unobtrusively as possible on the edges of the hall, attentively observing the training rituals while absorbing the atmosphere, as Mark recalls, quite literally:

[Q] – “What was your first impression of the club when you walked through the doors?”

“Get me out of here! I thought hmm...it was small...I thought it was a lot smaller than I expected...it smelt [laughs]...yeah, it smelt of sweat, although I’ve got used to it so I don’t really smell it now. I thought it was buzzing, yeah...I mean it captured me straight away really”.

Mark (22 years old, 3 bouts)

¹³ The sensual character of boxing gymnasiums is a common theme discussed in all previous ethnographic studies (see Sugden 1996; DeGaris 1997; Wacquant 2004).

Newcomers observing the gymnasium life-world for the first time are also instantly engulfed by the corporeal, richly symbolic, exoticism of boxing-action: self-absorbed, focused and strained facial expressions contorted and dripping with sweat from the effort of executing training rituals previously only envisaged in 'Rocky-wood' depictions; accomplished displays of skipping, the rhythmical virtuosity of the effective use of speed balls; the cracking noise of punches absorbed into the padded hands of coaches loudly instructing combinations to be delivered: '*LEFT-RIGHT-LEFT ... DOUBLE THE HOOK STRAIGHT RIGHT ... FEINT ... FINISH IT ON THE JAB ... BOOM ... COME ON ... S-H-A-R-P-E-R!*'; the displays of virile camaraderie among Gym-boxers as they swapped quick intervals of '*banter*' or knowing glances of acknowledgement to the physical strain called for to execute the techniques of boxing practiced; the contradictory scene (for the newcomer) of boxers wearing headgear and groin protectors centre ring delivering streams of powerful punches at one another, yet intermittently grinning and encouraging their opponent to '*work harder*'. Clearly, the Gym 'at work' presents the newcomer with a highly ritualised and overtly masculinised world of energetic endeavour, an intense symbolic assault on the senses that serves to attract a steady stream of interested youth and men, with up to thirty or more boxers from pre-teens to early thirties training on any given night. The ethnic identities of the cohort of Gym-boxers comprised of a majority of 'white' boxers including English, second and third generation Irish and Romany-Gypsies, a substantial number of Asian boxers reflecting the large Indian and Pakistani ethnic presence in Luton, with occasional and usually fleeting visits from 'black' participants. Individuals showing an interest in trying their hand at boxing were invited cordially to train alongside the regular members...

Rather awkwardly newcomers took their place on the gymnasium floor among the rest of the boxers and proceeded to replicate the series of limbering-up exercises of those around them. Immediately before them and also undergoing stretching exercises or lightly shadowboxing, more accomplished 'quality' boxers trained within the ring ropes. Proudly displaying discreet yet definitive symbols of status, such as personalised vests and shorts embroidered with their insignias and sew-on badges advertising regional and national achievements, '*quality*' boxers assumed detached yet serious expressions while concentrating their thoughts in anticipation of the coming exertions. The right to own the ring in this way denotes an immediately discernable intra-gymnasium rite of passage, confirming status earned from a prolonged and regular attendance among the Gym community and crucially via attaining a measure of competitive success. The 'profits' to be earned from amateur boxing were thus clearly demonstrable from merely observing more accomplished boxers, such as effortless displays of skipping, a fluid virtuosity when shadowboxing and by being singled-out for 'special' one-on-one supervision under the watchful consideration of Coach.

As novice boxers could do nothing but observe the more experienced members and attempt to mimic both technical proficiency and serious intent, they effectively became absorbed into a tacit acceptance of the social mechanisms lubricating clearly hierarchical social relations among Gym-actors. By implication also, newcomers were effortlessly subsumed by the prevailing ethos of symbolic exchange unquestioningly conforming to disciplined fortitude. As fitness demands took their toll, sooner rather than later as training for amateur boxing mirrors the intensity of competition, the new recruits gained an immediate appreciation of the task they had undertaken. Just as quickly, they learned to respect the proficiency of the more experienced Gym-boxers. A largely unspoken and uncontested affirmation to disciplined servitude thus presided among the cohort of Gym-boxers. Moreover, the 'profits' of disciplinarian conformity served to reinforce a universalised acknowledgement to the meritocracy of, and respect for, proving one's capabilities through ring bound action. Moreover, discipline resided as tacit among the Gym-actors to the extent it virtually never had to be reinforced via stern verbal reprimand as it would say, in a classroom or in military training. Nonetheless, despite the richly textured sensual and symbolic web of signifiers serving to structure conformity towards the disciplinarian regimes required of all those who attended Gym training sessions it was normal that, for the vast majority, immediate conformity did not equate with longevity. A prominent theme throughout the three years of data collection among the Gym milieu of practitioners was that the vast majority of newcomers who '*mixed in*' were all too often short-term visitors. It seems, as much as the popular cultural appeal of boxing readily enticed the imaginations of a wide cross-section of male and to a (far) lesser extent female participants, it is evident the disciplinarian regime required of them to develop the techniques of boxing were quickly forsaken. The question arises therefore, as to why does the initial symbolic appeal of the boxing space equate with longevity of effort and aspiration for some while, ultimately, proving less of a draw for the vast majority?

In the first instance it seems plausible to infer that although the imagery boxing captures the imaginations of a wide cross section of social-actors, it does not do so in a homologous meaning and value orientation. As such, it can be understood that boxing appeals to a wide cross section of society although necessarily via variable connotations, mimicking the broader diversity and complexity of an ever-transforming and increasingly multicultural social landscape. The significance of amateur boxing to contemporary social-actors therefore can be seen to be allegorical, or a story that contains symbolic, albeit necessarily variable, connotations. Although impossible to account for all the vantages of intent and purpose passing through the Gym, while acting out the responsibilities of 'coach' it was possible to chronicle the following prominent patterns of signification among '*likely*' and '*not-so-likely*' aspirant boxers during the period of data gathering. A substantial number of social-actors

training at the Gym were of Romany-Gypsy ethnicity. Although keenly participating during gymnasium workouts, with some venturing to represent the Gym in organised tournaments, it was nonetheless a rarity to see Romany-Gypsy boxers develop their full athletic potential...

The symbolism of gloving up: rough and hard

Upon arrival at the community centre on given training nights it was noticeable that the car park accommodated an unusually large fleet of white work-vans. Gym 'regulars' would instantly recognise that any one of a number of nomadic and semi-nomadic Gypsy-Clans renowned in the Home Counties region and beyond would be joining them for training. With the sight of ten or so 'Clansmen' usually stripped to the waist in expectation of the start of training, an unusually tense atmosphere was palpable among the 'regulars', considered English in this pre-text, and it was not uncommon for Dads to whisper with an air of disdain, '*it smells kind of rough in here tonight*' or '*watch your gear Alex, it may go walkies*'. For his part, Coach assured the visitors they could train alongside the other Gym members '*no problem*', although unequivocally stated his authority by demanding subs were paid in advance before the training schedule got underway. He would then have a quiet word:

'I've got my eye on them and they should be all right. Let them walk around thinking they're supermen...admiring themselves in the mirrors and all that...don't worry about them just do your usual with the regular crowd. If they ask to spar, just point them over to me and I'll tell them it's not on unless they get 'carded' and want to fight...I doubt they'll agree to that so it's no go. They won't last anyway I've seen it all before...'

Observing the visits made by large groups of Clansmen a dozen or more times over the period of data collection, it became apparent that boxing to them represented an appeal to a way of life perhaps not that far removed from the bare-knuckle era of the 1700s and before. The Gypsy-boxers would often eulogize '*hard men*' who had gained a reputation for their prowess in semi regulated bare-knuckle contests between protagonists travelling from as far afield as Ireland and vice versa. The centrality of this loosely defined sport as a defining feature of constructed sense of masculinity was brought home to me when on one occasion Francis, a young boy in his early teens who for a short time represented the Gym in boxing tournaments, informed me that he was due to compete in a bare-knuckle contest as part of the formal wedding festivities to take place in honour of one of his uncles.

The merits of this form of (hyper)-masculine rite of passage, particularly when imposed on a young teenage boy, clearly leaves much to be desired in the realm of human rights¹⁴. As

¹⁴ See David (2006) for a similar argument concerning the human rights of adolescent Thai boxers.

unpalatable as this particular tradition may appear to most, it clearly denotes a highly significant rite of passage for the likes of Francis. In all likelihood, such a passage appeals to a constructed 'manhood formula' (Messner 1992) that has remained intact for centuries, handed down through the generations as cultural heritage seemingly unmoved by 'civilised' social mores. Whatever the ethical concerns apparent, it need also be understood that contemporary social norms deemed civilised invariably uphold economic stature and a sensibility toward professional-bureaucratic status and instrumental efficiency to connote a symbolic and actual accrual of power. In modern times, 'rough' modes of physical currency, whether as a means of exercising persuasion, asserting one's cultural identity or simply playful recreation are generally frowned upon. For an ethnic minority culture whose appeal to 'old ways of physical life' are directly or indirectly undermined and thus invariably discriminated against, therefore, the quest to assert a '*hard*' social identity, whether it be at work, drinking in a pub, walking the streets, or in this case the practice of amateur boxing, has added significance.

The Clansmen's constructed logic of amateur boxing was clearly in evidence when sparring practice commenced between the regular Gym-boxers. Habitually the Clansmen disregarded their training and congregated around the ring area watching intently, intermittently and vociferously badgering Coach if they could join in. In reply, Coach pointed to the biggest and most experienced Gym-boxer, half-jokingly implying that he would be the only available boxer for a '*move around*'. He would then point in the direction of the punch bags in an insinuation they had to get on with their training. On more than one occasion when the Clansmen were allowed to enter the ring, usually against a far more accomplished Gym-boxer under the bequest of Coach, their enthusiasm soon subsided when counter-punched and out manoeuvred by their more experienced spar-partner. Once fatigue set in it was not unusual for the Clansmen to invent a strained muscle and promptly excuse themselves from the ring...

It would be folly to think of the Gypsy visitors as anything less than '*hardy*' however. The ability to '*hold a good fight*' was a valued and one suspects enjoyable part of their social identity, even necessary, and thus, one suspects, they were by no means adverse to a brawl or two. The bravado to brawl on the street is not the same as the concentrated ability to box, however, and this incompatibility, when realised-in-action, usually blunted much of their enthusiasm. More often than not, the quest to be macho and assert status among peers through violently domineering action was soon blunted by the realisation that novice inadequacy had to be surmounted, and further still, inevitably put on show under the ever scrutinizing gaze of their peers. Moreover, in order to forge acceptance and status among the Gym-milieu, it was necessary to harbour respect for the hierarchical social apparatus and corresponding value attachments and belief systems signifying amateur boxing as a meaningful and rational athletic

practice. Rather, participation in amateur boxing for the Clansmen was an extension of a cultural etiquette that had no pretensions of amateur athleticism and the ethic of discipline implicated as a logic of practice. This cultural incompatibility proved something of a hindrance for Clansmen. One might speculate that rather more immediately profitable options of combative currency were sought out...

The Clans rather insular and guarded interactions with outsiders and the fleeting nature of their visits to the Gym made it difficult to gain a deeper insight into their interpretative capacities of amateur boxing. Nonetheless, a large number of 'regular' Gym-boxers were of Romany-Gypsy stock. In particular the two most successful Gym boxers, Dodger and his younger sibling brother Kenny accompanied by Dad-Jim, were Gypsies. Due to their regular, almost monastic, approach to training and impressive tally of winning performances, they were acknowledged accordingly by Coach and segregated from the troublesome non-conformity of the visiting Clansmen:

“...they're ok see, in fact I think it's her (the mother) that is more Traveller than Jim. She is a bit rough and ready...he is a bit steadier, a hardworking man and pretty keen on his boys coming here. I mean he's no bother...I mean mostly...he's all right”.

Whatever the social identity of Gym-practitioners, perhaps the formative cultural stimulus through which boxing, in the first instance at least, ignites public awareness and thereafter the imaginations of those interested in participation is gleaned from televised and necessarily 'spectacularised' (Shiple 1989) representations. The following patterns of behaviour featured prominently during the period of data collection and serve to illustrate the means by which spectacularised yet, paradoxically, somewhat sanitised 'mytho-popular' representations of boxing penetrate Gym-actors interpretative consciousness.

Consuming the 'mytho-popular'

In today's media age boxing, perhaps above all sports, inspires mass celebratory acclaim of 'heroic' athletic feats at the convenience of the on/off button of television sets (Woodward 2007). The 'mytho-popular' representation of boxing is thereafter seamlessly filtered into and, in turn, processed by individual imaginations. By these terms, the entertainment value of boxing to the many millions regularly engrossed in televised fight-night spectacles represents an object of consumption infused with a 'magical' quality (see Miles 1998). It would be fair to argue therefore that for many, if not most, amateur boxers the inspiration to seek-out boxing was kindled as a 'symbolic form of consumption' (Miles 2001) mediated through spectacular televised representations. For those inspired enough to stir from their homely comforts and '*have a go for real*', the most accessible and identifiable start-point is a

local amateur boxing gymnasium just like the Gym. Equally so, the vast majority who enter a boxing gymnasium with great enthusiasm never make it anywhere near a competitive boxing ring...

For a short space of time the Gym milieu was graced by the presence of Naz. In his late twenties, Naz had never boxed before and lacked a basic level of physical fitness or any identifiable athletic aptitude. He nonetheless was an enthusiastic and vocal participant during training sessions. Inevitably, Naz's customary exuberance at the start of training soon declined and he took self-appointed '*time-outs*' to rest his bulky frame. When on his and self-directed pit-stops he would be gently chided back into action back into action by Coach. Upon persisting on sneaking off for impromptu '*toilet breaks*', knowing glances among the regulars were swapped and his re-appearance enticed a loud chorus of applause and whistles. Such scenes were part of the everyday pastiche of gymnasium-life and Naz, in all his honest endeavours yet '*no-hoper*' status as far as a ring appearance was concerned, was readily accepted as a 'feature' of the Gym life-world and quickly became a popular entity during training sessions. Gradually, upon demonstrating his willingness to be a regular attendee during training sessions, the team of coaches increasingly spent time on a one-to-one basis teaching him the rudiments of boxing technique. On one occasion, while I instructed him on the basics of delivering a punch he made the following self-congratulatory declaration:

" I don't want to mess about...I want to be the best (gasping for air)...you know be a champion [my reply – "just concentrate on what you're doing now Naz"...]...yeah, yeah...I think I can be world champ innit...I want to be a professional world champion in the next year or so...you know a Luton's Naz Hamed, I want to be just like him [grinning broadly]..."

After a further period of six weeks dedicated endeavour, although with only a slight physical and technical improvement, in a sudden reversal to his colourful predictions Naz was never to be seen again. Periodically spotted driving his taxicab around town however, he would be indignant that work commitments had temporarily kept him from achieving his dreams but, fortunately for all concerned, he would soon return to action. For the regulars his absence was hardly noticed, bar the occasional recall of his and a host of other '*dreamers*' antics reminisced as anecdotal peculiarities of Gym life. For Gym-regular and self-styled 'real' boxers weightier issues concerning up and coming tournaments took precedence...

The point made through evoking Naz's short lived career as an amateur boxer, is to argue that although boxing continues to attract widespread public interest and accordingly, serves to entice a pro-active approach toward participation for some, the overwhelming pattern of attendance is one of early dropout. It seems that for the likes of Naz and the many other

'*wannabe-boxers*', the dramatized portrayals of boxing-spectaculars made accessible for living room entertainment are clearly enticing. The allegorical significance of boxing as a mass mediated representation serves to, in a sense, open up a connection to an imaginary reality whereby identification with boxing signifies a readily accessible source of symbolic capital (see Boyle and Haynes 2000). More succinctly, the cultural touchstone (ethnic, masculine, class-based or other) Naz identified with and thereafter sought to portray through his attachment to boxing was in the first and perhaps foremost instance, self-actualised via passive (i.e. as a figment of his imagination) means of consumption. As such, it is the instantaneous act of consumption that, largely unconsciously, defines the symbolic signifiers through which boxing is interpreted as culturally and socially meaningful.

As gymnasium rigours take their toll however, any priori notion of 'mytho-popular' signification fades quickly when boxing reality takes precedence over imagery: the clumsy attempts at skipping among many experts; the sore knuckles as soft skin comes apart from punching the heavy bag; fatigue as the body adjusts to the intense training regimen; the inadequacy felt at not being able to do as many press-ups as a boy many year younger. If allegorical constructions furnishing one's desired sense of masculine identity are centred on the romance of stardom, being flash, heroic, spectacular, macho or any other iconic frame of 'mytho-popular' reference, the day-to-day realities of Gym-life fail to correspond with such-like notions of symbolic validation. The disciplined rigour, dogged persistence and 'hardy' physicality to develop the standards of fitness and technique necessary to compete successfully in the competitive boxing ring simply amplify the reality of novice inadequacy and boxing appears inconceivable, intimidating or unnecessary. Subsequently, for many, motivation soon subsides. For Naz a hasty retreat back into 'normality' was decided, safe in the illusion that '*if only I had the time to train properly I would have been champion!*' The juxtaposition between athletic development and the 'mytho-popular' significance of boxing as a popular cultural phenomenon gives rise to another mode of symbolic association serving to define a prominent pattern of behaviour among Gym-boxers.

Seeking new dreams...re-visiting old identities

The '*comebacks*' of many boxers that had for a period of time decided to hang-up the gloves, only to return to the disciplines of amateur boxing with renewed, although usually fickle, vigour was a common occurrence during the period of data collection. '*Getting back on it*' was most prominent at the beginning of each New Year with, no doubt, holiday festivities having taken their toll, resolutions made and the quest for physical and perhaps moral betterment sought. The regular '*comebacks*' of Big-Mac was a particularly illustrative example of such re-ignited, yet short-lived, pugilistic passion...

A physically imposing man of over 100kg, Big-Mac would bound into the gymnasium, at times joyfully shaking hands with all Gym-boxers and other times with a sullen posture offering only a frustrated scowl hidden under a hooded tracksuit top. Striking an exotic figure among the junior boxers he was old enough to be a father to, with a muscular frame twice their size and head and shoulders taller than most, he claimed space in front of a mirror and intently shadowboxed exhaling huge grunts to accompany his efforts. For those in the 'know', grins and winks were exchanged signalling the welcome visit by this big amiable man, while first-timers to the 'Big-Mac phenomenon' shuffled their feet as he took up space alongside them, partly in awe at his physical stature and equally apprehension at the uncertain potential of his presence! After half an hour of spirited effort, the exertion put on his huge musculature took its toll, forcing Big-Mac to slump on the side-lines in a bid to gain much needed breath. Ritualistically, Coach confided him with one-to-one intimacy, discussing old times while commenting on Big-Mac's plans for "*a few more fights Coach man, I'm really up for it. Sure I've got to lose a little bit of weight but I'm willing and able...you know what I mean?*" Despite being officially too old to box¹⁵ Coach, making a concerted effort to appear sincere, affirmed '*lets build up your foundations first...get nice and fit, then sharpen up a little and then who knows*', before guiding his attentions to the needs of '*real*' boxers. For Big-Mac the comeback would last for a week or two more, after which he disappeared from sight only to return in the next few months with the same enthusiastic vigour...

For ex-boxers like Big-Mac who have retreated away from the disciplines of the ring to settle into work and family commitments, no doubt accompanied by rather more leisurely recreational habits, memories of his time as a real boxer lingered strong enough to re-ignite a craving to '*give it another go*'. The symbolism of boxing in this sense sustains an internal logic that fails to be fully subsumed by other features of social reality. Nonetheless, the desire to stage comebacks were (on the most part) short lived and all too often lapsed into faded reminiscences of a glorified boxing past. The allegory here it seems, although stemming from the same strand of 'mytho-popular' appeal inspiring the public at large, is also interwoven through intrinsic evaluations of '*the buzz*' of competition, the '*feel*' of achieving a high level of physical fitness or whatever else is a requirement to be a '*real*' boxer. So questions arise as to how the motivations to make a 'comeback' by many ex-boxers informs understanding of amateur boxing as an athletic experience and reciprocally the interwoven web of value orientations and belief systems through which '*real*' boxers construct interpretative frameworks and actions. The attractions of '*real*' amateur boxing are considered next.

¹⁵ Rumour had it he was approaching forty years old although no one dared ask 'Big-Mac' his age directly!

Boxing verstehen in action: becoming a ‘real’ boxer

“A lot of people tell me that boxing...like I tell them that there’s a lot of skill in it, I mean a lot of skill. Well there is, isn’t there...a lot of skill and they say ‘Nah stuff that anyone can get in the ring and just fight’...but that’s rubbish...its rubbish yeah. Because there is a hell of a lot of skill in boxing...[increasingly exasperated]...a hell of a lot of skill, but you try and tell them that and it goes in one ear and out of the other. But...hmm...I don’t know really...[contemplative]...like my girlfriend goes ‘anyone can box anyone can do that’ but no way there’s a lot of skill in boxing...a lot of skill. They say boxing aint a sport but really it is one of the oldest sports going really innit...I mean older than most sports, one of the best I reckon...yeah...I mean there’s so much interest in it”.

Mark (22 years old, 3 bouts)

Gym boxer Mark offers the above response when questioned of the attractions boxing held for him. Despite his relative inexperience, having made the transition from ‘outsider’ to Gym ‘regular’ Mark displays a great deal of pride to be associated as a ‘real’ boxer and clearly lays much intrinsic emphasis on the skill element of boxing. It became increasingly apparent throughout the period of data collection among the Gym-milieu of practitioners, that ‘real’ boxers constructed moral discourses defined as a consequence of their ‘lived’ corporeal and symbolic visceral understandings of boxing as an athletic experience and social practice.

For the likes of Mark, ‘boxing-reality’ resides in tandem with the requirements of him to negotiate a rite of passage that is unconditional to the point of it being harsh if a sense of discipline and conformity is not self-managed. It is common for many inexperienced boxers when first engaging in full-contact sparring to seek-out competition through uncontrolled displays of aggression. This type of behaviour is frowned upon as an ill-judged, unnecessary and not least disrespectful display of bravado whether induced by nerves or not. New recruits are as such quickly encouraged to develop a measure of emotional control. This is done initially through verbal reprimand. If persistence at ‘*going silly*’ continues however, the guilty party is simply paired with physically stronger and technically superior sparring partners in a bid to induce paradigmatic lessons in appropriate codes of etiquette. An instantaneous learning curve is thus engineered, stimulating contemplative reflection towards adopting a more controlled, skill-orientated and subsequently ‘respectful’ orientation towards future engagements.

Prospective boxers are in this sense socialised to ‘recognise’ the psychological and emotional effects of their leisure experience (see Giulianotti 2005). In other words, the processes through which amateur boxers gain acceptance among the hierarchical social relations of the Gym ‘interaction order’ (Goffman 1967) engineer acceptance, by way of tacit inculcated and

implicitly understood conformity, for the disciplinarian ethos required of developing a *'hardy'* yet *'honest'* physicality. By doing so, real boxers are educated to accept and respect the challenges and consequences set through ring competition both for themselves and others. As is discussed below, this was made clear when one observed the actions of *'real'* boxers when sparring against smaller, weaker or inexperienced partners.

Learning the game

On most training nights Coach instructed the core of *'real'* Gym-boxers to spar with novice boxers, always with the proviso to *'let them throw free shots'* and *'have a move around keeping it light'*, i.e. let the inexperienced sparring partner attack without reply, or simply *'pull'* punches to the extent they tap an opponent lightly and repeatedly while the inexperienced boxer was instructed *'to let them go'* (punch with full force). This is done to instil a form of equilibrium between disparately aged, sized and/or skilled boxers and thus encourage mutual skill development. In effect, *'real'* boxers learn to control their emotions under this self-imposed and potentially threatening handicap by channelling an unflappable will power to neutralise an opponent's physical aggression. As such, sparring is commonly referred to as a *'mind game'* whereby assertive physicality in the boxing ring becomes disassociated from spontaneous forms of violent action (see also DeGaris 1997). It is also instructive to note instances during sparring when two evenly skilled boxers *'got a little serious'*. On such occasions the tempo of action escalated to the point powerful punches were delivered with measured *'intent'*. Inevitably as the tempo of action heated up the collective attention of the Gym-milieu would be drawn to the ring when, inevitably, powerful punches from either of the sparring duo landed *'flush'* on target. It was usual for both deliverer and recipient to nod at each other and exchange a quick tap of gloves, followed by a spontaneous drop in tempo. Such *'friendly'* gestures served to affirm an instantaneous confirmation of the technical proficiency and *'hurtful'* potential of an accurately executed *'hit'*. The delineation between technical proficiency and *'hurt'* is of course a rather transient estimation residing in the delicate interplay demarcating competitive mutuality from antagonism, as much sensed as deliberately rationalised by duelling boxers during that instance in time and space.

Nonetheless, on the whole, an ethos of partnership was encouraged and duly upheld by Gym-boxers when sparring. If the tempo of aggression during a particularly heated sparring session continued to escalate, the authoritative demand of Coach to *'drop it both of you and keep it nice and relaxed!'* served as an instant and uncontested regulator of aggressive intent. The onus to *'relax...keep calm'* was considered invaluable, as loss of even temperament hampered correct delivery of punches, depleted energy levels and averted precision focus. Moreover, the emphasis stressed on relaxation, emotional control and technical virtuosity was universally

and thus unquestioningly regarded as the moral coda of training and sparring. The prevailing ethos thus implicitly lubricated and reinforced a collective adherence towards the performative self-regulation necessary to develop the athletic skills of boxing within an individualistically egalitarian yet socially bound and thus, ultimately, civilised life-world context. As real boxers gain experience and seek to further develop their fitness levels and skills, training by necessity becomes more resolute. The disciplined fortitude demanded of Gym-boxers, even before achieving the performance criteria necessary to compete in the grass-roots infrastructure of amateur boxing competition, thus becomes embedded as the prevailing logic of practice. From here 'real' boxers seek to self-actualise, reinforce and accentuate both their own athletic development and their stature within the Gym status hierarchy by proving what they are made of in the public arena of organised competition. In this way, as is discussed below, from an intrinsic, intuitive and pre/sub-conscious level of comprehension, 'real' Gym-boxers appreciated boxing as an allegory beyond 'mytho-popular' media depictions.

Constructing the self through combat

Aaron voices the following opinion when asked if boxing could be thought of as anything other than violent:

“Nah...nah no way...there is no way anyone can say that about boxing. I mean you do hear it a lot but that's from people who wouldn't know a punch-up in a boozier from a world title fight or something like that. I suppose in a way you can appreciate that point of view as...well...a punch is a punch. I mean I would have probably said the same thing...but get in the ring and try and knock someone over...or simply try and hit someone with a clean shot even...its not as easy as it looks...you know that. You have to have that knowledge before making any kind of judgements... definitely”

Aaron (20 years old, 16 bouts)

For Aaron, the allegorical significance of his 'boxing-self' is a portrayal that incrementally becomes disengaged from media representations alluding to heroism, sensationalism, quasi-deviant violence and such like 'mytho-popular' depictions. In short, the more he becomes embroiled in the rigours of boxing competition, the more the magnitude of the task at hand is made real. His experiential trajectory dictates that along the way discomfort is pre-ordained with the road towards accruing symbolic 'profit' physically arduous and mentally and emotionally draining. Thus, the process of becoming a real boxer requires the negotiation of many internal challenges, not least in overcoming self-doubt and fear of public humiliation when performing on the stage of competition. In particular, and controversially, the combative nature of boxing ensures a measure of '*hurt*', either as physical fatigue or the sharp and possibly concussive impact of a '*hit*', is a reality experienced and expected.

The challenge of boxing competition is, therefore, inwardly directed toward overcoming self-doubts and insecurities in order to be able to perform the skills drilled in the gymnasium. In this sense, the execution of what appears an innate act of aggression is in fact an act of internalised negotiation, to the extent 'the opponent' is regarded as a faceless '*problem*' or a '*challenge*' that must be overcome to arrive at a point of self-actualisation. In order to overcome the challenge of '*the fight*' therefore, real boxers learn to recognise their own frailties, their 'deep-innate' sense of emotional fragility, which must be controlled and as such acknowledged¹⁶ on a daily basis. Thus boxers are pre-disposed to acquiring a 'mature masculinity' (DeGaris 1997) in many respects distanced from the symbolic power accorded the ideal typology of the ultra-competitive and all conquering (male) winner - the populist iconology of the 'hegemonic man' (see Connell 1990). From this vantage of understanding, the aggressive physicality called upon during a contest asks of the boxer to face up to and, in 'real' terms, negotiate and conquer a morally coded and strictly (self)regulating, if harsh and potentially risky, athletic challenge. By doing so the 'real' boxer can, through undertaking a rigorous yet highly structured and rule bound dimensions faced in developing the techniques of boxing and latterly boxing competition itself, benefit from participating in a unique medium through which to acquire meaningful self-knowledge (see Kidd 1996).

Nonetheless, when considering the potential value inherent when undertaking the hardy physical nature of amateur boxing competition, it is important to acknowledge that as much as athletic competition may be educational it can also have the capacity to be pathological (Kidd 1996). This argument applies to a combative practice such as amateur boxing perhaps above all other Olympic sports, as the moral logic informing amateur-boxing practitioners actions resides in the development of an intensely aggressive physicality. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the athletic experience of amateur boxing constitutes a gamut of social dimensions external to the moral coda informing real boxers' constructed sense of athletic identity. The broader social dynamic contributing to 'the spirit' (Weber 1930) through which amateur boxers construct interpretative capacities, relations, athletic identities and actions is examined next.

¹⁶ Although Gym boxers freely admitted to feeling nervous pre-contest and shuddered at the notion of suffering 'hurt' in the form of a concussive knock-out they might have witnessed on televised airings of professional contests and occasionally 'live' at amateur boxing tournaments, they just as adamantly eschewed the notion that such likelihood was a distinct possibility in their own futures. In this way, 'mytho-popularity' serves as simultaneously a reminder yet also a disguise camouflaging athletic realities residing on the precipice of hurt.

The spirit of amateur boxing

For Weber, human life in Westernised societies is consequential of the forces propelling the modes of rationalisation contributing to the Protestant work ethic, bureaucracy and science (Tucker 1998). The term rationalisation was essentially used to describe the process by which nature, society and individual action are increasingly mastered by an orientation to planning, technical procedure and rational, or calculable, means-to-an-end actions. Henceforth, this process contributed to a dominant mode of human consciousness that gave rise to Western capitalism. Moreover if, as Weber (1930) argued in his study of the relation between the rise of Protestantism and capitalism, "...the early captains of industry chose to be rational...[and therefore]...we are compelled to be so" (see Cantelon and Ingham 2002 p. 68), then this is a useful theoretical concept to interpret, and critically evaluate, the cultural logic of amateur boxing, perhaps the quintessential 'rational recreation' administered for the benefit of the industrialised masses in British society (Shipley 1989).

As will be discussed below, Gym-practitioners interpretative frameworks and actions can be better understood as being consistent with two overlapping and at times conflicting modes of Weber's "...ideal-typical portrayals" (Cantelon and Ingham 2002 p. 66) of Western human consciousness: '*value-rational*' and '*instrumental-rational*'. Value-rational actions are defined through the symbolic idealisms and social pragmatics through which amateur boxing is perceived as a community centred sporting outlet serving purpose for developing young working-class men into productive citizens. Instrumental-rational actions are aligned with Weber's theory of the pervasiveness through which relations between individuals and groups residing in Westernised societies are overwhelmingly rationalised as a means for ensuring the most efficient pursuit for securing individual gain (Jarvie and Maguire 1994). From this conceptual vantage of consideration the following sections of this chapter discuss when, how and why the cultural praxis of amateur boxing is lived-out as two interwoven, perpetually evolving and at times conflicting levels of social interaction: the '*informal*' ('grass-roots practitioner) and the '*formal*' (ABAE bureaucratic-organisational). The informal and formal hallmarks of the amateur boxing universe and their consequence in contributing to the 'performativity' adopted by amateur boxing-practitioners are discussed next.

Informal reality in perspective

Sociological discourse has discussed the transformation of the British working-classes as a demographic formation and a distinctive socio-cultural entity for many decades (Giddens 1990; Devine 1992; Ritzer 1996; Bauman 1998; Miles 2001). In broad terms theorists have

argued for a British version of the ‘embourgeoisement thesis’ (Miles 2001) whereby it is claimed the working-classes are increasingly adopting middle-class values as they achieve higher incomes and standards of living since post-war prosperity. Thus what were remarkably stable, albeit mostly oppressive, life-circumstances through which the working-class affirmed a shared sense of cultural identity for most of the 20th century, have given way to value orientations favouring instrumentalism, privatism and individualism (see Devine 1992). The town of Luton became synonymous with this debate, as over forty years ago Goldthorpe et al (see 1968a, 1968b, 1969) conducted research among workers from Vauxhall car manufacturing plant with the aim of testing the embourgeoisement thesis. Although their 1960s *Affluent Worker* findings refuted the notion that traditional cultural signifiers of working-class identity had disappeared altogether, the authors nonetheless argued that the Luton-Vauxhall workers interviewed displayed value orientations they typified as ‘privatised instrumental collectivism’ as a result of the post-war period of prosperity.

Fiona Devine (1992) re-examined the claims made in the *Affluent Worker* series some two decades later on¹⁷. Her findings are critical to the point of fine-tuning arguments of privatism, instrumentalism and collectivism among the Vauxhall workers interviewed, rather than to wholly supporting or refuting them. In claiming, “...self-interest and individualism did not reign supreme” (p. 7), Devine argued processes of cultural transformation are complex and relative to the flux of everyday aspirations, fears and disappointments as shaped in and through the economic, social and political context defining social-actors everyday life-circumstances. Accordingly, Devine concluded that, as Britain approached the 1990s, subtler shifts of what could be understood as traditional modes of working-class consciousness were in progress rather than an absolute breakdown of long established class-based value orientations and belief systems.

Nonetheless, the intervening decades since Devine’s study have seen a dramatic decline of Luton’s industrial infrastructure sustaining long established cultural mores and traditions through which the working-classes made sense of their life-circumstances for much of the 20th century. Moreover, as the decline of industrial ways of life mutate into modes of social existence variously theorised as post-industrial, late-modern, consumer, global, McDonaldized, risk or whatever else (see Miles 2001), so does the possibility that working-class social actors develop modes of consciousness configured in relation to the ever-shifting and accordingly rather more ‘liquid’ (Bauman 1998) social dimensions defining their everyday existence. By acknowledging the present moment of social flux, therefore, there is much

¹⁷ Devine (1992) conducted interviews with 62 Luton-Vauxhall workers and their spouses during the late 1980s.

reason to estimate tension, or at least incongruity, between Gym-actors value orientations configured as a consequence of their practice of amateur boxing. In order explore how the ever shifting social dimensions define ‘the spirit’ (Weber 1930) through which amateur boxing signifies meaning and value to the cohort of Gym-boxing practitioners the grass-roots ‘informal’ cultural aestheticism (Giullianotti 2005) of amateur boxing as a social practice sustained in and through a sporting infrastructure premised on volunteerism is discussed next.

Contemporary sports-volunteerism in context

One need not scratch too much under the surface of Luton town’s boxing folklore before fond memories are recalled of the mighty Luton-Vauxhall amateur boxing club in existence during the 1970s and 1980s. The status of the Vauxhall ABC as a well-funded leisure amenity, financially supported by the parent car manufacturing company, is ruefully contrasted with the isolated and rather meagre financial backing Coach manages to secure for the Gym:

“It was a cracking place to train and when I was ‘pro’ I used to go there myself and have a shake-out and even get in there and let them all (Luton-Vauxhall’s cohort of amateur boxers) throw a few shots at me...I used to take it easy naturally...but it was beneficial for me to get my eye in...you know...reflexes, distances sorted out that sort of thing. It must have been beneficial for the amateurs there too, I suppose...and some of them weren’t bad. Anyway...the gymnasium was fantastic, a big place and everything you needed was provided...mirrors, lots of bags, speed-balls, a permanent full sized ring, anything and everything really ‘cause they had so much funding see...nothing like now, money was no issue back then. It was very popular too, full of good quality boys and they staged some cracking ‘shows’. I remember practically the whole of Vauxhall would support them... Anyway, it’s all gone now...there was some scandal about corruption and [name] was accused with running off with a load of money...thousands and thousands, a large sum of money. It was in the local news...anyway it slowly wound down out of sight”.

Since the closure of the Luton-Vauxhall ABC the recent history of the parent car manufacturing company has been cataclysmic. In a fateful period of redundancies from the year 2000 onwards the Vauxhall plant ceased production by 2002. Commutatively, the downturn of productivity affected the industry of a number of satellite manufacturing companies based in Luton, such as Trico and BTR, that added to a tally of some 3,000-manufacturing job losses in the region during this period (*Luton on Sunday* December 17th 2000). The impact of Vauxhall closure to a sporting code such as amateur boxing that is so deeply enmeshed in the cultural mores and traditions configured from an industrialised way of Luton-based life is not difficult to foresee. As the dominant employer for many decades, Vauxhall sustained much by way of Luton town’s blue-collar identity. In particular, the might of this industrial employer ensured financial security for a large proportion of Luton’s

populace. Reciprocally and beyond material necessities, Vauxhall and its industrial symbolism was a normative signifier through which many Lutonians ascribed meaning to their social identities.

The dominant employer in Luton is now London-Luton Airport indicating a new era of service, health and education sector changes in not only employment but also lifestyle habits and aspirations¹⁸. Just one consequence of service sector employment is that it provides opportunities for women as much, or more so, than men (Devine 1992). If physical manpower is still a requirement of the rapidly diminishing industrial labour market, many of the displaced Luton-based industrial workforce have been forced to travel to work further afield¹⁹, relocate altogether or seek out a livelihood in other employment sectors. In turn, the declining association of workplace with place of residence unsettles the community based networks and processes of sociability through which biographies, kinships, customs and values are shared or at least familiarised among social peers in closely proximate geographical space and through continuity in time. It is apparent therefore that ‘old-industrialised’ life-patterns and the symbolic norms ascribed to them have either ceased altogether, are in transition and/or stubbornly persist as before. Henceforth, questions need to be asked if it is possible to draw parallels between the decline of industrialised ways of living and the meanings and values permeating the social practice of amateur boxing among the Gym-membership.

Boxing and identity construction in post-industrial context

The impact of Vauxhall’s closure resonated almost immediately among a number of Gym-actors. Coach himself was forced to ‘*get another pay cheque*’ as his job as a maintenance worker at the plant became redundant. Equally Steve, the son of a wealthy entrepreneurial ‘*face*’ whose construction business relied heavily on Vauxhall, decided ‘*enough is enough this country’s bollocks...*’ and after a noticeable absence from training, news filtered through he was ‘*spending time*’ in Canada. Nonetheless, on the whole, the Gym seemed wholly unaffected from its daily pre-occupations. In fact the closure of Vauxhall, although directly impacting on the economic circumstances of several of its membership, was barely discussed. Nightly training rituals continued with the same intensity, with upcoming tournaments talked about in preference to practically any ‘outside’ worldly events. If the ripples of social re-configuration directly impinged personal biographies for some and only vaguely for others

¹⁸ London-Luton Airport is expected to create jobs for 10,000 more people by 2021 and a further 5,000 by 2031 (see Luton Borough Council 2007)

¹⁹ Some 36,800 people commute into, and 50,800 commute out of, Luton for work daily (see Luton Borough Council 2007)

(myself included), it seems daily pre-occupations revolving around the local amateur boxing 'scene' continued, at least on the discursive level, unfalteringly.

A useful adjunct here is that immediately after the closure of Vauxhall Coach acquired a 'start' bricklaying, after making enquiries on the communal grapevine of subcontracted work sustaining much of the semi-formal economy of the building industry. Without an in-between period of unemployment, he was offered 'as much work as I need' from a local building contractor and ex-professional boxer who was a familiar acquaintance. For Coach at least, the immediate impact of social transformation, namely the rapid decline of the employment sector through which directly and indirectly he made sense of his social identity, was in this instance buttressed, or more precisely absorbed, by the social and cultural capital bestowed his boxing biography. Accordingly, in 'real' material terms, his status as a 'boxing face' of the 1970s proffered him economic sustenance. Reciprocally, his role as the Uncle-like patriarch responsible for the 'rational' development of Gym-amateur boxers was fortified with significance beyond the moral virtues of altruistic volunteerism. It need be acknowledged therefore, that amateur boxing is meaningful to the likes of Coach as something more than simply an 'amateur' and accordingly 'rational' sporting recreation. It is imperative therefore to examine in more depth Coach's identity and constructed value orientations as 'The Governor' solely responsible for the cohort of Gym amateur boxers athletic and, indeed, human development.

Introducing 'The Governor'

Coach is a robust man in his late-fifties who still manages to display an air of the 'fighting' identity he forged as a professional boxer during the 1970s. To this day his past exploits as a 'quality pro' are still worth a mention among tales of fighting-lore circulating boxing gymnasiums, pubs and working men's clubs throughout the region²⁰. Despite sporting ample midriff and a head of grey hair suiting his grandfather status, past battles confirming his identity as 'a fighting man through-and-through' are readily apparent when note is made of his heavily protruding eyebrows, courtesy of dozens of scar tissue remnants and a nose of undoubted pugilistic character²¹. While sitting in a café one afternoon in anticipation of a

²⁰ While at a preliminary round of the Schools Championships a memorabilia collector approached Coach with a request to sign his autograph on a 1970s fight poster bearing his image. As he dully obliged, a small crowd admiringly took note of this tangible proof of his glorious past. Needless to say (for the next few minutes at least) Coach had a noticeable stride in his step as he walked to and fro the arena acknowledging acquaintances!

²¹ The appearance of Coach's rather indented nose was actually flattered by an operation to have his nose cartilage 'set' upon retirement due to the fact that, 'you always get some kind of snide comment...so I thought might as well get it sorted and save some aggro see'.

regional round of the Schoolboy Championships, he recalled this snippet of life history relaying his ascendancy through the boxing hierarchies during the era of his fighting prowess:

“I was living piece-meal...you know...lodging with my folks just earning a bit and spending a bit. The family were Irish people, ordinary honest folk and they put up with me, well on the most part anyway [chuckles]. I was into my boxing and was like a lot of them you see now...enjoying my training but not killing myself. I had a lot of fights and reached a decent standard where I would win some, lose some, but never in a bad fight. I done the Championships here in England a few times and the best I got to was the semis...I think...I then decided to go over to Ireland and give them a go. Why? I just wanted...[emphatically] you know...have a good go at winning something to say I got something out of it! So I packed my bag...well this was actually one week after I got married [laughs]...anyway, I told the missus to take care of the house and I would be back in a few weeks. I actually sold a load of gear I'd won in fights previous...back in the day you got a decent prize for a bout. I remember I got rid of a set of giant tape decks they used to have in them days...you know...the big reel ones. Got a few bob and made my way there a few days before the tournament, not having planned anything but hoping to sort something out having got there. They would not let me sleep at the airport so I made my way to a doss-house, the cheapest I could find and just had a go. Well I won them and it surprised everyone! No one knew me see, so I beat them all and there were big write-ups about me in the papers...I got 'best boxer' (award) too, so in the papers they're saying I'm a surprise package and all that. So I came back and as I've said I'd just got married and the first one pops out, so I thought I better make some dough 'cause I had mouths to feed, so I goes '*pro*'. All I wanted was a few bob to line my pockets, no big plans...have a few fights, take a few beatings and get out. So that's how it kicked off. Next thing I know I'm settled in a gymnasium in London, fighting and getting paid for it! [Raising tone]...So I'm thinking this is all right...I wasn't getting hurt or anything like that so I carried on. It wasn't easy but I felt good about myself and my boxing. I was providing well for her and the baby...I actually had a few guys working for me at the time...I was training and fighting and every time I fought I put it away, it was a great help. Its funny thinking about it now, but if someone had told me I would be number five professional in the country and that I'd have fought British and European champions and the rest of it...I would have laughed in their face”.

Coach's biographical tale clearly relays a snippet of a life history steeped in the traditions of the 'fighting Irish' who migrated to Luton on mass during the 1950s and 1960s. The motherland was clearly in the foreground and played its part as the catalyst for fashioning Coach's social identity, both as a second generation immigrant aspiring to the '*honest-grafter*' ethos that had (and invariably still does) sustained the Irish presence in the building industry and his persona gained from countless '*wars*' in boxing rings around Britain. It is important to note, Coach displays a level of awareness to the possibilities of boxing as judged from a wealth of personal experience in both amateur and professional codes. As Giddens (1976) would say, whatever goes on in society does not wholly go on behind the back of the

likes of Coach, nor is he a non-reflective dope. Equally, the boxers attending the Gym are motivated to box because, first and foremost, they find the practice an enjoyable and challenging experience and act accordingly in an agential capacity. Also true, is that Coach spends virtually his entire spare time bearing responsibility for every organisational aspect affecting the experiences of Gym-boxers during training and competition. It is clear therefore, that his vantage of reality is pivotal when estimating the criteria by which Gym-boxers experienced amateur boxing. Accordingly, it is important to fully consider Coach's accountability as 'The Governor' solely responsible for the existence of the Gym amateur boxing club.

A 'one-man-band'

Anybody entering the Gym is sure to make note of Coach keenly observing proceedings from a small table strategically positioned directly opposite the entrance. Literally the captain at the helm of the ship Coach is acknowledged by all as the patriarchal figurehead of the Gym-milieu, whose existence is entirely due to his protracted endeavour since he created the boxing club over a decade ago and for ten months of the year serves as its unwavering stalwart²². Quite simply, without Coach single-handedly supervising training, raising funds, maintaining and purchasing equipment, organising boxers and their families when travelling to competitions and matchmaking as well as bearing responsibility for their conduct in and outside of the Gym premises, the club would cease to exist. By any stretch of the imagination this is an all-consuming task, one not always appreciated by boxers and the adults responsible for them. As co-trainer I was often the sounding board of many weekly gripes troubling Coach:

“People don't realise the amount of work that goes into this...I've been working in Watford all day perched on a roof and its been bloody freezing. Shot back (to Luton), popped in for a quick wash and a bite to eat and came straight down here. I was on the phone until gone twelve last night talking to some bloke from Southampton desperate for matches for his show on Saturday. There's no chance of getting down there 'cause its way too far and I don't really know the score with them, could be shit see and we're asking to get messed around...it's just not worth the bother. Anyway, we're at Bushey on Friday at the Hilton and there's a possibility at Reading coming up, which I would like 'cause they've got a kid travelling from Birmingham for Dodger. I have to get him a match see, as a warm-up for the Championships. In any case it's a good one...it's a good possibility and they're all right, so I'd take it. I've phoned Tanver and told him of a bout but he's not about...not yet anyway. All he ever says to me is he wants to box and all he does is let me down...Then there's Jay and he's been matched but I've had his mum on the phone...[incredulous]...they're going to Spain for a week so he can't box! What am I supposed to do with that? He is

²² The Gym shuts its doors for two-months over summer affording Coach a well-needed break.

either here to box or not and it looks like I'm going to have to get hold of them (club of Jay's opponent) and tell them the fights off. It's like this all the bloody time...you've got to do it all for them, keep them winning and even then they let you down. Then there's the finance of this place...they all seem to think it all right to pay when it suits them...but its not cause if I don't settle with this lot (the Community Centre) then they start getting shitty see, so I have to chase them and more or less bully it out of them...shouldn't have to do that though should I?...[I confirm]...The missus is giving me gip as well...[smiles faintly before walking away to instruct a novice boxer]..."

The content of the above demonstrates the daily predicaments required of organising the Gym collective into a cohesive, reliable and successful amateur boxing club. To all intents and purposes Coach's protracted and single-handed effort is the glue that affords any sense of structure among its membership; '*holding it all together*' as Coach aptly articulates his role. The extent of this self-imposed responsibility was brought home to me when, after returning from travelling to a competition held in Liverpool in the early hours of the morning and dropping a car full of Gym-boxers at their homes, Coach explained to me his '*routine*' before getting to bed, often to get up and out for work after only two or three hours sleep:

"I get into a routine or it just doesn't get done and then it's a mess for the next show, which as you know is often the next night...Anyway, I put any paperwork that needs doing in order...like I sort out the cards that may have to be used the next day or during the week, any letters from 'them' (the ABAE), alter the lists²³ of the boys to give to anyone of interest I might see and things like that. I sort out the gloves and wipe clean the bandages, groin protectors and head-guards...wipe them clean of the snot and blood...leave the used vests and shorts for her to clean straight away if possible and I make sure I hang them up to dry in the morning before I get off and the rest of the kit gets folded and put away. I then just sit for half an hour and think about everything that's gone on, things that went well, things that should have gone better...just take the time to make sense of the night in peace and quiet 'cause it just goes to waist see...next thing you know it's the next set of problems".

The 'show' held in Liverpool was on a weekday, forcing Coach to forsake '*a pay day*' doing his day job so that he could make sure the Gym-boxers arrived on time for the designated medical and weigh-in protocol scheduled for mid-day. With the tournament ending just before midnight, by the time Coach had arrived back in Luton and dropped each of the Gym-boxers off at their homes, it was virtually time for him to go back to work for Saturday overtime. Once more, the show was a Championships tournament organised by the ABAE, meaning he could not claim travelling expenses as he would from the hosts of a club tournament. As he reminded everyone repeatedly over the months and years afterwards, he was not only out of

²³'Lists' are a compilation of Gym-boxers who are available to compete and provide the necessary information (record of wins/loses, level of performance, weight and date of birth) for other 'head-men' to consider when arranging contests.

pocket “*by about eighty quid...they robbed as blind...they [spiting vehemence] gave it to the other kid purely because he was home town...!*”

The indignity of a ‘*robbery*’ was in all likelihood felt by Coach as much, or even more so, than the defeated boxer. If the boxer’s pride and body felt a bit sore after a losing contest, for Coach, the Gym and the fortunes of those under his charge symbolised his own identity as an ‘*honest sort...a working bloke*’ and ‘*a fighting man*’. So despite the disappointment of ‘*my boy*’ losing by ‘*getting robbed blind*’ he doggedly persisted with upholding the interests of the Gym-boxers with an unwavering verve best described as resilient. All too often, however, his passion gradated to the point of utter vehemence and contempt directed toward ‘*them*’ (ABAE officials)²⁴ and their denial of rightful justice for ‘*my boys*’ that, by insinuation, was an affront to his own self-worth. Any setbacks were stoically confronted head-on with an ‘*I’ll never lie down for no-one*’ mind-set that aided him in steering the Gym through the daily trials and tribulations encountered along the way. This was the only way for Coach and it is worth remembering his response to dealing with ‘*them*’ stems from his social identity fashioned as an ‘*honest sort*’ and a ‘*fighter*’ to boot. Presently, he expresses his ingrained sense of selfhood through his Uncle-like leadership as the of the Gym-boxers, which in turn derives social meaning as a product of the Victorian rational-recreation movement upholding volunteerism as an appropriate moral image for the facilitation of sporting endeavour. As is discussed below, Coach’s all-pervasive struggle to maintain a semblance of control and dignity as the Governor responsible for organising the Gym, that by insinuation validates his own sense of self-worth, encompassed two interrelated strands of Weberian (1930) consciousness: a ‘*value-rational*’ logic sustaining an ethos encouraging actions of *humanitarian-fellowship* and an ‘*instrumentally-rational*’ logic preoccupied with a *self-interested* pursuit of *gain*.

Amateur boxing as ‘value-rational’

One of the overriding day-to-day priorities for Coach was the economic sustenance of the Gym. As he would inform all, “*we have to all muck in because the Gym doesn’t pay for itself*”. Economic necessities included: the part-hire of the community hall from the local council²⁵; the cost of travelling to and from venues of competition; the provision of all boxing apparel and equipment (most boxers do not own their own); annual registration fees to the ABAE²⁶; miscellaneous expenses such as phone bills, travelling costs and other day-to-day

²⁴ Invariably ‘*them*’ was a reference toward the ABAE officials, although ‘*them*’ could be any other party deemed to be oppositional!

²⁵ Coach was responsible for the rent of the hall for one night per week with the other training nights council funded.

²⁶ Such fees are minimal and include insurance premiums, payment for obligatory coaching seminars and doctor’s fees for Gym-boxers annual medical requirements.

'pay-outs'. The constancy for generating funds to cover the day-to-day expenditure was an ever-present concern for Coach, with fees of £3 for junior boxers and £4 for senior members earnestly collected at the start of each training session. Likewise for senior boxers and the many Dads supporting their sons endeavours, attending the Gym equated to an economic discipline. Travelling expenses, weekly dues and restrictions on hours worked in order to fit in training, particularly when overtime is a standard requirement for *'putting a few quid away'*, all equated to economic considerations as amateur-recreational boxers.

Of course many Gym-boxers were well aware that their subs generated more than enough income to cover rental fees and miscellaneous bills outstanding. Irrespective, the taint of a profiteering motive was never levelled at Coach despite details of expenditure being kept private to him²⁷. Also common knowledge was that the £2000 (reputed) profit made from the Gym hosting its last *'show'*²⁸ had been dutifully banked under Coach's authority, who intended to be put into use *'for the boys sake'*. Despite clear ambiguities arising from Coach's declarations of Gym monetary incomings and outgoings, the taint of him coveting a somewhat profiteering motive was dismissed as out of hand. In fact, many of the Dads and older boxers often made impromptu cash donations amounting up to several hundred pounds a time to help Coach fund the Gym. Such gestures of benevolent good-will were on the whole undertaken without an overtly public display of largesse displayed²⁹.

The situated logic of making a donation towards the upkeep of the Gym can be understood as a symbolic exchange between 'giver' and 'receiver' in lieu of economic transactions in this context that in turn is made transparent, or 'pure', due to the ideal of non-monetarism enshrining amateur sport practices. In this way the, albeit diminishing, absence of monetary reward in the practice of amateur boxing lubricates a belief system that serves to reinforce, or perhaps augments the ability to contribute towards, the welfare of one's fellows. Thus, the symbolic value of monetary-exchange affords 'The Executor' the opportunity to contribute towards a worthy cause *'for the boy's sake'*. Equally Coach, as the recipient of the monies bequeathed, is symbolically entrusted the responsibility as 'The Guardian' of a worthy cause for the *'all the boys benefit'*. In turn, by accepting the responsibility of guardianship Coach is at liberty to reinforce his stature as a benevolent and 'honourable' Uncle-like patriarch beyond reproach. From a symbolic interactionist standpoint, therefore, the cultural practice of amateur

²⁷ Rent arrears were never talked of or settled in view of the members

²⁸ This 'show' was held in a local nightclub over two years since the time of writing.

²⁹ Coach often confided to me the measure of such generosity declaring, 'look what (name) just handed over to me [showing me the money]' or 'he's just signed us a cheque as a write-off' when referring to a donation claimed as tax expenditure from the small business interests of a significant proportion of older Gym-members.

boxing enshrine the function of economic transactions between boxing practitioners as signifying value gleaned from supporting or '*putting something back*' a worthwhile communitarian venture serving purpose as personal and social good for all concerned. It can be inferred, therefore, that both the *giving* and *receiving* of moneys is aligned to a belief system that, symbolically at least, subverts the taint of greed associated with the quest toward securing self-interested economic gain. Moreover, the cultural aestheticism through which the cohort of Gym-practitioners validated their daily interactions mediated bonds of mutuality and reciprocity among one another. The question of how such symbolic codes became validated among the cohort Gym-boxers, as a consequence of their constructed athletic identities and in relation to and/or in addition of their wider identities and experiences is discussed next.

Legitimising power: 'been there, done that'

Throughout the period of data collection Coach's stature as the doyen of the Gym community was accorded status that translated into an almost unconditional sense of reverence among Gym boxers. The symbolic essence of '*someone who's done a bit...the real thing*' was, with a sense of pride, literally imprinted in Coach's '*worn*' features displaying flattened nose cartilage and scarred eyebrows, old wounds revealing a biography of experience. Inquisitive scrutiny directed at the unconventionality of pug-like profiles afforded the owner the opportunity to quip, '*I'm not as pretty as I once was...but a lot wiser*'; a remark delivered with an air of confident self-depreciation, masking an expectation of respect due to one who has '*mixed it up...been there*' in a colourful and glorious past. Beyond imagery, '*ownership*' of a pugs' profile is to lay claim to the strength of character and hard earned wisdom only possible from prolonged service in the ring. Boxing-practitioners recognise '*experience*' by these terms, affording deference to its owner for fulfilling internal mastery sustained through '*real-time*' action not merely braggadocio. Accordingly boxing, for those versed in the '*realities*' of ring-bound competition, is often referred to as '*a man's game among Gentlemen*'. Coach's experience in other words, afforded him an unconditional source of symbolic capital among the Gym membership. Furthermore, Coach's symbolic stature was also acknowledged within, and in turn sourced from, the amateur boxing subculture per se and within the Luton-based community centred occupational and leisure cultural pockets receptive to the mores of boxing. In this way, his social identity as '*a good boxer in his day*' pre-ordained feelings of reverence for many of the boxers seeking to gain entry to the Gym, as Mick a novice competitive boxer with six fights experience recalls:

(Q) - How did you get into boxing?

“What it was...hmm...do you know a bloke called Paul (surname) from St Albans? [You mean the guy who boxed (surname)?]. No that's Campbell (surname) and Paul

is his dad. I work with him and I got chatting to him and that...and he was talking boxing and that...and I said 'I wouldn't mind some of that' and I didn't know any boxing clubs in Luton see...and he gave me Coach's number so I came by...I've always wanted to do it".

(Q) - Any first memories of Coach?

"Yeah I do actually...he was the first person I saw. He was in the ring doing pad work with Dodger and Kenny. I walked in and he ...well he stopped and came over and started chatting and he said 'are you Mick?' and I said 'yeah that's right' and he goes do you want to train and that...and I said 'nah its all right I just come here to watch for the first night'. And then after that...well I watched for a couple of hours and I liked it, I liked it a lot and then I popped down on the Thursday to start training and that...and on the Friday I was aching [laughs]. You know Coach he's one of them old blokes who...hmm...he's all or nothing really you know what I mean? If you're not one-hundred per cent for it he doesn't want to know. He's a nice bloke, a really nice bloke. I get along really well with Coach...he's a really nice bloke".

As Mick's and a substantial number of other Gym-boxers initiation into amateur boxing indicates, Coach's character credentials came recommended from respected elders - esteemed acquaintances from the workplace or other more informal social networks in and around Luton. In this way Coach's repute as '*a quality pro*', as represented in the column inches of the 'Luton and Herald Post' during the 1970s and furnished through folklore circulating the informal networks of sociability receptive to boxing, span the generations in a way that to this day affords him a near pre-ordained status as '*all-right*'; a man who has earned the right to be respected. The rationale of amateur boxing for the likes of Mick is thus handed down through the generations and retains a value-orientation that is bound, at least on one foot, in a 'traditional' (i.e. industrialised working-class) cultural aestheticism. Accordingly if, as Bourdieu (1984) contends, the notion of symbolic capital can be considered as a form of power that is not perceived as power but rather as a legitimate demand for recognition, deference and obedience (see Laberge and Kay 2002), then Coach's actions vis-à-vis his pugilistic credentials as ex-pro and now Uncle-like doyen of the Gym, are pre-ordained as selfless and as such are esteemed as moralistic - '*putting something back*' to the very same community that allotted symbolic-prestige to his own identity. Furthermore, Coach's status is implicitly respected and translates into a notion of near reverence among Gym-boxers.

The extent through which such value orientations lubricated the day-to-day social interactions between Gym actors was made explicit when noting that the youthful brigade of Gym amateur boxers virtually at all times complied with Coach's wishes. In fact, over the four year period of data collection, matters of 'rebelliousness' (see Armstrong 1998) directed towards the disciplinarian conformity expected during training and competition simply did not

materialise. If acts of rebellious defiance were undoubtedly considered by some as an option, dissenting ‘*all mouth wannabe’s*’ were soon doused by way of collective mockery and scorn at the needlessness of the ‘*attitudes*’ displayed and it was a rarity when individuals had to be authoritatively reprimanded to ‘*get into line...or else*’. In turn, through displaying ritualistic allegiance to the whims of Coach, ‘real’ boxers were accorded peerage by their Uncle-like mentor and other significant elders for transferring their stoicism and fortitude displayed during training unto the public stage of competition. In this way, the prevailing ethos of disciplined fortitude necessary to succeed during boxing competition symbolises a right passage accredited as an unquestionably ‘respectful’ and ‘honest’, and thus ‘moral’, masculine endeavour. The symbolic signifiers serving to legitimise this brand of athleticism thus functioned in synthesis with the ‘traditional’ cultural mores defining the pockets of sociability receptive to the mores of boxing. For many boxers like Mick therefore, a willing internalisation of boxing tradition, by way of ‘cultural reflex’ (Cantelon and Ingham 2002), affirms the symbolic parameters through which he chooses to validate his identity as a ‘real’ boxer. Reciprocally, by eulogising his agency Mick implicitly legitimises Coach’s authority to guide his athletic development (that also necessarily encapsulates his health). That said, it should be noted that the processes sketched out above are not intended to depict the behaviours, values and norms enacted by Gym-boxers from a romanticised standpoint enchanting ideal-typical portrayals of working-class dignity and so forth. Rather, as is discussed below, the reflexivity serving to lubricate the much vaunted and sublimely implicit ‘respectful’ value orientations and social repertoires sketched out above, also serve to informally ‘police’ Gym-boxers athletic development.

Respect and surveillance: reflexivity at work

By acknowledging the cultural aesthetics through which legitimacy is bestowed Coach’s identity as Uncle-like patriarch responsible for the Gym cohort of amateur boxers, it becomes clear that Gym-boxers athletic development is, to all intents and purposes, reflective of and structured by the value-rationale defining the everyday social contexts through which Coach garners symbolic capital. More so, Coach is aware that the belief systems bestowing prestige to his role as Gym-patriarch are garnered from and through peer networks implicating webs of social interaction through which stocks of cultural knowledge are shared. In turn and largely implicitly, the value orientations defining such like belief systems are ‘democratically’ understood and thus informally ‘policed’ through public grapevines of news and gossip. In this way, collective consensus to the symbolism of amateur boxing serving purpose as a personal and social good placed Coach’s actions under informal, yet constant, surveillance. The evidence gleaned from this study suggests that, albeit on a ‘social’ rather than wholly

‘individualistic’ level of interaction, the informal surveillance mechanisms at work ensured respectful, and accordingly humanistic, practices and relations were adhered to from all parties.

The social context lubricating such like ‘respectful’ codes of behaviour among Gym-practitioners sketched out thus far, has been understood as a consequence of the enduring working-class cultural fabric through which class-specific forms of social being, valorising a very durable brand of tough yet honest work-like physicality, have been enacted for much of the 20th century. The meaning of amateur boxing as a participant sport in other words, is reinforced by industrial capitalism’s class system and a mutual understanding of value-laden practices and relations affording working-class actors a measure of masculine self-worth and thus ontological security (Giddens 1990; Winlow and Hall 2006). Nonetheless if humanist values, practices and relations between Gym-actors undoubtedly existed then also, in an ever transforming multicultural and increasingly politically contested landscape, class based gender norms and the symbolic capital they afford are liable to decline in significance or simply mutate. Therefore, as much as Coach had become accustomed to receiving unconditional respect from his moniker as the Uncle-like patriarch of the Gym amateur boxing club, as the social networks of traditional working class life decline so does his stature as a purveyor of social good incrementally diminish. Accordingly, in the contemporary moment of declining cultural homogeneity, the means through which Coach is able to accrue ‘traditional’ symbolic profit is also in decline. From a vantage of examination that acknowledges the contemporary rapidity of social change therefore, the symbolic parameters fuelling Coach’s and other Gym-practitioners actions can be better understood as increasingly signifying Weberian ‘instrumental-rational’ modes of human consciousness.

Amateur boxing as ‘instrumentally-rational’

Weber (1930) argued human consciousness in the Western world of capitalism is increasingly governed by “...quantitative reasoning” (Morrison 1995 p. 219-220) and, reciprocally, through patterns of thought by which “...individuals weigh up alternatives prior to action by evaluating means and ends in order to increase the chance of success” (ibid). From this standpoint, Weber used the term ‘calculability’ to convey the point by which economic rationality penetrates other spheres of human life beyond monetary transactions. By this estimation he argued a ‘spirit’ predisposed towards the accrual of ‘gain’ increasingly shapes the character of social existence in Western capitalist societies, to the extent it tends to place individuals in competition with one another. Reciprocally, this drive towards accruing tangible estimations of individualist ‘gain’ serves to undermine the onus placed on symbolically laden values and

actions that are socially legitimised and thus rather less immediate in their potency (Morrison 1995 p. 231).

Over the duration of this study, Gym-actors displayed a mix of contradictory and often paradoxical meaningful capacities through which they interpreted the athletic practice of amateur boxing. On the one hand, actions of value-rational benevolence contributed to a climate of fellowship, reciprocity, good-will and belonging. On the other hand, Gym-actors displayed incessant self-interested quests for accumulating individualistic gains often at the complete disregard for fellow Gym-members. The processes through which the all-pervasive instrumental-rational ‘gain spirit’ punctuated an undercurrent, yet ever-present, sense of dubiety and tension straining relations the everyday relations and practices among Gym-actors is discussed next.

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

Always the first to arrive at the Gym premises in readiness to supervise a night’s training Coach had a calculated awareness as to the ‘worth’ of each of the Gym-boxers under his guidance. Punctuating his calculations was a desire to uncover ‘*the prospect*’, a boxer who displayed ‘*that little bit extra*’ who could, under Coach’s Uncle-like guidance, achieve elite success or at the very least aid in the development of the few boxers in the gymnasium that could aspire to do so. Accordingly, as Coach mused upon the ‘*look*’ of the boxers training on any given night, he intuitively and expertly judged their character potential for harbouring ‘*the right kind of make-up...a nice way about them*’ or, alternatively, categorised them as merely ‘*no-hopers*’, ‘*dreamers*’, ‘*keep-fitters*’ or ‘*wasters who are likely to be trouble*’. In any case, whether he deemed individual boxer’s as possessing the ‘*raw material to be moulded into something decent*’, or not, their ‘worth’ was put to the test within the epicentre of Coach’s concerns, the boxing ring occupying centre stage in the gymnasium. Accordingly, the nightly ritual of sparring between the cohort of Gym-boxers took on a multi-layered significance for those participating that, nonetheless, to all intents and purposes was moulded by Coach’s intent to pursue ‘gain’.

At the instruction to ‘*glove up*’ the boxers donned headgear and well-padded 16oz gloves and waited for Coach’s instructions for a designated pair to enter the ring. Ritualistically, ‘The Governor’ stood centre ring and considered the order of sparring to take place. Quickly casting his eye on the pool of willing (or not) boxers, he intuitively sensed the frame of mind of ‘real’ boxers in an appraisal of their readiness for “*doing a good nights move around*”. Well aware of a contest already pre-arranged or with “*a possibility of a good match*” in mind, he facilitated sparring he felt to be appropriate to that individual. If the boxer foremost in his

concerns appeared listless, he instructed him to “*take it easy*” or “*have a light shake out and just concentrate on movement*”. On the other hand, if the boxer appeared highly motivated Coach lined up a selection of partners instructing his protégé, “*you’ve got different styles coming at you... so use them...deal with each one accordingly to sharpen yourself up*”.

It should be made clear at this point that despite sparring practice taking place most training sessions, throughout the period of data collection bloody noses or ‘*marking-up*’ (bruising) were, if they happened at all, of a superficial nature. Moreover, noticeable hurt such as knockdowns, deeply bruised or cut skin via sustained punishment meted out during sparring was virtually a non-event. This is a feature of Gym-life that should not be understated as sparring has the potential to be a far less controlled affair, as Amir a nineteen year-old boxer with twelve bouts experience who defected to the Gym from a neighbouring boxing club elaborates:

[Q] – Tell me what went wrong at (name of club)?

“[Name of coach] was all right you know...I won’t say anything too bad about him. But...you know he’s a good trainer and all that...but...he’d leave me on my own and put you in the ring with like [emphasising] heavy guys and you know you might have a really bad spar and you know...you get knocked about a little bit from heavier people and that. That was one thing and plus...hmm...I was fighting people I fought like three or four times before so I wasn’t feeling like I was getting anything from that...you know just repeating the same thing over and over again. So I felt he wasn’t really getting me any good fights and he wasn’t really training me. I was basically on my own so that’s the main reason why I left plus...you know with the sparring I was getting my brain beaten in”.

In contrast it was common for Gym-boxers to acknowledge the controlled demeanour, by way of Coach’s guidance toward sparring practices at the Gym. Amir elaborates further:

“The difference at the Gym is...hmm...you get training down there that’s all right...and you get sparring...you get taught to box. Coach looks after all the boys who come to box, it is really friendly and that...you know everyone that walks through that door is really friendly and that he welcomes everyone to the Gym”.

Despite Amir’s and many other Gym-practitioners advocacy to the controlled and welcoming ambience of nightly sparring sessions, it must be emphasised nonetheless that the ‘friendly’ character of the Gym is not so much based on processes of sociability per se, as it was to the sanctity allotted the individual and his athletic endeavours. In this way, the boxing ring truly represented an egalitarian space where Gym-boxers, irrespective of their social identity, were afforded the opportunity to develop their athletic capabilities and, in doing so, claim a sense of intra-communal status. Moreover, the individualist sanctity allotted to the endeavour of ring bound action served to inform a vivid sense of acceptance and camaraderie among the Gym-

practitioners. Equally so, as is discussed below, it was equally apparent that underpinning the ‘civilised’ ethos of egalitarianism upheld by Gym-practitioners during training, any given boxer’s athletic development was structured in a way that incorporated Coach’s and other significant elder’s instrumentalist ‘gain’ motives.

The instrumental logic of ‘it’

Coach was well aware that if newcomers to the Gym witnessed the ‘hurtful’ potential of boxing prematurely they were unlikely to persist with the sport. If nothing else ‘losing’ new faces amounted to a loss in revenue for the Gym in the form of subs. Also, as Coach often remarked, a near empty gymnasium rendered the training atmosphere ‘*lacking that nice little buzz that gets everyone going*’. Perhaps the most fundamental motive for controlling the flow of aggression during sparring was that the intent to ‘hurt’ one’s sparmate, as opposed to ‘using them’ to refine skills, blunts the learning process. If a physically stronger or vastly more capable boxer is solely pre-occupied on dominating his sparring partner, he simply relies on his strengths to ‘look good’ as opposed to developing new skills or improving upon his deficiencies. Thus, he simply repeats strengths as opposed to realising weaknesses. Well aware of the appeal for novice boxers to seek to accentuate their advantages during sparring, Coach stressed a partnership ethos whereby he urged boxers to push each other physically and mentally but, nonetheless, abstained from seeking to dominate their fellow spar-mate as in ‘*one-way-traffic*’.

As such, the prevailing logic of sparring at the Gym fostered a relatively safe arena for skill development. Nonetheless, under Coach’s considered instrumentalist gaze, the act of sparring also symbolised a definitive intra-competitive right of passage among the Gym-boxers. A hierarchy of boxers was thus tacitly established in accordance to Coach’s pre-occupation with achieving success from ‘it’ – his own instrumentalist gain motives that by definition became publicly validated, informally and formally, through developing ‘quality’ boxers capable of achieving national standard success. The following autobiographical notes are intended to elaborate the subtle processes through which ‘quality’ Gym-boxers were elevated in stature, in symbolic and practical terms, from more the vast majority of ‘ordinary’ boxers. Further still, as my autobiographical recollections reveal, the signifying practices through which boxing-practitioners bestowed symbolic capital, and reciprocally established patterns of accommodation among one another, were necessarily transient in accordance to the all-pervasive instrumentalist gain motives permeating their logic of action:

Quality boy...spar-mate...role model

Over the course of this research process my status as a member of the Gym has fluctuated considerably in tune with my aspirations and achievements in the ring. My current role as coach is a configuration of much negotiation and at times resistance, not to mention personal discontent, at the loss of status I experienced upon retirement as a competitive boxer. As an 'open' class senior boxer with a modicum of Championships success for a period of four years, it would be fair to say I occupied the focus of Coach's concerns despite some ten or so other competitive boxers training at the Gym during that time. Our relationship had been forged over many years. Over that time span we built a solid friendship that was pretty much implicitly understood and communicated on a tacit level. During every training session as I carried out my warm-up, Coach would single me out and we would discuss the training or sparring schedule for that particular session. Depending on the boxers in attendance and in accordance to their size, ability, age and character trait he would advise, "[name of boxer] *has come in tonight so I'll get him ready and you can do a few rounds. Watch him just in case he thinks he is superman, you know what he's like...I don't trust him...if he gets tasty let the right go or work him to the body, slow him down a little...that's if you have to...then I'll stick in a few younger ones and just mess them about, work on defence...do your thing I'll leave it up to you*". This relationship became even more intimate when, under Coach's guidance, I competed as a professional for two contests while using the Gym facilities. Significant 'pro' rituals were incorporated into our relationship - Coach would take care in applying Vaseline to my face before sparring (as is commonly applied to 'pro's' so as to minimise the risk of facial abrasions or 'marking-up'); he would guide me through a series of callisthenic exercises at the end of each training session while the rest of the boxers observed in the wings; he undertook the 'fatherly' pre-contest ritual of applying oil to my upper body frame and 'looking after me' with timely advice when psychologically I prepared for a contest in the solitude of the changing rooms.

Upon the onset of my retirement from competitive boxing however, admittedly after a certain amount of dissatisfaction with the Gym as my training base on my part, in an abrupt turnaround our boxer-coach relationship all but evaporated. Although I trained at the Gym as usual, I ceased to be included in Coach's considerations alongside the other Gym-boxers. This apparent decline of my stature was underlined when on one occasion when a heavyweight boxer occupying Coach's attentions discontentedly bemoaned that there wasn't anyone large or able enough for him to spar against. Coach, to my astonishment, cheekily asked me "*do you fancy a shake about Alex...nothing serious...*" It is common practice not to 'mix it' with boxers of significant weight differential let alone the close on six stone separating the two of us, as any excessive strength-to-weight disparity can, even unintentionally, leave the lighter boxer considerably hurt. The point is, both Coach and myself were well aware of sparring etiquette and it was apparent to me that my previous status had just come full circle and now I was the 'fill-in' for upcoming Gym prospects! I dug my heels in and nonchalantly refused the invitation, on the one hand insisting on self-preservation and on the other resisting his authority with an understanding that I was a bit too long in the tooth to be 'used' in that manner...

As time wore on this in-between period of status re-alignment, with my social relations among the Gym community remaining on an even and good keel, Coach invited me to take on the responsibility of coaching. Although my presence is clearly secondary to Coach, I am very

much an identifiable role-model as far as the younger cohort of Gym-boxers are concerned, having trained and competed among them as a Championships calibre senior amateur and more significantly as a *'pro'* boxer. Current Gym starlet and Coach's foremost concern, schoolboy champion Dodger, had as an impressionable 13-year-old witnessed the training preparations during my professional sojourns and attended my first professional contest, which I won. On one of the regional Championships tournaments on the way to his national title victory Dodger enquired if I would be in his corner declaring, "*I like it when Alex is there with me, it gets me ready for it*". Clearly, Coach is very much aware of my effect on the impressionable boxers in the gymnasium and in countless conversations I had with him is more than happy to facilitate this process. Complaining that he is getting "*old and a bit creaky*" I took charge of Gym-boxers technical and fitness training. He maintains his authority as the doyen of the Gym however, specifically by retaining sole control of sparring, matchmaking, instructing boxers in *'the corner'* during contests and when and collecting subs from all concerned.

(Autobiographical notes – October 2005)

The case is being made that Coach's actions as the architect of Gym-boxers athletic development prioritised, by way of non-reflective intent, his self-interested calculations for securing personal gain. Thus, getting something for 'it' (his involvement in amateur boxing) can represent disorientated and unpredictable patterns of both value-rational and instrumental-rational motives: a boxers success; a packed gymnasium full of *'good boys'*; a sense of fellowship; economic gain; a sense of pride in running and controlling his own destiny *vis-à-vis* the Gym; the honourable association attached to a *'hardy little scrap'*; beating *'them'* (anyone and anything deemed oppositional such as clubs, rival-coaches, ABAE officials, or at times life itself!) Accordingly, as much as boxers wilfully accepted the challenge of amateur boxing competition they did so solely in respect of Coach's instrumentalist whims and thus, albeit in barely recognisable ways, on alienating terms. As Mick articulates, the nervous tension he has to negotiate leading up to a contest and the test of masculinity he firmly believes this to represent is done so *despite of* rather than *aided by* the mentorship of Coach:

"Well I actually used to get really worked up about it. I used to get really nervous like...something terrible to be honest. I could hardly sleep the night before...I really used to sit there and get worked up about it. I don't know why really, it's hard to explain. I used to get real bad nerves like, but the last one I wasn't all that nervous. Saying that...that's why I probably lost it. But really I feel I wasn't all that fit, but Coach said I was but I don't think so...I would've liked the fight maybe with a few more weeks fitness".

[Q] – "Was that a bit of Coach manipulation?"

"Yeah it was really. He phoned me up at home like, and he just said 'are you coming down' like...and I was asleep so I wasn't really up for it, you know? So anyway I went down and weighed-in...and he says I've got a bout on the Friday and this was

the Wednesday...and I tell him that I'd do it but I don't think I'm fit...but I'd do it anyway".

[Q] – “Why did you go through with it?”

“Don't know really...[lost for words]...I did want to do it, I really did but I thought in the back of my mind that...hmm...that I just wasn't fit. I suppose it is in your head really...if in your head you feel fit you really can be fit for it...do you know what I mean? It's all in your head...I mean in my second fight I felt fit and won the fight so I think it is really important like”.

Mick (22 years old, 6 bouts)

Mick had no hesitation in claiming responsibility for his actions despite expressing ambivalence at the authority that put him in a situation he was not the instigator of. Nonetheless, his sentiments echo the 'hidden' tension simmering under the surface of Gym-practitioners sociability towards one another. Throughout this study a constant sense of dubiety punctuated the relations among Gym-practitioners, particularly among Dads in regular attendance at the Gym, to the extent that on more than one occasion disagreements erupted in permanent conflict³⁰. More to the point, as is examined in more detail below, the hidden tension arising from Coach's and significant-others instrumental-rational calculations to accrue personal gain served to define, nurture and reinforce Gym-boxers interpretative frameworks and actions.

In pursuit of 'it': seeking gain within the boxing arena

As is shown below, Schools champion Dodger's 'quality' signifies overlapping and at times conflicting gain motives for those, in one way or another, proclaiming influence on his athletic development. In particular much as Dodger represents the most decorated boxer of 'Coach's boys', Dad-Jim bears the overbearing authority over his son. Concomitantly, Dad Jim's (sub)conscious striving to secure symbolic gain through his son's involvement in amateur boxing nourishes the most immediately signifying parameters of performativity through which Dodger interprets his agency prior to the Schools Finals contest. The following snapshot provides a penetrative insight into Jim's gain motive that, in turn, is defined by and reinforced through his social sense of identity:

³⁰ I have to acknowledge my own gain motive was pervasive throughout the period of analysis either as an athlete and/or researcher. As the research process unfolded it became increasingly difficult for me to reconcile what I considered to be inexcusable acts of self-interest from those bearing responsibility for the spirit in which amateur boxing was/should be practiced. I no longer coach at the Gym and hereby lay bare my subjective gaze in the hope that the scope of critical judgement offered (tinged with authorial 'gain motive') is, if nothing else, made transparent to the reader.

A hard life

Of Gypsy-Romany stock Jim is a hardworking scrap metal dealer in his mid-thirties. Having arrived at the venue in his brand new four-wheel drive, of which he is happy to tell me he paid “£30,000 cash”, he seems to be bursting with pride as he heads his family troop all wearing matching tracksuits in reverence to the occasion. Although never having boxed Jim often recalls his fighting exploits as a bare-knuckle brawler. Clearly excited at his sons upcoming challenge he has dressed for the occasion having donned his best gold jewellery, that includes a rather striking three-fingered gold and diamond studded ring stretching an elongated and dazzling, although one suspects intentionally intimidating, ‘J-I-M’ across his knuckles. When I remarked (jokingly) that he could be arrested for possession of a lethal weapon, he jovially informs me that the jewellery can only be a weapon or ‘knuckle-duster’ if it spans four of his fingers. “That’s the law in their own words...they can’t touch me!” he earnestly explains to me while tapping his nose.

The patriarch of a family unit consisting of wife and five children (Dodger is the eldest), Jim is extremely proud of his son’s achievements in boxing and supports him in every way. On a previous occasion he had confided to me that despite Dodger’s and younger brother Kenny’s adolescence³¹, “I treat them both as men. I don’t expect them to ask me any favours and they are brought up to do their bit”. His remarks alerted me to a strikingly different way of life to the one I’ve known despite our shared bond with amateur boxing. For instance, every day of the week for twelve hours a day Dodger works alongside his father collecting scrap metal. Dodger has therefore neither the time nor inclination to attend school and like his father can hardly read or write. Accordingly, apart from work and family, boxing very much shapes the contours of his young consciousness. Never missing a night’s training he is earnestly put through his paces by Dad-Jim who supervises every one of his actions. He tells me, “all I care about is my two really...I tell them the harder they work the harder they become the better they will be...stands to reason”. Jim also looks beyond the Gym in a bid to instil ‘hardness’ to his sons approach to boxing and has set up a gymnasium outside his mobile home on a caravan park in Luton. Insisting that the boys will have it no other way, he supervises daily workouts including extra skipping, punch bag and circuit training, sparring sessions between the brothers and any other suitable opposition, plus four to five mile morning runs on non-Gym training nights. Sunday is designated a rest-day, apart from their twelve-hour shift spent collecting and dealing scrap metal...

This is a disciplined, verging on the monastic, regimen no doubt informed by a social identity that experiences life from the fringes of society. The likelihood of very much real or self-perceived discrimination and prejudice to the minority Romany-Gypsy way of life on the one hand, and self-imposed handicaps such as non-literacy on the other, makes Dad-Jim insistent on instilling an ethos of self-sufficiency to his sons personas. ‘Graft’ is expected during work and play with a pronounced physical assertiveness demanded in celebratory acclaim of the ‘hard-man’. The first loss registered on Dodger’s boxing ledger illustrates this point well. After a long winning streak he boxed below par against a talented opponent and was declared a narrow points loser. The explanation offered to me by Coach the following day was that due to visiting a very close relative in hospital, Dodger had virtually no sleep and by the time he completed his work duties the next day, was understandably listless by the time of the contest.

³¹ The boys were 15 and 13 years old respectively at the time of writing.

Shaking his head in disbelief Coach added, “do you know what Jim did? As a punishment for losing he had them up all night doing exercises and punching the bags. I mean all night... they finally got to bed about four in the morning!” Jim cheerily confirms this to me in person when attending training at the Gym adding in fits of laughter that, “it’s not (Dodger losing) going to happen too often!” Before painting a picture of a harsh, cruel and dictatorial father-figure it must be noted Jim is clearly dedicated to his family and enjoys a warm and often humorous relationship with his boys. He clearly prides himself as an extremely hard-working man that provides everything possible for his family out of genuine love and he wishes to do the best for them. His philosophy on life simply reflects his own socialisation and this extends to his guidance of his sons involvement in boxing.

As we got ready to enter the arena Jim, clearly tense before Dodger’s forthcoming bout, recalls a story regarding his father, a renowned ‘hard-man’ throughout the travelling communities in Britain and Ireland. The significance of this story is of interest as much for its impromptu inclusion into our conversation as for its content. Seemingly out of nowhere he offers, “You know I saw my old man once...when I was only young and worked the fairs. One day, and I don’t know why or what went on before, but three big black men came over to our stall and one of them punched my old man in the face. Now, and remember he was an old geezer by then, he just picked up a baseball bat he kept with him behind the stall, leapt over the counter and did all three in. I mean something terrible, I’ve never seen anything like it... blood, broken bones, teeth gone, split heads the lot. They never come back again...”

(Adapted field-notes 28/03/2004)

Tapered from a vantage of life experienced from the fringes of society, Dad-Jim’s perception of amateur boxing reflects the ‘hardy’ nature of his life-circumstances and constructed sense of identity in society. In turn, he projects his situated logic upon Dodger’s and Kenny’s athletic development. For Dad-Jim and by implication his offspring, therefore, the athletic experience and social practice of boxing signifies reflexive resistance to modes of social discrimination and perceived subjugation widely experience by Romany’s in present day Britain, as much as it does the joy of physical expression, skill development, intrinsic self-expression and communal bonding with one’s peers. In order to more fully understand how Gym-practitioners praxis is rendered meaningful within the structural contexts defining their everyday life-circumstances, it is necessary to once again evoke the full panoply of ‘lived’ dimensions through which the competitive practice of amateur boxing is perceived as ‘profitable’. In the section below, the social processes through which Gym-actors seek emotional, sensual and symbolic empowerment, directly as a consequence of their athletic competences and indirectly in relation with and often at the expense of significant and generalised others, are sketched out in more detail.

Winners and losers at the ‘grass-roots’

At its grass-roots, the amateur boxing universe revolves around a yearly calendar of tournaments, or ‘shows’. Amateur boxing clubs host either ‘club-shows’ or ‘dinner-shows’ in

order to match-make their own boxers with opponents from rival boxing clubs in the region and other parts of Britain, or even depending on their stature invitational squads from Europe and America³², and to raise the necessary income that will sustain the club's annual expenditure. Club (or '*open*') shows are on the most part community affairs staged in town halls, working men's clubs, nightclubs and leisure centres with an audience made up of families, friends, visiting teams of boxers and members of the public. Dinner-shows are rather more formal affairs, often held in plush hotels with a main audience of suited diners enjoying hospitality food while being entertained by the boxing³³.

The organisation of a show is a considerable undertaking requiring time, effort, patience and money to book the venue, hire and construct the ring, purchase trophies, arrange the services of trained medical staff, security and caterers etc, sell tickets, collect moneys, arrange the contests and many other tasks. Moreover, the infrastructure of grass-roots competition is wholly reliant on the passionate endeavours of Uncle figureheads like Coach who, more often than not, are solely in charge of amateur boxing clubs. It is right to suggest therefore, that the situated logic and emotive capacities underpinning head-coaches actions are, to all intents and purposes, pivotal to the spirit sustaining the presence of amateur boxing in contemporary English society and, by definition, the athletic development of the boxers under their guidance.

The Gym, or more precisely Coach, would be invited to attend shows held throughout the local region, other parts of Britain and occasionally as far a-field as Ireland or Cyprus. Through having formed long established relations (both friendly and antagonistic) with other head-coaches, Coach was therefore the sole arbiter as to whether a proposed contest involving Gym-boxers was to be accepted or denied. In every sense therefore, Coach was the architect of '*my boys*' athletic career and did his utmost to ensure their experiences on the competitive stage were of benefit to the boxer, and by implication also, the reputation of the Gym. Of course Coach was acutely aware that negotiations were reliant on a pattern of reciprocal (or not) accommodation. As such, pleasantries or antagonisms were on the whole subverted and politicised negotiations governed needs-must objectives. If advantage³⁴ for '*my boy*' when matched against a foe from a rival club was sought when and where possible, dealings were bound by past relations, the likelihood of future accommodation and knowledge that personal and club reputation was unavoidably implicated via a web of grapevine news and gossip

³² The contests can only take place after formal sanction has been granted by the ABAE officials presiding at every show, making sure the regulations stipulating boxers are matched in accordance to weight, age and experience classifications are adhered to.

³³ With dinner-shows substantially more lucrative the staging of club shows has become something of a rare occurrence in the Home Counties region much to the discord of the boxers themselves

³⁴ Advantages are sought in securing '*my boy*' an edge in experience, weight differential (if heavier by a few kilograms a boxer has a substantial advantage), the maturity of the boxer (i.e. a man's strength pitted against a still maturing boy's strength), securing a contest on 'home' turf.

circulating the tightly knit universe of amateur boxing practitioners. Accordingly regulative codes of conduct informally presided as to the allowable advantages sought-out. *'Taking the piss'* could only serve temporary profit as non-adherence to unwritten codes of etiquette when negotiating *'a fair or fairish match-up'* dampened future relations with interdependent, albeit rival, amateur boxing clubs.

Equally, matchmaking considerations were perceived from a broader plain than individual boxer's athletic development, past and future patterns of accommodation and a concern with personal repute and the like. The act of matchmaking took into account 'real world' practicalities such as travelling costs incurred, day time work commitments, or the 'quality' of a proposed contest that, it was hoped, would keep the *'punters'* entertained enough for them to return for the next show. As such, 'real world' practicalities often necessitated *'giving a little and taking a little'* and allowed for a certain amount of latitude to what was deemed fair when considering a contest between two boxers. A *'match-up'* could be accepted that was *'reasonable'*, as opposed to a strict consideration of the athletic capabilities and/or physical stature between two prospective opponents, on account of future accommodations between the clubs involved. Invariably the performances of boxers (*'my boys'*) were embroiled in the gamut of politicised and practically expedient realities of the match-making process and therefore were upheld by coaches as a legitimate source of bargaining power, and when successful, a source of prestige. Thus, any given amateur boxing contest accommodated the potential for symbolic profit in addition to, or despite of, a boxer's athletic development and welfare as the mainstay of consideration defining the match making process³⁵.

The following snapshot offers an account of the negotiated interactions engaged among amateur boxing practitioners attending a club show on the outskirts of Oxford approximately a two-hour drive from Luton. Coach had arranged contests for two Gym youngsters against boxers from the host club - Jay competing in his second bout and Declan competing in his first. Also making the journey from Luton were three cars full of family supporters of Damien, who although not officially matched to box against a designated opponent had come as a *'spare'*. For young Damien and family the decision was taken to make the four-hour return journey to Oxford on the off-chance that either a boy his size and age would fail to show for a designated contest and Damien could replace him, or another spare would be on hand to compete against. Although Coach was usually reluctant to let members of the Gym, that in Damien's case included a dozen or so supporters travel such a long way with no bout pre-

³⁵ By this estimation when Coach handed out *'lists'* of the boxers eligible to compete from the Gym to other 'head-men', one could argue much like commodities or stocks, every boxer signified worth beyond boxing conceived purely from an athletic standpoint and as such beyond his control and inevitably comprehension.

arranged with the host club's matchmaker, as I sat next to him on the drive to Oxford he told me:

“He's (the organiser) all right and I know he gets them coming in from all over. He didn't promise anything mind but he said there's likely to be a load of juniors there tonight, so a good chance of a match-up. I explained to them (Damien's family) the situation and they said they'd give it a go. They know the score so it's up to them and he said it was ok so I thought why not.”

Inevitably the calendar of grass-roots '*shows*' represents the first rung of a 'hierarchical performance' (Morgan 1994) structure of competition where boxers can display their abilities, accumulate experience and in the process develop the skills necessary toward progressing onto more prestigious Championships tournaments. In short, this is the breeding ground of all Olympic representatives and professional boxing starlets of the future. Equally, it is the only taste of competitive boxing for the vast majority of amateur boxers in England. It is true to suggest that the grass-roots tier of amateur boxing competition amounts to a 'filtering-mechanism' demarcating, experientially but perhaps more importantly symbolically, the performance credentials and by implication social stature of 'quality' boxers from their rather more 'ordinary' counterparts.

Amateur boxing in the community

After a two hour journey, including the obligatory ritual of losing our way on more than one occasion (and the inevitable rise in tension because of it), we arrive at the venue; a community hall on the outskirts of town. By-passing a queue of people waiting to gain entry under the keen surveillance of a team of hefty looking bouncers, we are greeted by the organiser from the host club who points us in the direction of a door posted 'Boxers Changing Rooms – Visiting clubs'. As we make our way through the building the boxing ring in the still empty arena beckons our collective attention. For any boxer knowledge that he has to negotiate the intimidating challenge of a fight in front of a live audiences expectations in a strange and possibly hostile environment, against an as yet imaginary opponent (is he tall or stocky? strong or fast or both? good or bad?), is a bracing and nerve jangling experience. In every way it is a step into the unknown and self-doubt laced with nervy-excitement fuels an overactive imagination of the likely outcomes to this stern athletic challenge to be undertaken...

We by-pass a smoke filled bar crowded with men talking energetically in groups. These are working folk spanning the generations, predominantly 'white' and enjoying a pint. Grandfathers having made the effort to dress smartly sit alongside sons and grandsons wearing high street designer shirts with sleeves rolled up to showcase tattooed arms decorated with chunky rings and wrist bracelets, all specially donned for this 'night-out'. Scatterings of women also take their place among the men in the bar with more seated in the main hall looking after groups of young children, while teenaged girls 'dressed-to-impress' parade to and from the seating area chattering excitedly. On an elevated stage are the prizes for tonight; a glittering array of winner's trophies casting a shadow over the smaller second place prizes. Among them and seemingly conspicuously on display is a strikingly ornate trophy reserved

for 'The Best Boxer of the Night' award. At the rear of the hall, boxers stand in a line semi-naked in muted silence waiting to undertake the obligatory pre-contest medical. A closer inspection reveals that they are all shivering slightly due to the chilly temperature and no doubt also in nervous expectation of their upcoming contest. At intervals of no more than a minute or two, one emerges from a room marked 'Doctor-Medicals' while the next in line enters at the call of 'next!'

We make our way into a packed changing room full of skinny boys milling around in the usual baseball cap and tracksuit attire, older and more athletic young men somberly meditating on the side-lines. Seated among the boxers, with arms folded intently surveying proceedings, are their coaches whose rather oversized appearance strikes a sharp contrast to their charges. Adding to the cramped conditions friends and family of boxers congregate in tight groups chatting in hushed tones, or alternatively, sharing a joke with an exaggerated spirit of bravado displayed for all to see. As is usual of boxers changing rooms, the air is thick with nervous tension although one that is laced with a kind of respectful reverence to the forthcoming challenge at hand. For as much as the tension is palpable and made overt by the continual glances directed at sizing up the presence of members from rival clubs, it is almost wholly directed inwards to one self and the battle with nerves. People squeeze by each other with an air of amiable consideration of almost over-politeness, good naturedly conversing with one another by initiating small talk and sharing a laugh or two. There is also a marked familiarity between rival boxers who, having shared the ring with one another on any number of previous occasions, indulge in uninhibited and good-humoured small talk punctuated by respectful handshakes.

Once accommodated in the changing room Coach, looking his usual tense self, instructs the Gym-youngsters to get changed while he busily gets their cards out of his kit bag. He then escorts them to a set of digital scales presided over by two ABAE officials and a dozen or so sombre looking coaches attentively observing proceedings. The boxers in turn jump on the scales and one of the officials loudly announces their weight, "Mr [surname] from the Gym ABC...64.5 kilos!" As soon as the weight is officially recorded, Coach consults the host matchmaker to see if the boxers from the opposing clubs have arrived and 'made' their designated weight classification. Before long, a protracted conversation ensues between Coach and another head-man, with Damien's and another boxer's cards studied assiduously. After a period of protracted close quarter conversation, with much thoughtful posturing from both parties punctuating their exchange, news filters through to the three nervous looking boxers sitting quietly trying to make sense of the proceedings that, "all of you are on! We're number two, four and seven on the programme so get the medical over with and then quickly get changed and loosened up cause the first bout is starting in half an hour!" Coach appears fidgety, however, and is prompted to confide me in a hushed tone, "there's something not right with that lot (insinuating the club of Damien's opponent). I don't really know why but there's something not quite right here. I don't know them and I don't trust them...I have a feeling we're being stitched up!" He then shoots off in the hope of 'getting word' on Damien's opponent from a trusted acquaintance among the boxing clubs congregated here tonight. Damien himself is by this stage nervously lacing up his brand new Adidas boxing boots surrounded by an anxious looking cohort of relatives. Coach re-appears and looking more than agitated lets me know, "nah, no way...[incredulous] that's his boy there! [pointing to a much taller ginger haired boy]. No way...no way he's forty-three kilos...[shaking his

head in dismay bordering on red-faced rage]...not a chance...well look at him he looks like he's been shaving for the last year! (in reference to the boys reported age of fourteen). Nah, they've rigged the card it's a stitch job...I'm not having that, no way!" He promptly signals an ABAE official over and without any deliberation cancels the contest. In the meantime a nervous looking Damien aware there is a problem but not sure of its nature is told by Coach, "get out of your gear son, it wasn't a fair match...for one thing he was way too heavy and he looks about three years older...I'm sorry son but there's no way that's going on. I'm sorry you won't be able to box but it's the way it has to be I'm afraid". He pulls Damien's dad over to one side and quietly explains his foreboding in more detail. With recriminating stares directed toward the coach of Damien's would-be opponent, they both shrug shoulders in confirmation of the attempted 'scam' and mutual agreement at the justification of the bouts cancellation. [Damien and family having paid the entry fee promptly made the two-hour journey back to Luton].

With the time approaching 9pm an expectant crowd of around five hundred are by now seated, or standing pints in hand cramped along the perimeters of the hall, anticipating the boxing to begin. There seems to be a delay however and as it is prolonged the host club's organiser, rather red faced due to the stress placed on his oversized frame by the oncoming embarrassment at failing in his responsibilities, is spotted frantically gesticulating on his mobile phone. After some time of uncertainty among the boxers and more importantly the increasing frustration of the paying 'punters' sat staring into their ever emptying pint glasses, the tuxedoed MC climbs into the ring and announces "Ladies and Gentlemen, as you've no doubt noticed there has been a delay. This unfortunately has been unavoidable as due to unforeseen circumstances there has not been the appropriate number of officials specified in the rules and regulations of the ABA to allow this show to proceed. It is worth remembering Ladies and Gentlemen, rules are put in place only to ensure the utmost safety of our boxers. Fortunately this problem is being rectified as I speak and in no time the action shall begin. So please show some patience and before long we can do what we all came here for... that's cheer on all the boys and enjoy a good night's amateur boxing!" Waiting in the changing room with young Declan, who is nervously pacing up and down contemplating embarking on his first foray into the unknown, a head-man of a prominent local boxing club loudly aired his grievances, "it's all right for your RAF, your Navy, your bloody Army to turn up on time when there's a bit of prestige on the line but when its grass roots where are they? This is what amateur boxing is all about, not your Wembley's and all the overseas travel..." In due course an official makes his way to the venue and the sport for the night is ready to get underway...

The Gym boxers compete against opponents from the host club and both claim hard earned wins! As I escort each Gym-boxer in turn towards the ring the Rocky theme tune blares out over the amplifier system and disco lights accompany their walk from the backstage passed the expectant and scrutinising audience into the ring. The charged atmosphere is heightened by the vocal encouragement for the local boxers who's supporters loudly chant, "Come on my S-O-N lets make it happen...plenty of hard graft...come on lets HAVE IT!" Both contests take a similar pattern: the Gym boxers are met at the start of each round with an onslaught of aggressive punching enthusiastically cheered on by the locals. Unable to sustain the work rate required for such aggressive tactics however, their tempo subsides allowing the Gym boxers to take the initiative in the latter half of the round. Urged by Coach during the one-minute rest interval to, "Keep your hands up and throw lots of straight punches. Whatever you do KEEP

WORKING! [followed by a slap on the back of the legs]”, the Gym boxers see their way through the contest and are awarded decisions primarily on the strength of accurate punches landed. Upon the declaration of the winner both boxers receive rapturous applause and they are presented with a sizeable trophy which they proudly clasp onto as they walk back to the changing room ‘wearing’ marks of battle: grazed shoulders from friction burns courtesy of the ring ropes, slight skin abrasions with a hint of facial bruising and specs of blood on their vests and sorts. Exhilarated by the psychological release of pre-contest nervous tension and physical exhilaration of the contest, they animatedly discuss the merits of their performance while getting changed back into street clothes.

The highlight of the night is the final ‘top of the bill’ bout between two intermediate boxers in their early twenties. The bout is scheduled for four two-minute rounds, the same distance required of elite standard international boxing. The local favourite has a large youthful contingent of fans chanting his name, “B-R-O-D-I-E, B-R-O-D-I-E, B-R-O-D-I-E!” By this stage well inebriated, they crowd around the ring apron ignoring pleas from the officials to, “show some respect for the boxers sake...please a bit of order!” Brodie’s coach has to intervene and implore “he’s going to get disqualified before he gets a chance to show what he can do...its not on lads! Come on now, behave yourselves...and please stand back”. Pacified by the prospect of disqualification of their hero the forty or so fans, much to the amusement of the boxing fraternity, reluctantly retreat back to their seats and continue chanting, “B-R-O-D-I-E, B-R-O-D-I-E, B-R-O-D-I-E!” Both boxers enter the ring accompanied by the Rocky theme once more, with Brodie looking menacing underneath his hooded gown and personalised insignia sewn into his shorts, while his opponent from Birmingham smiles in defiance at the chanting fans and shares a joke with his coach. The contest is evenly matched with bursts of considerable skill and heartfelt endeavour, no doubt heightened by the charged atmosphere, although a few notches below the elite boxers of their age group. Over the course of the contest, Brodie sustains enough of a work rate to be awarded a unanimous points decision. Upon his departure from the ring his ecstatic fans clamber over the seating and the by now forlorn officials, and hoist their hero on their shoulders and parade him around the hall. The chanting resumes, “B-R-O-D-I-E, B-R-O-D-I-E, B-R-O-D-I-E!” as they head towards the exit. This finale rounds of the nights boxing and we head back to Luton with the time well past midnight.

(Adapted field-notes 6/03/2004)

The snapshot above demonstrates how the amateur boxing’s grass-roots tier of social reproduction serves to demarcate aspirant ‘Championships’ calibre boxers from their rather more ‘ordinary’ counterparts (the vast majority). Moreover, by documenting the necessity for reciprocal accommodation between regionally and nationally affiliated amateur boxing practitioners, it became apparent throughout the period of data collection that a core of inner-city based amateur boxing clubs – ‘the elite’ - had the social, political and economic power to provide their cohort of boxers many relatively subtle but nonetheless definitive advantages, enabling them to fully develop their athletic potential. Conversely, the vast majority of ‘one man band’ clubs were necessarily obliged to keep ‘in’ with their more powerful rivals’ offers of reciprocity. Moreover, this nucleus of inner-city based amateur boxing clubs enjoyed

remarkably enduring success in accruing national and international honours for their boxers. If, no doubt, all the boxers who achieved elite status undoubtedly were remarkably dedicated and athletically gifted individuals in their own right, it should also be acknowledged that the cohort of inner city 'elite' boxing clubs benefited from ample human and economic resources at their disposal (such as experienced and knowledgeable coaches, a large supply of boxers at all levels and generous sponsors willing to finance the hosting of and travel to prestigious tournaments). Furthermore, 'the elite' were not only in a position to fully develop the athletic potential of their boxers, but also exercise leverage when negotiating 'suitable' matches for their own boxers in comparison to less powerful and therefore compliant 'one man bands'. Far more subtly, 'the elite' could more readily exercise political and economic leverage when accommodating, directly or indirectly, the welfare of ABAE officials to preside over their own 'shows', or indeed, travel in accompaniment with them to tournaments held throughout England and overseas.

From this vantage of consideration, the talent requisites necessary to succeed in amateur boxing are in complex ways conducive to more than merely the near mythologized 'rough' socialization processes defining the psyche of 'hungry' individuals with thunder in their fists fighting their way out of poverty, or indeed, the 'natural' endowments of individual boxers. Rather, more intricate social-cultural processes are at work through which amateur boxing-practitioners are able to negotiate advantages for themselves albeit, as always, at the expense of others. By equal measure, nonetheless, the grass-roots field of amateur boxing competition (re)produces a symbolic dynamic through which amateur boxers, significant others and spectators enact 'aspirant' interpretative capacities. As will be shown below, amateur boxing-practitioners aspirations are ultimately shaped in and defined through the structure of 'hierarchical performance' (Morgan 1993) competition as organised through the rather more 'formalised' administrative capacities of the Amateur Boxing Association of England. The interplay between the 'informal' and rather more 'formalised', or institutionalised, cultural mores structuring the universe of amateur boxing in England, and the ways this social dynamic serves to (consciously and unconsciously) define 'aspirant' amateur boxers athletic performativities are discussed next.

Formal reality in perspective

Following the analysis of amateur boxing experienced and negotiated as an intra-cultural 'informal' social practice, it is possible to gain understanding of the social dimensions through which Gym-actors adopt and construct a collective sense of identity. More precisely, as is described below, the sense of identity constructed by amateur boxing-practitioners is in direct

consequence of, and often in resistance to, the organisational power exerted by the rather more formalised authority of the Amateur Boxing Association. The following snapshot continues following the Gym-milieu's, along with a vast array of England's amateur boxing clubs, entrance to the leisure centre venue hosting the National Schoolboy Finals:

The Finals

As our group enters the leisure centre, ABAE officials dressed in formal attire greet us. Today's event is the highlight of the competitive season and due to its significance the ABAE 'Gentlemen' are everywhere to be seen, their presence adding an air of pomp and ceremony to this occasion. As well as an efficacious mannerism and smart dress code, striking a sharp contrast with the main body of 'boxing-folk' seeking to enter the arena, a generational gap exists as on the most part the officials look over retirement age. Accompanying the Gentlemen are a team of burly men clad in dark bomber jackets labelled 'event security' keeping a steady eye on proceedings while brandishing talk radios.

With admirable efficiency, while exercising considerable patience due to the crowds of boxing-practitioners impatiently push against each other while queuing to gain entry, the Gentlemen co-ordinate each clubs allocation of passes stipulating only two coaches and the boxers programmed to compete are entitled free entry, while ensuring all other persons paid. At intervals voices are raised protesting the injustice at not allowing prominent individuals connected to a particular club free entry. Several older Gym-members also voiced ire at the prospect of paying to enter, echoing the belief that amateur boxing is not to be run with a profit motive and as a consequence discretion should be exercised for young boxers and their adult guardians who dedicate much of their spare time for no monetary recompense. It is customary practice therefore to sneak in as many of the boxers as possible 'on the blind side' of the officials and security guards attentions and for adults to pose as coaches in a bid to avoid the imposition of paying to enter. Inevitably as the impostors manage to persuade the officials that they are entitled to the allocated a free entry-pass and are ticked off as so on the official registers, the persons who genuinely can gain free access are stopped from doing so. The result is considerable consternation directed toward the demands for payment by the Gentlemen and ensuing ructions directed at the guilty parties from the Gym group itself for being 'done' from our own'! At such instances, it is curtly spelled by the Gentlemen-gatekeepers that only two coaches and boxers competing are entitled free entry, while any other parties have to pay £10 per head for juniors and £15 per head for adults regardless. If anti-authoritarian resistance persists the officials in charge point to the signs prominently displayed throughout the arena (of course this is done under the close scrutiny of the hired muscle waiting in the wings): **Please take note – Boxers and Clubs spectators are warned than any disruptive, violent or abusive behaviour will not be tolerated and will lead to the immediate suspension of the competing boxer from any further part of the competition.**

...Upon entering the arena it is evident the ABAE hosts have coordinated an efficiently run event. The main hall accommodates up to three thousand spectators, with ringside seating positioned on three sides of the ring and a larger stand facing the remaining side. Backstage changing facilities are signposted in accordance to the regional affiliation of boxing clubs and an additional space is cordoned off for 'OFFICIALS USE ONLY'. Here, boxers weigh-in and undertake a medical examination. Also, a catering firm provides buffet dining. If supporters,

coaches and boxers require snacks or light refreshments (there is a ban on alcohol consumption inside the building today), they venture to the canteen at the other side of the arena or the nearby McDonald's (as our group opted for). Before any food can be digested however the weigh-in ritual has to be negotiated...Coach looking decidedly serious instructs Dodger to get ready for 'the scales'. Presiding are four officials surrounded by a cohort of head-men assiduously observing proceedings. Dodger strips out of his clothes and jumps on the digital scales while, in muted silence, all persons anticipate his weight in kilograms to be confirmed. The official in charge reads, "forty-one kilos exactly for Mr [surname]!" and promptly ticks his name of the match-list prompting Coach to hand over Dodger's card to the official. Enquiring if the opposition has 'made weight', Coach is informed that the Nottingham club had yet to be seen in the stadium. Thankful that the Gym has upheld its integrity as far as the necessary procedural formalities are concerned, Coach signals that it is time we find a bite to eat. As I glance at Dodger dressed once again with customary baseball cap in place while tucking into a Mars bar (he has abstained from food and liquids for the best part of the last twenty-four hours in order to make weight) I hear him ask, "how many stones was that dad?" Not knowing the answer Dad-Jim frowns and then yawn before escorting his son out of the arena in search for food...

(Adapted field-notes, March 2004)

As is evident in the description above, Dodger's and significant others agency within the field of amateur boxing competition is unavoidably structured by and through the institutionalised values and organisational procedures as administered by ABAE officials. It is important therefore, to examine how the formalised ideology stipulating value to schoolboy amateur boxing is interpreted and understood from the situated logic and emotive capacities through which boxing-practitioners construct lived meanings of their athletic experiences.

Education and Olympic success: a sustainable reality..?

As the Luton group sat in the main arena waiting expectantly for the Gym starlet to negotiate the final hurdle leading to Championships glory, they flicked through the official programme and by doing so digested the formal ideology informing the institutionalised demeanour of schoolboy amateur boxing in England. The Chairman of Schools ABA, Brian Noblett, states the following:

IT IS WITH MUCH PLEASURE that I welcome competitors, coaches, officials and spectators to the 57th Schools ABA National Boxing Championships Finals...

As I write, the future of these championships is uncertain. The introduction of the World Class "Start" Programme (for elite boxers of school age) and the concomitant expansion of international competition for boxers in this age group (including the Four Nations Championships) mean that various changes to the structure of the "Schools" Championships have been proposed by the ABAE...Meanwhile, the Association has extended its work in bringing boxing back into schools. A colourful and informative pack has been produced and schools up and down the country are showing interest in running courses in recreational (non contact) boxing leading to

the Foundation Award of the Schools' ABA Standards Scheme. Our thanks go to Pro-Am (equipment suppliers) for sponsoring this event...

But for today our attention is focused on the young men who are contesting these Finals. I know that the competition will be fierce, that the joy of winning and disappointment at losing will be as intense as ever, and that the sportsmanship and discipline shown will be exemplary.

The above sentiments informed all those in support of the elite class of schoolboy boxers of the ideology through which amateur boxing is represented to society at large. Two main thrusts are highlighted as the guiding principles for organising the present-day era of schools amateur boxing:

Elite performance - In the first instance, there is an emphasis for nurturing boxers capable of success on the international stage. Accordingly, the newly implemented schedule of elite squad training and a calendar of international competition is outlined in some detail. Such measures are put in place to nurture the performance levels necessary to emulate Audley Harrison's Sydney 2000 gold medal and Amir Khan's Athens 2004 silver medal successes in future Olympic tournaments. Prior to the immanent Beijing 2008 Olympic Games and more significantly the London 2012 Olympic Games, and in direct response to Government rationale for the delivery of sport in society (see DMCS: *Game Plan* 2002), funding opportunities and elite squad training are provided for a select band of amateur boxers identified as possessing the talent requisites necessary to win medals at prestigious international tournaments. It should be noted however, in order to nurture the performance criteria necessary to secure international sporting success extensive support mechanisms are needed that can only be sustained through securing National Lottery funding. In turn, funding is measured and/or restricted in relation to the medal counts (or not) attained in major international tournaments. Thus, if the modern era of amateur boxing heralds opportunities for talented individuals as never before, it should also be acknowledged that 'opportunity' equates with instrumental necessity – namely to 'produce' an elite cadre of world beating amateur boxers. Accordingly, as Ian Irwin the former Performance Director for English amateur boxing states, national and international calibre amateur boxers need apply a truly 'specialist' application to their approach to training: "The days have gone when elite athletes could perform on the world stage through training four nights a week in the local ABA club. Training has to be an obsession and almost a full-time job" (McDonnell 2003). The 'specialist' athletic criteria demanded if success is to be accrued on the international stage of amateur boxing are clearly articulated by knowledgeable journalists Graham Houston and Steve Bunce following the Athens 2004 Olympic Games:

“I quickly realised one thing. If a world-class amateur gets to be five points in front it is almost impossible to beat him. A real science is involved here, which entails a boxer getting in front and then tailoring his boxing strictly to stay ahead. Another thing. Combination punching looks good, but a run of four, five or six punches usually gets only one point in the amateurs. The people tapping the key-pads (can we really call them judges?) can’t keep up with the punches”

Graham Houston (*Boxing Monthly* Oct 2004)

“Boxing at this high level is a very different sport from its bloody cousin, the professional business. The big ring favours smart guys, the scoring favours thinkers and there is little opportunity for raw talent. If you are good you can win a medal – but you have to be very, very good”

Steve Bunce (*Boxing Monthly* Oct 2004)

As the quotes above indicate, the level of performance necessary to secure elite amateur boxing success dictate that modern-day international amateur boxers are supported financially to be able to train full-time and be aided by an array of sport-scientists in order to develop their athletic capabilities to the highest ‘techno-scientific’ specification. Nonetheless, despite the advocacy for full-time specialism in order to attain, or aspire towards, elite status as an amateur boxer, the SABA praises the voluntary endeavours of, “The teachers, clubs, coaches and officials without whom schools’ boxing would not exist”. Equally, amateur boxers are championed for demonstrating the ideals of fair-play and sportsmanship first dreamt up in the public schools of the 19th century. The relation, however, between specialist application in order to achieve podium success on the international stage of competition and a grass-roots club infrastructure sustained through a remarkably dedicated army of adult volunteers remains hazy. So too is the co-existence between a cadre of funded ‘elite’ international standard boxers and the social significance of grass-roots amateur boxing competition for ‘the rest’. Also puzzling is the ‘working’ relationship sanctioned by the ABAE with the British Boxing Board of Control (the organising body of professional boxing in England) and professional boxing promoter Frank Warren who sponsored this tournament. The clear indication is that, to all intents and purposes, amateur-recreational boxing is directly associated with, or placed in the shadow of, the professional code despite being rooted in idealisms distinct from, or even oppositional to, a commercial-instrumental regard for the practice of sport³⁶. From this standpoint the prevailing symbolism of sporting elitism, whether Olympic or professional, legitimises the athletic ethos of contemporary schoolboy amateur boxing. Perhaps more importantly, the ideological premise through which amateur boxing is facilitated at the grass-

³⁶ Boxing equipment and clothing merchandisers also sponsored of the Schools Finals and marketed their goods in full page advertisements and in several stands dotted around the main arena. The images of top professional boxers to promote their merchandise further blurred the association between amateur idealism and practice.

roots tier of social (re)production increasingly signifies value orientations other than those premised on intrinsic self-development through the *socialising* properties of the sport itself.

Amateur boxing and education – Another initiative forwarded by the SABA is concerned with the function of amateur boxing as a component of schools PE curricula and further education achievement. Under the headline ‘Time to bring it back into schools’ the SABA dedicate 4 pages out of the 16 of the programme to this subject. The following reasons are offered as to why amateur boxing is considered worthy for inclusion in school PE curricula:

- Students enjoy it;
- It can be taught at a purely recreational (non contact) level;
- It is safe and encourages physical fitness and a healthy lifestyle;
- It provides a constructive, disciplined outlet for aggression and high spirits;
- It widens choice for students, is cheap to run and has minimal space and equipment requirements;
- It aids character and personal development;
- It can make a significant contribution to the reduction of violence, bullying and fighting within schools;

To the rear of the arena a promotional stand featured information on the initiatives of the Hopwood Hall Boxing Academy, one of three such academies newly formed with the intent of attracting youngsters with a boxing interest into the vocational curriculum of Further Education. The rationale for combining amateur boxing with academic and vocational qualifications is stated thus:

“The sport of Amateur Boxing promotes health, discipline, self esteem and develops today’s youths into mature respectful members of the community. Academy students from Hopwood Hall College have been successful in their sport and vocational studies over the past two academic terms. The academy ethos offers the unique opportunity to allow young people to fulfil their academic/vocational and sporting potential at the same time”.

Hopwood Academy Prospectus 2003 – 2004

As I sat in the arena contemplating the merits of such initiatives, I could not help but wonder what Dodger would make of such an opportunity if, in fact, he could read it. More to the point, there was an irony to the very title of this competition being presented under the banner of ‘Schools’ for the likes of Dodger. While a perusal of the official match list classified the majority of boxers as belonging to their boxing club and school, Dodger came under the schooling categorisation of ‘Home Tuition’, which in his case meant he worked full-time alongside his father collecting scrap metal and never received academic tuition. In this Schoolboy Finals competition the categorisation of ‘Home Tuition’ applied to in excess of

25% of the number of competing boxers. For Dodger, and no doubt the vast majority of boxers of Romany-Gypsy ethnic identity or else, the label of 'Home Tuition' indicated a much disadvantaged social identity and (self)exclusion from the education system. Moreover, the contradiction when seeking to promote the social significance of amateur boxing as a sporting mechanism geared towards enhancing the all-round (including academic) development of young men is clearly apparent. On the other hand, the argument can also be made that in the era of New Labour's advocacy for sport as a means to foster social inclusion, amateur boxing can justifiably be heralded for its inclusiveness.

Irrespective of the apparent contradictions inherent, the elite stage of competition and the ideals disseminated clearly serves to inspire, if not always inform, schoolboy amateur boxers. The following sections of this chapter illustrates how the, often tense, social interactions between informal-practitioners and formal-administrators serve to structure and define the symbolic dimensions through which aspirant boxers construct athletic identities and, in turn, enact the phenomenological 'reality' of 'Championships' boxing.

Disciplining the individual...controlling the group

For Gym boxers with the requisites to achieve a standard of performance necessary to compete in regional and national Championships tournaments it was apparent that, while training alongside 'ordinary' Gym-boxers, they had developed a rather more ascetically minded approach to boxing as an amateur-recreational experience. As they climbed the performance gradient, whether they realised it or not, they internalised habits or 'regimes of truth' (Chapman 1997) that served to distance them in subtle, yet definitive, terms from fellow Gym-boxers. As has been documented above, these subtle yet definitive processes of demarcation were apparent by simply observing 'quality' boxers train and compete. Nonetheless, when probing Dodger for his thoughts the week after triumphing at the National Schools Championships, it was evident that he struggled to articulate with any sense of exactitude the experiential and symbolic dimensions through which he allotted value to his elite achievement:

[Q] – What got you buzzing the most last Saturday Dodge?

“I liked it all really Alex...I just like all of it...I liked the winning...I don't know really...[shrugs and continuous shadowboxing]”.

As if embarrassed by his inability to express his thoughts, he focused on letting flurries of compact punches fly at all angles, his verbal expression contrasting with the vivid 'language' articulated as he assiduously studied his actions in the mirror. Undoubtedly his cultural background, age and perhaps personal codes of inclining toward trust or non-trust towards me

may have influenced his response. Perhaps also it was the frustration experienced by athletes in general, as Gutmann (1978) asserts, "...to communicate what is, of course, essentially incommunicable – the joy of physical action" (p. 78). If verbal expressivities fail to adequately capture the essence of elite calibre boxing there is also, as Wacquant (1995) argues, a sacrificial dimension through which boxers ascribe meaning and value to boxing that exceeds their everyday discursive realms. Moreover, Wacquant argues that the boxers in his study chose to interpret the highly regimented asceticism of their profession as a sacrificial quest enabling them to transcend the material constraints and multiple social deprivations of their ghettoised life-circumstances.

Nonetheless, despite often articulating similar sentiments of sacrificial endeavour, Gym amateur boxers interpretative capacities are as much structured through the institutional provision of amateur boxing as by the immediacy of the physical environment in which they practice amateur boxing. Accordingly, the historically situated idealisms underpinning amateurism in the practice of amateur boxing in England, by way of the organisational impetus of the ABAE, are situated in the lived meanings constructed by present day amateur boxers. A vivid example of the dynamic nature through which "...the subtle and delicate dialectical interplay between ideal and actuality" (Morgan 1993 p. 470) serves to shape and define the symbolic and phenomenological reality of '*quality*' amateur boxers is the sacrifice called upon to '*make weight*'.

Sacrifice and you will succeed

Weight control through dieting and, at times drastic, fluid reduction is a normalised practice for boxers wishing to compete successfully at Championships level amateur boxing. The normalisation of weight management, as well as peak fitness, is made explicit by simply observing the hollow cheeked appearance typical among high-calibre boxers of all ages. The maxim for 'aspirant' contenders is to be as light as possible while aiming to attain full strength and energy levels to perform at peak intensity and, crucially, not be disadvantaged by physically bigger and stronger opponents³⁷. Thus, it is not unusual for boxers (as is common practice among Gym-boxers) to closely monitor their weight throughout the competitive season and '*dry-out*', or consume minimal liquids and eat next to no food anywhere up to twenty-four hours, prior the official weigh-in protocol of a Championships competition. The desired aim is to sustain the lightest weight possible up until the official weigh-in and thereafter replenish much needed liquids and energy stores in preparation for the upcoming contest. The disciplinarian ethic exercised for making-weight is made clearer when

³⁷At the Championships level of performance anything over a two-kilo differential is considered excessive disparity between otherwise evenly skilled boxers.

considering it is usual among boxing-practitioners to make reference to '*walk about*' weight prior a major competition. This is the normal (i.e. healthy) body weight for physically powerful athletes, often as much as two or three weight divisions (5-10 kilos) above '*fighting-weight*'.

Although none of the Gym-boxers talked of the discipline of making-weight in terms of ethics, it is clear the continuous monitoring of body weight and ensuing practice of abstinence was unquestioningly thought of as necessary to attain a competitive edge. In this sense, the practice of 'weight management' (see Hughes and Coakley 1991; Johns 1998) was internalised as the criteria defining what it means to be a 'real' boxer. Moreover, the ritual of making-weight symbolised the moral veracity of the boxer and the competence of those responsible for him to succeed during competition. Accordingly, as much as the ABAE stipulates rules and regulations to safeguard against the obvious dangers of dehydration prior to competition, it was a common occurrence for amateur boxing-practitioners to perceive official convention as an obstacle that needed to be negotiated as and how possible. All too often therefore, the nature of boxing-practitioners negotiation symbolised an act of resistance as opposed to a 'rational' estimation of the boxer's health and safety as regards to, and in conjunction with, his/er athletic development. The processes through which the practice of making weight signifies an act of resistance are discussed next.

The contested logic of sacrifice

At all amateur boxing tournaments the weigh-in ritual was a symbolically laden affair not only for the boxers, but also the significant others responsible for them and the ABAE officials presiding as guardians of health and safety. In the first instance, amateur boxers compete in the name of the amateur boxing club they represent. As such, the ability of the boxer to make weight at the limit stipulated by his weight classification is a sign of competence that is registered both internally to the boxer and verifies the know-how of those in charge of him. Equally, the ABAE officials act as enforcers of health, safety and fair competition by adhering to strict guidelines regarding weight classifications. If a boxer's weight is more than the maximum allowed when recorded under official jurisdiction he is automatically eliminated from the tournament. Well aware of the strict adherence to the rule book, it is not unusual for coaches to conduct sneak weight checks in discreet corners of the arena. If a boxer is overweight³⁸ he can be seen jogging around the car park clad in several layers of clothing and plastic bin-lining on his bare skin, or skipping next to steamy changing room showers with the hot water on full blast in order to '*sweat-out*' as much weight as required. A more bizarre

³⁸ There were boxers in this predicament at virtually every Championships tournament observed during the data collection period of this study.

ritual is the practice of boxers standing on their head for several minutes then jumping on the scales for as much time as it takes a reading of the weight. The belief is it is possible to weigh a couple of pounds lighter for a matter of a few seconds. While doubts arise as to the scientific validity of this practice the point is many boxers have resorted to trying it.

It is evident, therefore, that the informal/formal social dynamic through which boxers enact the practice of making weight is not only pivotal in defining the athletic subjectivities and moral coda constructed by Championships calibre amateur boxers, it also signifies a masculine rite of passage reflexively resistant to the authority upholding health and safety criteria. The connections between the body, power and social management and the ways this social nexus shapes amateur boxers constructed subjectivities (see Foucault 1979; Maguire 2002) is described in the following ‘*making weight*’ episode during a Juniors Championships competition held in 2003:

Wanting ‘it’

Representing the Gym at this quarter-final stage is Naz, a clean cut sixteen years old boxer of British Asian ethnicity and a “*stylish little boxer*”. The only people accompanying Naz today are Coach, his wife Kate and myself. This is the first foray into the Championships for young Naz and although at an advanced stage of this competition he has yet to compete, as no opponent his diminutive size entered the regional and area prelims. Upon our arrival at the venue, Coach instructs Naz to “*get changed and get the weigh-in over and done with*” before shooting off to see if he can garner information on his opponent. Naz duly does as instructed and proceeds to jump on the scales under the jurisdiction of ABAE officials. He is announced as one and a half kilos overweight and is curtly informed that he is disqualified from the competition. Upon locating Coach he sheepishly passes on the news...

Despite it being Naz’s first attempt at weight-management, Coach is visibly angered and rebukes him for relinquishing his responsibilities and as a consequence “*messing me and everyone else at the club around!*” He calms down enough to instruct the by now forlorn Naz to find a quiet corner where ‘*you can to skip it of*’ (vigorously skip wearing plastic bin lining on his bare skin while clad in as many layers of clothing as possible until the exertion has rid the excess weight in sweat). Coach then attempts to convince the officials that in fact Naz, due to his inexperience, had weighed-in wearing shorts and groin protector and is therefore understandably overweight. This protestation is rejected from the representative official of the London region, the same region as Naz’s opponent. Despite Coach’s lengthy and forceful argument that “*my boy has worked bloody hard all year for this and he has done everything right to be the best he could be for this opportunity*”, the rules stating the consequences for failing to make weight are equally forcefully pointed out and the matter is closed.

A disgruntled Coach expresses to me his dismay at the ABAE officials ignorance of the realities of boxing, “*they have not got a clue Alex, never put a pair of gloves on in their lives so how can they tell me what is right for the boy and what he wants or doesn’t? Yet they sit behind their desks and bla, bla this and bla, bla that* [waving his arm dismissively]...” He then corners Naz and yet again reprimands him, insisting that his lack of discipline has left

everyone at the club, his family and, most importantly, himself down...Shaking his head in dismay Coach grumpily joins Kate at ringside to watch the show. A bemused Naz simply shrugs his shoulders and partly in disappointment and partly in relief (I suspect) that he does not have to negotiate his nerves any longer, retreats to a corner of the arena and watches the ensuing action...

[An interesting side note is that upon being further rebuked by Coach on the journey home for “missing an opportunity most boys would give their right arm for yet you just don’t seem to want it enough!” and that his idleness had resulted in Coach wasting time, effort and money in arranging transport, missing work and making necessary phone calls so as to glean information on his opponent, prompted Naz to arrive at the Gym with a card of apology for Coach. Naz competed in next season’s Junior Championships managing a national semi-final appearance that resulted in an invitation to train with the England national squad. He did not attend however and does not box anymore].

(Adapted field-notes February 2003)

As Naz was to discover, the Championships stage of competition requires the boxer to exhibit a strong sense of self-reliance perhaps to the point of being selfish. There is no team play when competing in the ring as such, as boxers are expected to be solely responsible for their own training habits, and likewise, their performance during competition is a direct consequence of their self-worth. If he gets tired it is because he has been lax *‘on doing it the right way in the gym’*, if he gets *‘caught’* by a hurtful punch *‘your forgetting about your defence son’*, if failing to make weight *‘your lazy and a disgrace’*. Although such demands are up to a point successfully negotiated by all those who attain the status of ‘real’ boxers, the mark of the Championships boxer is the ability to successfully adopt or submit to, in Foucauldian (1979) terminology, the normalised processes of disciplinary regimes such as the practices and expectations of making-weight (see Chapman 1997). Thus, albeit constructing aspirant individualist values orientations, real amateur boxers wilful submission to the sacrifice of making-weight subordinates their athletic identities and actions in an informal (as in the relation between Coach and Naz) and formal (as in the relation between Coach and the ABA officials) nexus of, necessarily self-indulgent, power laden social interactions.

It should be noted, however, as much as the disciplining practice of making-weight is forcefully, or at least expectantly, stressed upon the likes of young Naz, it is important to acknowledge that any coded form of physical culture and its effects on athlete’s subjectivity is not wholly determined by, and thus functional to, disciplinary agencies alone. Foucault’s later work suggests such practices have the capacity to enable individuals to understand and/or transform their subjectivities. For Foucault this negotiation can be interpreted as a “technology of the self” allowing an individual to:

“...effect, by their own means or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and a way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality”.

(in Maguire 2002 p. 302)

From this standpoint it is possible, via displays of fortitude and the sheer capacity to aspire and enjoy the challenge of training and competition, for the boxer to develop his body and mind in an empowering and enlightening way. According to this line of argument, therefore, the challenges set by boxing contests (that includes the sacrifice of making weight) have the potential for physical, psychological and spiritual emancipation. Within the array of social control mechanisms therefore, there are always possibilities for, and outcomes of, regulation *and* autonomy. That said, it is clear the *raison d'être* of '*making weight*' and much of the reason amateur boxing as a social practice among the Gym-milieu is bound as a cohesive social apparatus in the first place, lay in boxing-practitioners cultivation of an 'aspirant' ethos to attain success within the structure of competition available to them. Furthermore, it is thus evident that the social context through which amateur boxers aspire to attain hierarchical performance principles is laden with the canons and customs of institutionally regulated sporting competition. So, whether boxers adopted the training habits of a recreational, grass roots or Championships performer, it is important to reiterate they all unquestioningly aspired to become '*the winner*', or once felt it to be beyond their capabilities, implicitly recognised the achievements of their 'betters'. The self-worth of any boxer therefore, is not only proven and tested on the institutionalised stage of competition but also bound to it. In short, it is important to acknowledge that wherever there is freedom there are relations of power and as such practices of freedom are always based on the models made available by one's culture or society (see Chapman 1997). The web of power relations through which, directly or indirectly, boxing-practitioners construct 'aspirant' sensibilities are examined next by once again evoking young Dodger's quest to become Schoolboy National champion.

Symbolic capital in context: living the dream

As Dodger sat among his family and team-mates quietly observing the programme of bouts contested before us, he nervously contemplated his turn centre stage. If outwardly he looked rather sedate, inwardly his emotions worked overtime as he battled to channel his psychic energy into the focused determination required to uphold the resolve required to be 'the winner'. As much as this ensuing battle was innately personal, he nonetheless sought to fortify his resolve by drawing upon the most familiar sources of 'role-support' (Cortese 1994) available to him; the patriarchal authority of Dad-Jim, the Uncle-like mentorship of Coach, his

stature among the less accomplished Gym-boxers and the totality of his cultural capital garnered from his status as a *'quality'* amateur boxer.

Also animating his emotional turmoil was a tangible, if barely recognisable, awareness that his self-concept as 'the boxer' bore interdependency with the 'oppositional' demeanours of ABAE officialdom and the rather more 'exotically' (self)aggrandized expectations of the audience. For however much he has learned to discipline his mind and body in a bid to negotiate the authoritative 'rule book' administered by the ABAE, and has distanced the phenomenological entity of boxing from the vicarious and often biased expectations of audiences, his athletic performativity resonated those same institutionalised and populist power laden norms of validation. As such his family, fellow Gym-boxers, the demeanour of ABAE officials, the audience, the 'mytho-popular' representations of boxing and even the abstracted voice of those refuting the (un)civil status of boxing, defined and re-defined the lived parameters through which Dodger constructed the meanings and actions validating his athletic identity.

The role-support extended by family, gymnasium community and the audience conjures a social dynamic that is worth placing in the context of previous year's Championships campaigns. The journey in reaching this year's *'Finals'* preceded two unsuccessful attempts at a preliminary stage of the same tournament the years previous. Despite heavily favoured to win by those around him, on each occasion Dodger was narrowly defeated by the same opponent. Both *'robbery'* decisions enticed the wrath of Dad-Jim and Coach, with large sections of the audience vociferously making their disapproval known³⁹. While Coach voiced his roth by threatening to submit an official letter of complaint to the ABAE demonstrating against the biased ineptitude of the officials in charge, Dad-Jim was unable to contain his anger and on the second *'robbery'* decision had to be restrained from assaulting the officials! So this competition represented a big opportunity to perform on the bigger stage for Dodger having finally *'got a just run'* on the back of two years of personal disappointment. With such recent history in the back of his mind Dodger prepared to face the biggest challenge of his boxing career...

The often used analogy by the boxing fraternity when describing the sensation of entering a boxing ring as *'the loneliest place on the planet'*, indicates well the induced nerves experienced by boxers as they contemplate their turn centre stage during the hours or days (for some weeks) before a contest. The wait pre-contest is an animated roller coaster of emotion awash with fear, anxiety, anticipation, excitement, self-doubt, oscillating with bursts

³⁹ One member of the audience, unknown to Dodger and family, offered a sum of money to charity if the MC made a public proclamation of the *'robbery'* decision. The MC promptly obliged.

of confidence...and more of the same. As Cus D'Amato the coach accredited with nurturing Mike Tyson to become the youngest, and one of the most destructive, heavyweight champion in history remarked, "Every fighter ever lived had fear...The fighter that's gone into the ring and hasn't experienced fear is either a liar or a psychopath" (cited in Heller 1995 p. 60). It is important to stress, nonetheless, that fear should not be confused as a wholly negative consequence of an undesirable ordeal. Fear and the adrenaline it generates must be negotiated and for anyone seated ringside at any boxing tournament they cannot but feel the palpable sense of excitement in the air induced by the bravado of boxers as they climb through the ropes. The intensity that boxing competition generates is clearly infectious and the boxers, particularly those competing on the elite stage, relish the challenge...

Likewise, it must be stressed that amateur boxing in its competitive guise sets a stern and lonely challenge, particularly for adolescent schoolboys, to engage in. The individualistic nature of boxing competition dictates there is no one to support you if you happen to be off-form. You cannot rest when you are tired and you have to face your opponent for the last and deciding round. You cannot instruct the referee of your discomfort following a punch to the solar-plexus and the induced lack of oxygen has left all faculties in your arms and legs drained to incapacity for a few precious seconds, not unless you wish to quit in public that is. A boxing ring represents a stage very much under public scrutiny, asking the boxer to be simultaneously 'pumped' to the point of hostile aggression yet sufficiently in control of his actions. As he enters the ring, albeit in direct confrontation with a foe, he must avoid submitting to the panoply of adrenaline induced emotion animating his being. Failure to find the balance between heightened physical and psychological arousal, yet concentrated awareness, results in wasting precious energy reserves and undermines the requisite focus to enable the, near instinctive, virtuosity to execute the fluid motion and split second timing necessary to successfully execute the repertoire of boxing skills during competition. The maxim for all boxers therefore, is to remain cool and calculating under pressure before and during a contest. This is a special kind of 'cool' however...

Performing on an elevated and very public ring-stage, charged with the nervous tension of adrenaline induced excitement and with energy levels depleting rapidly in an athletic challenge requiring a cardiovascular output of a four-hundred metre sprinter for each round contested (Jordan 1993), does not allow for anything more than explosive-like action⁴⁰. Conversely, the ability to perform during contest conditions is only made possible and thereafter only improved upon after countless hours over many years spent in the gymnasium. There is much

⁴⁰ This is particularly true in amateur boxing where contests are of a shorter duration and therefore require fast, sprint-like, exertions.

at stake therefore when competing in Championships contests, not least the immediacy of self-preservation and all the years of sacrifice merging into an 'explosive' time frame of a few minutes of highly charged competition. The following descriptive snapshot seeks to evoke the sense of heightened anticipation prior to Dodger's *'Finals'* challenge. By gaining a sense of the pent-up emotion experienced by those identifying with Dodger's performance from a rather more peripheral and wholly symbolic, yet no less power-laden, vantage of intent it is possible to gain a sense of the clearly tangible, yet 'hidden', forces through which Dodger constructs the athletic performativity of a *'quality'* amateur boxer:

Rising above the crowd

As Dodger readies himself for the upcoming contest and looks towards the empty ring, soon also to focus the attentions of the crowds rapidly filling the three-thousand seat arena, he knows that oncoming success or failure will be publicly put on show. Taking their place toward the front of the arena, the Gym contingent keenly anticipates his bout. Michael, Dean, Aaron and Kenny have also entered these same Championships and all have been eliminated at the regional stages. Even though the cohort of Gym-boxers seem at ease from their rather side-lined vantages, they are nonetheless embroiled in the atmosphere and are particularly keen to observe the cream of boxers competing in their age group. As the programme of contests unfolds there is much talk of the worth of prominent boxers some of whom are seasoned internationals. On several occasions I move from my seat to make a point of a particular technique executed by the boxers 'on show'. The youngsters take stock of my comments, praising the performance of 'a good boy'. Equally so, liberal doses of 'banter' are levelled at the skills put on display before us with exaggerated displays of bravado, by way of mockery, voiced at the shortcomings of those competing from our group of up-and-comers. It is evident that the presence of their more accomplished team-mate in today's Finals signifies a yardstick for them to judge their own capabilities and also furnish their personal ambitions. As such, however much support is extended toward the Gym starlet, there are also self-interested motives at work. Indeed, the individualistic ethos of boxing encourages such comparison and as the programme of bouts gets underway it is evident the Gym-collective, although sitting in the same section of ringside seats, are comprised of distinct sub-groups. One section is Dad-Jim and family, Dean and Dad-Bob are (as usual) quietly conversing in hushed tones with one another, Coach cuts an isolated and tense looking figure while keeping 'an eye on things'. Of course, I'm also engrossed with my self-interested role as 'the participant observer'.

As the bouts get underway a constancy of many spectators in the arena is to avert their attention away from the action taking place in the ring in order to scrutinise the many 'faces' seated ringside. The resulting ambience reverberating in the arena is of a vivid 'us watching them...them watching us' dynamic. It seems, in what is very much a citadel of past, present and future (or might-have-been, wannabe or dreaming-of-becoming) fighting identities, particularly expressive hyper-masculine role-enactments are (self)represented for public consumption. Such like modes of masculine (self)presentation are further heightened when large groups of fans supporting a boxer due to occupy centre stage take residence as close to the ring apron as they can, thus obscuring the view of those of us seated immediately behind them. The resulting consternation from a group of spectators seated next to our cohort force

the security guards to 'have a word' with the guilty parties. After an initially tense stand-off, a compromise is reached whereby the fans move into the aisles instead of directly in front of us. The fans quickly redeem their animated postures however, displaying heightened arousal verging on hostility at the immediacy of masculine pride at stake, often a family concern with grandfathers, fathers, uncles, siblings and cousins eagerly supporting 'our boy' in action. The ambience in the hall in these instances becomes increasingly vociferous, with a feel of territorialism ebbing in tune with, or aiding, the action within the ring. Nonetheless, although it is clear that the fans enthusiasm is tinged with an aggressive demeanour, seemingly ebbing and flowing with the drama of ring bound competition, the end of each round instantly suspends emotions. Accordingly, the one-minute intervals between each round contested marks an instantaneous lull in tension as etiquettes of censure between opposing fans preside almost in reverence for the antagonistic yet fair frame of 'honest' ring bound competition.

That said, the comparison of such groups aggressively chanting encouragement contrast sharply with the rather more sombre demeanour of the majority in attendance need be stated. For the majority in attendance, the dimensions of emotionality animating the sense of spectator-excitement is laced with a sense of club and family pride at the magnitude of accomplishment reached by the boxers competing. The main body of the audience remains well behaved, good-natured and wholly interested in the athletic codes of the ring. As such all contests are enthusiastically supported for their skilful endeavour and it is customary for defeated 'second best' boxers to be granted a prolonged round of applause. Nonetheless, as groups of fans decide to stand as close to the ring as possible and consequently block our vision, it is difficult not to feel tense as a palpable sense of hostility reverberates throughout the arena...

Suddenly, as if confirming my rising irritability at having my view of the ring blocked once again, a noise erupts in the main stand as up to one-hundred men from presumably two rival parties scramble over on another in a bid to settle matters outside the arena. This causes a curious scenario whereby all focus is on a crowd of burly drunken youths and men, some of middle-age, falling over one another in order to prove themselves in something resembling schoolyard fisticuffs, or as Coach deridingly comments "looks like handbags..." At the same instance two athletic youngsters compete for the prestige of national recognition in the 'Noble Art' completely unnoticed! In the midst of all this excitement the clock ticks by and it is soon time to escort Dodger to the changing room in order to prepare for his upcoming bout...

(Field-notes [amended], March 2004)

As was discussed at the beginning of this study, Dodger gained that all-important victory and in no time his success was eulogised via proclamations of him as the next star of boxing to hail from Luton in the town's weekly newspaper. Even at this early stage of his adolescent athletic career, his name was being paired with the likes of Billy Schwer the most renowned boxer hailing from Luton to have '*made it*' as a world champion on the professional circuit. Of course before Dodger can get anywhere near emulating the multi-titled successes of his famed role model, he will have many trials to negotiate and hurdles to clear before being able to walk in the footsteps he is being groomed to follow...

The lure of making 'it': crossing over to the 'pro' game



As Dodger develops maturity and continuous to accrue ring experience he is widely recognised as '*one for the future*', by the gatekeepers of amateur boxing's World-Class Elite and also the brokers of the professional boxing universe. He has to prove himself first, however, by competing against the equally

aspirant cohorts of '*quality boys*' from every region of the country. His ambitions will be focused on the upcoming amateur boxing Championships competitions at youth and then, by the age of nineteen, senior level. At senior level of competition he will be just one among all the other multi-titled ex-schoolboy, junior and youth champions seeking national prominence. He will also face competition from physically mature men (whether talented boxers or not) as opposed to boys or youths the same age as him. In short, punches carry a more devastating effect with 'hurt', physical 'wear and tear' and on occasion concussion becoming part and parcel of the reality of senior amateur boxing competition. Also, as he nears early adulthood he will no doubt be tempted by the allure of options offered by the ever-burgeoning pub and club night-time economy and other culturally defined rights of manhood (such as getting married, raising a family and paying the bills). As a product of his socialisation, therefore, he will (or not) choose to define his identity in a way that increasingly corresponds with the sacrificial challenges befitting his stature as an aspirant '*quality*' boxer.

This is the contextual foreground that makes ABAE senior Championships success such a sought-after accolade among English amateur boxers throughout its long history. The intensity of competition mimics, and often exceeds, the demands set of 'ordinary' professional boxing contests. As much as amateur boxing competition intensifies however, the road to actualising the symbolic profits on offer - i.e. claiming an England 'vest' on the elite stage of international amateur boxing competition, remains necessarily out of reach of the vast majority of, by this stage, fully fledged and fully committed 'aspirant individualist' amateur boxers. More than likely a modicum of success on the regional stages of Championships competition is met with '*near misses*', '*should have's*', '*could have's*', or '*we got robbed... again!*'. At this juncture for the driven, athletically gifted and achievement

orientated '*quality*' amateur boxer the professional code of boxing, partly through necessity, becomes all the more alluring.

For aspirant amateur boxers just like Dodger, therefore, the constant imagery of the media staged universe of professional boxing serves to symbolically validate their aspirant individualist consciousness. As much as the amateur and professional boxing are clearly inter-related however, they are fundamentally distinctive athletic codes practiced in (on the whole) segregated social universes. Crossing this divide for aspirant amateur boxers like Dodger with the intent of punching for pay, therefore, necessitates embarking on a journey that will ask of them to leave behind the values and social relations defining their behavioural orientations and constructed athletic identities. The professional code of boxing in England - '*the pro game*' - is investigated next.

'Pro' boxing in England

“Boxing has a smell coming off it, and a feel, that the camera is not designed to detect. Unless you have boxed, or at least watched from ringside, it is hard to glean a true picture of what happens in there: the taste and sometimes the stink of sweat, snot and blood as bodies clash and clinch; the excruciating thud of a hook to liver, the sharper shock of a fist or head in the mouth or nose, the momentary haze from being caught on the side of the jaw, the exhaustion, the concentration and the exhilaration of getting it all to flow just right. There’s nothing more intense for the participants in the mainstream sporting world”.

Gavin Evans (1996)

The above is a rich evocation of a professional boxing context whereby the lived actualities ‘felt’ by boxers, and to a lesser extent a paying public wishing to be enthralled by the action unfolding before them at ringside, are seen to be sanitised by the mediums of technology through which the athletic practice of boxing is packaged and sold as a ‘spectacular’ (Shipley 1989) form of popular cultural entertainment. As has already been stated at the introduction of this chapter, ethnographic studies to date theorises the social significance and thus inherently violent actualities of boxing as a cultural manifestation of impoverished, criminogenic, racially and ethno-religiously divided neighbourhoods in the US and Northern Ireland (see Sugden 1996; Wacquant 2004).

For Woodward (2007), however, the anomaly of the enduring appeal of such an overtly dangerous and often bloody entertainment spectacle, when contrasted to the progressively ‘civilised’ standards deemed acceptable in late-modernity, can be explained because boxing, more than most sports, “...carries the *promise* of risk” (p. 2 emphasis added). For Woodward, therefore, the (predominantly male) social actors who are drawn to the sport of boxing, either as practitioners or fans, do so through conscious/unconscious processes of identification through which they strive to establish a secure, albeit risky, sense of ‘traditional’ masculinity in an increasingly fluid socio-cultural landscape. Thus, the culture of boxing is (re)produced as much through the power of representation and fantasy as through embodied and socio-structurally circumscribed agency. According to Woodward (2007 p. 4) the study of boxing demands an approach acknowledging the synthesis between spectacular public narratives and more localised symbolic attachments and personalised psychic and embodied investments:

“Thus the sport brings together the routine of the gym and the spectacle of public contest; it combines everyday embodied practice and public stories of celebrity, heroism and anti-heroism. Boxing combines the embodied practices and the daily physical grind of training with aspirations that are forged in particular economic and social circumstances and the aspirations which recruit boxers are firmly grounded in a material and social reality of social, economic and cultural disadvantage”

While acknowledging previous scholarship of boxing and society, the scope of this research agenda is to seek to further our understanding of the relationships between boxers' identities and the cultural production of professional boxing in England by more fully examining the social processes through which boxing-practitioners construct identities and strive to negotiate athletic careers. Importantly, it has been demonstrated that in order to more fully comprehend professional boxing-practitioners interpretative capacities key sociological dimensions of agency, resistance and power are brought to the fore as a direct consequence of their socialisation into and through the 'institutionalised' field of amateur boxing. With this analytical emphasis in mind, the literature reveals how those responsible for the 'sportinisation' (Sugden 1996) of professional boxing adopted the same Queensberry Rules as the amateur code. Since the early 20th century the British Boxing Board of Control (BBBC) has acted in a voluntary capacity to uphold the professional standards for professional boxing to be deemed a morally appropriate and legally sanctioned form of athletic competition (Shipley 1989).

Declaring its main *raison d'être* the medical protection of all professional boxers competing on British shores, the BBBC also acts as an advisory and regulative body in the contractual negotiations between boxers, trainers, managers, promoters, agents, matchmakers and referees, as well as (albeit in a reduced capacity) media agencies such as Sky, Eurosport and HBO that, to all intents and purposes, harness the commercial potential of 'big time' boxing. The commercial logic through which professional boxers are obliged to seek out material and symbolic rewards is clearly stated on the governing body's official web site and via direct correspondence to those wishing to apply for a professional boxer's licence:

'A career as a professional boxer

'Professional boxing is a hard, demanding sport and like so many other areas of activity or sport in which young men like to participate there is a degree of risk. The rules of the British Boxing Board of Control governing the licensing of all professional boxers are designed to minimise such risk and to ensure that boxers are fully prepared fit and properly matched to enjoy a rewarding career with some financial benefit. Many young people may be attracted to the sport by the lure of big money and it must be realised from the outset that very few boxers make it to the very top. For most boxers their ring earnings will act as a boost to their ordinary earnings and all potential boxers are therefore advised to ensure that they have a good regular income which they can maintain during their boxing career. A sympathetic and understanding employer is always an asset...Despite the demands and risks of the sport, boxing can offer so much to young men, not only financially but also for the forgoing friendships which will last a lifetime and the making of important contacts which may be of considerable value once their boxing career is over. Professional boxing is a career not to be embarked upon lightly but for the dedicated, determined and fit young man it may offer an area of opportunity in times where there may be very few other around'

(<http://www.bbbofc.com>; internal correspondence).

The above correspondence illustrates a level of transparency when stating that professional boxing can be a risky activity with the likelihood of financial gain, although declared beneficial, put into sensible context. Equally so, nonetheless, the institutionalised credo of the BBBC appeals to the logic of free market enterprise that, it is suggested, is best suited to the essential competitive nature of modern sports by enabling individuals the material means to develop their athletic capabilities towards excellence or any other level of performance. Thus, by appealing to the ethics of libertarianism the BBBC implies that professionalism in boxing can with some justification be deemed morally superior to its amateur counterpart (Morgan 1993)⁴¹. What is not made nearly as transparent, however, are ‘the ramifying webs of history, power and action’ (Wacquant 2005b) serving to define the cultural values through which professional boxers interpret and embody performative and life sustaining modes of ‘lived’ behaviour and action. One immediate illustration of the rather more hidden power dimensions serving to impose strictures upon a boxers’ agency can be gleaned from the contract s/he is obliged to sign in order to compete under the legally sanctioned aegis of the BBBC. Several clauses clearly illustrate an unequal distribution of power sustaining the contractual bind between boxer and manager:

Approved Boxer/Manger Agreement

To be granted a licence a boxer **must** sign with a licensed manager (clause 2)

To become self-managed a boxer **must** hold a licence in another capacity for a year

The manager is entitled to 25% of the boxer’s earnings (clause 10.2 iii)

(Internal correspondence; emphasis added)

It seems also that the professional code of boxing persists in retaining strong symbolic resonance with the ‘Manly Art’ of fist-fighting, an athletic challenge that perhaps above all else signified a feat of cunning, strength and endurance – the ‘bulldog spirit’ (Gorn 1986). As Brailsford (1988) states, the version of the Rules applied to regulate professional boxing only became formulated after a reluctant refinement of the traditions of bare-knuckle pugilism. One such immediately discernable ramification is that professional boxers compete over a maximum of twelve rounds of three minutes duration per round, whereas amateur boxers compete for four rounds of two minutes duration per round at national/international level. In a bid to further tease out a more detailed and intricate examination of the synthesis between structure, consciousness and action defining the agential capacities of boxers who have

⁴¹ Morgan identifies six senses or ideas of professionalism – the economic sense, the occupational sense, the legal sense, the moral sense, the instrumental sense, the specialist sense.

'crossed over' to the commercialised subculture of professional boxing live, I undertook a phenomenologically grounded standpoint of analysis as a boxing insider⁴².

Society, culture and 'pro' boxing

Much as how the literature illustrates (see Gorn 1986; Brailsford 1988; Shipley 1989) pugilism in its 18th century heyday was a subculture hidden within working-class communities, the professional boxing universe in contemporary England is subterranean to not only society at large but also the practical understanding of the vast majority of amateur boxing-practitioners. Today to all intent and purposes the professional boxing universe in England comprises of a network of gymnasium life-worlds located within the epicentres of Britain's major post-industrial metropolises and surrounding urban conurbations. These cultural hubs of professional boxing spawn the vast majority of elite and rank and file professional boxers. Satellite gymnasium life-worlds can be located up and down the country (such as in Luton) and like their inner-city counterparts are rather hidden from the public at large.

My foray into the professional boxing universe both in Luton and London, therefore, was accomplished through word-of-mouth recommendations as to the whereabouts of gymnasium life-worlds and, more importantly, key actors within the 'pro' subculture, most prominently Coach-figureheads. By way of introduction to the research journey among professional boxing-practitioners the following snapshot description details my initial attempt foray into an inner city estate of South-East London to locate '*The Workhouse*' gymnasium.

Boxing...A mugs game son!

[Notes from London]

The train from Luton brings me into the heart of London - Tower Bridge overlooking the Thames. Upon embarking on the underground tube system for the first time I soon realise that I've taken the wrong train and I jump of at the Canary Wharf terminal. Walking amongst city workers conducting business one-the-go by mobile phone, or diligently studying their laptops while drinking coffee in trendy cafeterias, the well-heeled, career dynamic and mostly 'white' demographic of this cultural sector of London is abundant. Taking a walk within easy distance of the station I find myself among hordes of tourists

⁴² I collected ethnographic data among professional boxing practitioners in Luton and London over a five year duration. After a two year period of auto-ethnographic data collection as a fully-competitive professional boxer patronising a variety of gymnasiums in and around Luton, that encompassed one eight-round professional boxing contest, the focus of the study moved to the inner-city landscapes of London, historically the epicentre of professional boxing in England. Over the next three years and alongside my continuing analysis of amateur boxing in Luton, as an observant-participant yet non-competitive boxer I collected data among 'pro' boxers training in two gymnasiums: '*Uppercut Inc*' (a pseudonym) gymnasium in North London and '*The Workhouse*' (a pseudonym) gymnasium in South-East London.

taking photographs of the historic architecture illuminated by neon lighted sky scrapers lining the Thames. As I take stock of this impressive landscape I too sense the immense economic and cultural vibrancy flowing through the heart of this globally dynamic metropolis. This is not my destination, however, and I hop back on the correct train for a journey that lasts merely a few minutes (by-passing Milwall football ground) to a somewhat different London. As I near my destination the landscape I left behind is reduced to a shimmering spectacle of life 'up town'

My stop is New Cross Gate, a customarily drab train station with the obligatory graffiti daubed walls. A steady flow of commuters board and depart trains, while British Rail employees keep a wary eye on hordes of school kids energetically talking in groups close to the ticketing booths. Upon exiting the train station I walk a mile or so along the high street. If the shimmering lights of the City illuminated the foreground, here is 'ordinary' London looking and feeling rather different. Observing the flow of humanity around me for the first time I immediately note the multicultural human tapestry before me, which I find curious because I am aware that this neighbourhood enshrines the cultural icon of the 'cockney' (and mostly 'white') Londoner. This is unmistakably a British landscape however. Double-decker buses line the streets, old Victorian houses with well-kept lawns and trimmed flowerbeds are staple to most buildings, pubs can be found at every few hundred metres advertising food menus, varieties of beer and 'live' coverage of the Premiership League fixtures. Look inside any of these establishments and there is a contrasting scene to the flow of humanity outside. Mostly 'white' men sit in small groups or in isolation drinking a 'social' beer. There is something strangely languid and somewhat dishevelled about the mannerisms among the patrons pondering over half empty pint glasses.; glassy eyed and detached ruminations perhaps reminiscing of the days gone by, the 'real' London that is no more. I continue my journey and become subsumed in the everyday ambience of London's 'down-town' high street hustle and bustle crammed with small businesses selling a variety of niche products and services. African hairdressers, Reggae music stores, Indian fabric merchants, Italian groceries, Thai restaurants, Arabic coffee shops and Chinese acupuncturists vie for the disposable income of busy looking pedestrians. Inside the shop premises are clusters of ethnic groups shopping or simply passing the day enjoying each other's company while drinking favourite beverages. Among the retailer outlets are 'professional' businesses offering services in immigration, accounting, soliciting and surveying, alongside more established high-street bank establishments, retail supermarkets and fast food outlets. A few hundred metres on from the bustling high street a retail park hosts a dozen or so Megastores advertising furniture, toys, electric goods and DIY products at discount rates.

Wondering on from the consumer belt I enter a residential area comprising of huge building packing residents into compact apartments located in addresses named 'Franklin House' or 'Newton Crescent'. These monikers seem like rather tenuous historical links to the forefathers of the British Empire that, nonetheless, may reveal much to the sense of Britishness constructed by its multi-ethnic mix of 'minority' Britons in residence. Surrounded by the sheer magnitude and hustle and bustle of this vast urban landscape I ponder the extent to which anonymity and insignificance is ever negated. Observing the local inhabitants going about their daily business, on occasion greeting one another with good humour and at least a semblance of familiarity, it is noticeable, nonetheless, that a

sense of hardship and resignation is inscribed in many adult's faces... 'getting by' in a vast, crowded, busy and somewhat drab concrete landscape. The presence of aspiration here, in the first instance at least, seems to be saturated by the promise extended by the God of retail consumerism. Nonetheless, this is also *the place* where anything is possible and aspiration resides beyond the homogenised facades of fast-food restaurants and giant retailers offering forty per cent discount and five years free credit. Look a bit closer and you spot the specialist music vendor proudly selling the coolest vinyl records for aspiring DJ's of 'underground' urban music and dance subcultures. Covering the wall space of many shops are dozens of flyers advertising tango and salsa dance classes, a variety of keep fit options, meditation retreats, holistic therapies, a host of politically affiliated societies and a host of eateries promising authentic cuisine from every corner of the globe.

My destination too (once located) offers something remarkably vibrant, although the cultural resonance here is rooted to a rather more traditional notion of London life. I enter a pub to ask directions as to the whereabouts of my destination; the '*The Workhouse*' boxing gymnasium. My enquiry stimulates several of the patrons propping up the bar to stir from their seats and point me in the direction of the adjacent housing estate. "*You mean Barney's place...yeah, yeah... about 5 minutes up that way...follow your nose and walk through the estate and you're by the Mac-D's*". I bid my gratitude and with a sense of being looked at up and down I head in the direction I had just come from. I walk through the housing estate and sure enough directly opposite a MacDonald's take-away restaurant I spot '*The George*' [a pseudonym], a public house draped in St George's red and white colours. Immediately opposite the pub are a group of 'black' youths shooting hoops to the backdrop of rap music blaring from a ghetto-blaster. To the right hand side of the basketball court and underneath railway arches are two men in overalls hunched over the bonnet of a family saloon car dismantling its engine. Perhaps due to the unusually hot midday sun the network of alleyways and footbridges leading to and from the tenement blocks are near deserted bar a postman doing his rounds and a woman in her late teens pushing a twin birth pram while chatting on her mobile phone. As I approach '*The George*' I make note of the collection of cars parked immediately outside - a four-wheel drive, a nifty open top sports car, a 'seen better days' family saloon with baby harnesses in the back seat. The dangling pair of miniature boxing gloves decorating all front mirrors indicated to anyone sufficiently conversed that something might be happening nearby, a sense of energy and purpose wholly out of place among this sprawling urban anonymity seemingly saturated by the superficial delights of consumer passivity and the sheer mundane humdrum of urban existence.

Inside the pub are half a dozen or so middle-aged 'white' men with pints of beer in front of them not doing or saying much. At the rear end of the bar is a door with '*The Workhouse - 1st floor*' daubed in big blue letters. The rickety staircase seems an indifferent entrance to the famed temple of British boxing I had often read about. Sure enough, when climbing the stairwell I hear the BBZZZ sound of an electric timer, the faint sound of a skipping rope whistling through the air, the rhythmical grunts of boxers shadowboxing and laughter as banter is exchanged among them. Prising the door open I walk unto a dimly lit landing with two further archways - to the left is a rather cramped yet neat and tidy changing room area with a singular shower cubicle, to the right a larger

open plan space with a dozen or so assortment of punch bags and speed balls, mirrored walls and an elevated boxing ring. Observing this space for the first time it occurs to me that this urban landscape does not seem conducive to breeding elite calibre athletes. Yet this, like many other sprawling metropolises around the world, is the home of those seeking to profit from the *'hardest game of all'*...

The electronic timer signals another three-minute round of boxing action...Coach-Al and Johnnie are doing the *'pads'* in the ring, while Rashcliffe pummels the heavy bag with meaty punches and loudly exhaled grunts of effort befitting his twenty something stone body frame. Sat by the window are two older men dressed in blue overalls observing the comings and goings of the boxers training before them. I go about my one and a half hours training routine consisting of: warm-up stretch, light shadowbox, more technical rounds of shadowboxing in front of a mirror and in the ring, bag and speed-ball work, skipping and finally *'floor'* exercises (sit ups, press ups and the like) before ending with mobility and stretching exercises for the cool-down stage. While shadowboxing through my first set of half dozen rounds, a middle aged lady of perhaps Thai or Vietnamese origin makes her way into the gym clutching a stack of counterfeit music CD's. Smiling she offers them out for our inspection. She is politely dismissed by Al and myself although Rashcliffe is prompted to take a closer look. After a while he chooses two and looking down at the diminutive lady offers in his booming cockney tone, *"I'll give ya a fiver...nah, nah...a f-i-v-e-r for both"*. Staring up at the giant 6ft 5ins, 120kg Jamaican-Londoner the lady shakes her head vigorously and using sign language doubles his offer. Placing his hands in a mock defensive posture Rashcliffe does an *'Ali'* shuffle and throws a series of playful jabs in her direction. He then strips off his boxing gloves and winking at the lady declares, *"I am the nicest guy I know...you know?"* He then reaches into his sports bag for his wallet. As he extracts the ten pound note Coach-Al laughs and mocks *"you've been mugged son!"*...

(Adapted field-notes Jan/Feb 2004)

Befitting the plethora of ethnic groups from every continent in the world who have made the vast metropolis of London their residence, both professional boxing gymnasiums studied were inherently multi-cultural hub of human interaction. Accordingly Nigerian ex-Olympians, 'black' Londoners, East-Europeans, a Cuban exile, a 'white' English father and son team, a lone Romany, an aspiring Irish super-bantamweight and a British-Iranian contender, were just some of the professional boxers encountered when training at *"Uppercut Inc"*. Across town, *"The Workhouse"* was a vibrant mix of multi-ethnicity too, although the dominant culture here could be described as one steeped in the centuries old traditions of London's fight fraternities⁴³. Accordingly, and adding to the patchwork of multicultural diversity surrounding

⁴³ Climbing the staircase of *'The Workhouse'* I was keenly aware that Henry Cooper had trained in these same premises when preparing for his contests against Muhammad Ali in the 1960s. In its present-day incarnation the gymnasium is illuminated by a rather more universal symbol of contemporary society - the bright lights of a MacDonal'd's restaurant situated immediately opposite the entrance. If the intervening period had seen retail outlets replace industrial warehouses in what is now a 'de-industrialised zone' (see Byrne 2001), the timer inside the gymnasium still chimed the same four-minute work periods as generations gone by.

the gymnasium premises, the social identities of the boxers training at these premises consisted of (in order of numerical prominence): ‘white’ English or second and third generation Irish, then ‘black’ (British or African) and from there individuals of Sri Lankan, East-European, Greek, Pakistani, Middle-Eastern and Australian ethnic identity.

Despite such a cosmopolitan mix of social actors a prevailing sense of egalitarianism defined rather friendly (or at least cordial) relations among the boxers in ways seemingly at odds with the hurtful *modus-aparande* of professional boxing. In particular, I was surprised (and pleased) that having only trained for a matter of weeks at the gymnasium life-worlds studied I felt comfortable enough to interact on first name basis with many of the boxers patronising these premises and was able to assume a comfortable presence among them. This affable sense of familiarity was also a welcome contrast to the all-pervasive sense of anonymity I experienced as one of the millions of faceless inhabitants within the vast landscape of London⁴⁴. For many months I pondered the social dynamics through which the boxing practitioners studied seemed to adopt remarkably egalitarian demeanours and, accordingly, engaged in a mutual cultural practice through which they forged a collective sense of belonging.

As shall be outlined in the following chapters the defining cultural dimensions of the professional boxing gymnasiums studied, much unlike their institutionalised amateur counterparts, in many ways resembled those documented of 20th century ‘respectable’ working-class occupational communities such as shipbuilders, coalminers, fishermen and printers (see Salaman 1974; Sugden 1996). As Salaman (1974) observes, the degree of inclusiveness between work and communal life, the degree of intrinsic involvement in work tasks and the status derived afforded members of occupational communities a particular empowering and richly fulfilling sense of personal worth and social connectivity vis-à-vis their work-based social identities. Lockwood’s (1968; cited in Salaman 1974 p. 56) definition of the determinants of traditional working class occupational cultures is instructive here:

‘Workers in such industries (as mining, docking and shipbuilding) usually have a high degree of job involvement and strong attachments to primary work groups that possess a considerable autonomy from technical and supervisory constraints. Pride in doing ‘men’s work’ and a strong sense of shared occupational experiences make for feelings of fraternity and comradeship which are expressed through a distinctive occupational culture’

⁴⁴ Upon entering the gymnasium premises the noise and congestion caused by the never ending current of traffic and the accompanying ebb and flow of humanity crammed in the underground or queuing for the public transport was temporarily and gratifyingly suspended. Once inside the gymnasium I would be greeted on first name basis or simply a ‘thumbs-up pat on the shoulder’ acknowledgement accompanied by a cheery, “*all right son*”, spontaneous welcoming gestures that I found immensely gratifying.

The decline of ‘traditional’ working class culture since the erosion of industrial production, however, has relegated this type of relationship between men’s work, their everyday lives and sense of personal and social wellbeing, in its extreme form at least, to somewhat of a rarity (Salaman 1974). Similarly to other forms of working class occupational culture, professional sport has been incorporated into the dominant hegemonic cultural form in accordance with requirements of capitalism. As stated by Donnelly (1993 p. 120) this would generally involve a cultural shift towards adopting ‘Americanised’ hyper-commercial imperatives towards maximising the commodity status of ‘alienating’ (Brohm 1978; Beamish and Ritchie 2006) sporting endeavour.

The ‘residual’ (Williams 1961) dimensions of cultural heritage do not simply vanish however. As Donnelly (1993) asserts, sportive subcultures may harbour cultural dimensions that provide resilience, or at least alternatives, to the dominant incorporation processes (see also Hughson et al 2005). As has been documented above, the culture of professional boxing in England retains a strong historical lineage dating from the 18th century pugilistic golden age (Brailsford 1988). Accordingly, as shall be argued in the following chapters, the ‘structure of feeling’ (Williams 1963) through which professional boxing practitioners embody performative identities are defined by their emotional attachments to the following components of the professional boxing occupational subculture: *craftwork*, *valorous (hyper)masculinity*, *edgework* and *entrepreneurship*. The synthesis between ‘residual’ and ‘dominant’ cultural formations and the way they serve to define professional boxing practitioners ‘emergent’ value orientations, identities and actions are discussed next.

Living ‘the life’: embodied impressions from the inside

As an experienced amateur boxer yet also a fan of professional boxing I eulogised what I deemed to be a hierarchical athletic challenge firmly implanted in my imagination. The ‘*pro*’ code, in my mind, symbolised the purest athletic challenge in sports – ‘the one sport all others aspire to be’. Likewise I held a reverence laced with curiosity for the pantheon of legendary boxing champions from England and overseas and their charisma as individuals who had forged (to my mind) heroic destinies. This notion was of course fortified through the years of invested agency as an ‘institutionalised’ amateur boxer. Like minded sentiments were shared by many of the professional boxers I interacted with:

[Q] – “What made you turn-over (to the professional code) Mark?”

“Well...hmm...I mean...I had a good go in the amateurs and did all right...never boxed in the Senior’s (Championships) but won two Schoolboy titles and reached the finals of the Youths...that’s where I boxed (name of boxer who was also a

Gym-boxer and familiar acquaintance). Having done all that...I didn't want to go through it again...getting 'up' for the ABA's...as you know there's some tasty boys about so err...I thought [pause]...I thought I was good enough to mix it 'pro'...so for better or for worse here I am. I thought...well...to earn some money...I knew I wasn't likely to earn millions...but...like...it was just time to get out of the amateur scene cause it felt like there was nothing there for me really...I was kind of repeating myself."

[Q] – “Was it a good decision mate?”

“Yeah I think so...I mean looking back I suppose I was a bit here we go and really it's nothing like that or what other people think it is...full-on excitement or loads of money, birds [grins] or anything like my mates think...nothing like it...but at least I'm doing something beyond a lot of them which is work for a wage, go out at weekends pissing it up...that sort of thing. I've got that little direction...something in my life that gets me up and out of bed doing five miles at six in the morning...and its freezing you know...and I'm loving...hmm [pause]...like I feel content, it's a buzz...I guess I'm 'up' for life...happy...yeah...better than in the amateurs or what I would be without it an' that..."

[Q] – “What don't you like about the game?”

“Nothing really [emphatically]...I like everything about boxing...nothing is a drag...I love everything there is to love about boxing. I think the hardest thing is going to be the day I give it all up”

Mark (23 years old; professional for 4 years)

From Mark's comments it is possible to detect the symbolic dimensions through which he cultivated the logic to aspire towards pursuing a career in professional boxing. Mark's identity as a 'pro' boxer, much like my own boxer-researcher identity, was clearly understood as being relative to, and fortified by, his socialisation in and through the institutionalised amateur code of amateur boxing. Clearly for 'real' boxers, like of Mark and myself, who had accumulated the athletic capital necessary to be welcomed into 'pro' life-worlds, the act of '*crossing over*' into the professional code symbolically signified an agential rite of passage. Perhaps unlike Mark, however, by engaging a more analytically minded frame of academic reference, albeit still embryonic by this stage in the research, I was in a position to rather more critically observe, sense and feel (and thereafter make 'sense' of) the unique cultural dimensions of the professional code of boxing.

For instance, one immediate problem that impeded my initial attempts to grasp the patterns of sociability among both milieu's of professional boxing practitioners studied was the rather itinerant time-keeping orientations adopted by professional boxers in regard to training. It was often the case upon arriving at the London gymnasiums and having paid the entrance fee that I would be surprised to find the gymnasium near empty whereas at the same time a few days

previous it had been a vibrant space of social interaction. It was puzzling to me, even disconcerting, that the routine of rather more structured attendance I had been socialised through as an amateur boxer, and felt was integral to the identity I bestowed upon myself and took great pride in, had been replaced by a rather alien, to me, time-frame through which professional boxing-practitioners engaged the routines of practice and social interaction. Nonetheless, despite feeling perturbed at finding a near empty gymnasium lacking the necessary pizzazz of a 'living' boxing life-world, and thus feeling very much an outsider to the coming and goings of the actors I was wishing to study, it was the occasions when the gymnasium was empty that the cultural divide between amateur and professional boxing incrementally 'revealed' itself.

It took many months of 'feeling' and 'sensing' myself to be on the outside/inside, as much as 'logically' comprehending through a somehow abstracted 'rational' deduction my standing professional boxing-practitioners, before more concretely comprehending the cultural divide demarcating the 'amateur-institutionalised' code of boxing from its 'commercialised-subcultural' cousin. If, following Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, human consciousness is seen to penetrate the 'world' and likewise the 'world' penetrates human consciousness (see Hughson et al 2005 p. 143), then by inhabiting the cultural dimensions (such a unique time-frame) through which to engage in the daily routines of professional boxers practices and social interactions, it can be theorised that professional boxing-practitioners (as body-subjects) develop unique identities from their amateur counterparts. Moreover, as Wacquant (2004) has argued, the processes of identification are sensed, felt and emotionally conceived through practical initiation rather than subject to reflective logico-deductive comprehension.

Furthermore, Wacquant's ethnography of a group of professional boxers hailing from Chicago has insightfully demonstrated the relationships between body-subjects conscious/unconscious sensibilities to wider dimensions of power and the organisation of society (see also Hughson et al 2005). Wacquant insists that it is only by becoming a fully submerged member of particular groups routine practices and social interactions that it is possible to grasp, through the body, the meanings invested in and through cultural phenomena. From this frame of analysis, Wacquant is able to articulate how the professional boxers of his study inferred a "...monastic devotion" (p. 67) toward their craftwork, "...the virile friendship of the club" (p. 68), "...the joy of feeling one's body blossom, loosen, and gradually get 'tuned' to the specific discipline" (ibid); "...the emotional attachment to one's gym" (p. 69), the "sensuous intoxication" of their athletic participation.

Within the English societal context of this research it became apparent that the embodied routines of practice and social interaction enacted by professional boxing-practitioners became fabricated as a consequence of the residual cultural moorings through which professional boxing and its pugilistic forefather symbolised the occupational status of 'craftwork'. Defining the athletic practice of professional boxing in terms of it being highly skilled craft, takes on important sociological significance that, in turn, is useful in reconciling professional boxing practitioners' conscious/unconscious interpretative frameworks in contrast to their amateur counterparts.

The 'sweet science' and the logic of tradition

The rich sense of tradition fabricating the 'pro' gymnasiums studied was, in the first instance, made explicit by the hundreds of photographs of 'old-time' boxers celebrating triumphs, knock-outs, punches given and taken in action shots of fights from years gone by. Indeed, many of the boxers working out before me had their own profiles on fight posters advertising upcoming boxing promotions in venues such as the York Hall in Bethnal Green, the revered home of boxing in London since the early 1900s. Their actions too were near identical of those displayed on the grainy black and white stills of their predecessors. They punched, sweated and grunted in the same measured intensity, skipped with the same light-footed virtuosity and inevitably bled in much the same way.

Nonetheless, I was surprised that there appeared little to discern fundamentally superior when comparing the physical verve and technical acumen of many of the professional boxers observed. If anything, the everyday routines of training enacted by professional boxers often appeared 'leisurely'. This is not to say that they were in any way lazy. Rather, the point made is that their 'stylised' enactments when undertaking their daily rituals of practice and social interaction were observed as and were *felt* to be markedly discernable from the amateur boxing practitioners studied. In particular, the drill-like training regimens through which amateur boxers were instructed in the rudiments of boxing had been replaced by a technical orientation best described as 'meaningfully precise'. It was only after a prolonged experiential grounding when the embodied dimensions contrasting 'amateur boxing' and 'pro fighting' became apparent. Over time I grew to recognise that if amateur and professional boxers adopted near identical training rituals of skipping, pad work, sparring, hitting the bags, press-ups and the like, the routines of practice through which professional boxers constructed athletic identities closely resembled Mills's (1956 p. 222-3) description of the work sensibilities adopted by the traditional craftsman:

‘In the craftsman pattern there is no split of work and play, of work and culture...The craftsman’s work is the mainspring of the only life he knows; he does not flee from work into a separate sphere of leisure; he brings to his non-working hours the values and qualities developed and employed in his working time. His idle conversation is shop talk; his friends follow the same line of work as he, and share a kinship of feeling and thought’.

A closer look at the professional boxing subculture in England suggests that behind every successful boxer’s athletic development lies the figurehead influence of ‘the coach’ who’s biography has been forged through many decades of dedicated service to learning the ‘craft of boxing’. Invariably an established face within the boxing universe whose repute often extends throughout the wider community social networks receptive to the traditions of boxing, the coach possesses a lifetime’s of boxing wisdom passed on to him by mentors of generations gone by. For boxers entering the fold of a gymnasium order it was necessary to gain the trust of the Coach in order to gain a foothold in the world of professional boxing. Correspondingly, the Coach claimed responsibility for his charges performance and welfare, often in the same gymnasium space as other reputable yet also, by implication, rival Coaches. At stake during those initial boxer-coach interactions, therefore, were Coaches status within the tightly knit universe of professional boxing in England and their (carefully guarded) cultivation of pugilistic capital. The boxer-coach relationship therefore, once established, was as such interdependent and thus laced through with emotional bonds of professional duty, friendship and even Uncle-like caring.

In all the professional boxing gymnasium studied coaches taught in their own unique idiosyncratic ways, imparting stocks of boxing wisdom – subtle boxing techniques, unique fitness regimes, psychological ‘secrets’ and other ‘tricks of the trade’ - not available in coaching manuals. Moreover, the tutelage undertaken by apprentice boxers was purely practical and transmitted, as Wacquant (2004) argues, on the basis of “...a largely implicit and barely codified pedagogy’ (p. 16)⁴⁵. In turn, by wilfully submitting to the logic of such “...tacit knowledge” (Rothman 1998 p. 114), through symbolic reverence as well as embodied transmission, the current generation of boxers cultivate the “...skill, pride and worker autonomy” (Rothman 1998 p. 114) characteristics passed on to them by the master-craftsmen elders. From here it is possible to comprehend how the cultivation of the ‘pro’ boxers

⁴⁵ In the following extract Wacquant (2004 p. 58) grasps the visceral practicality through which boxing practitioners understand the value of, and communicate through, boxing, “If the hallmark of practice is, as Pierre Bourdieu contends, that it follows ‘a logic that unfolds directly in bodily gymnastics’ without the intervention of discursive consciousness and reflective explication, that is, by excluding the contemplative and de-temporalising posture of the theoretical gaze, then few practices may be said to be more ‘practical’ than boxing. For the rules of the pugilistic art boil down to bodily moves that can be fully apprehended only in action and place it at the very edge of that which can be intellectually grasped and communicated”.

‘embodied pugilistic sensibility’ (Wacquant 2004 p. 97) becomes, simultaneously and paradoxically, an ultra-individualistic apprenticeship that, nonetheless, can only be transmitted collectively, ‘by imitation, by emulation, and by diffuse and reciprocal encouragement’ (Wacquant 2004 p. 102). As Wacquant (2004 pp. 68-69) argues, the occupational identity among ‘pro’ boxers signifies, and is displayed through, a rich tapestry of emotional and symbolic attachments:

“...boxers relish the fact that they share membership in the same small guild, renowned for its physical toughness and bravery, they enjoy knowing that they are different from other people. They are fighters. This satisfaction is no less real for being discreet, and the regulars of the gym express it by proudly wearing patches, T-shirts, and jackets bearing the insignia of the trade.”

Throughout this research journey the umbilical cord of residual tradition through which ‘pro’ boxers constructed identities befitting their status as *highly skilled craftsmen* was further observed and experienced within the inner most sanctum of the modern day professional boxer’s life-world, the changing room pre-contest. Coaches bandaged the hands of their charges the ‘*pro way*’, intricately applying strips of gauge tape on top of ample bandages to protect the primary means of a professional boxers livelihood – his fists. Nonetheless, the result is a weighty appendage of a solid texture not dissimilar to a cast as used to heal broken bones, perhaps resembling something more akin to the ‘caestus’⁴⁶ worn by Ancient gladiators, as opposed to the regulation length bandages amateur boxers are allowed to apply as a means to support hand and wrist in a bid to avoid strains and so forth. He will then urge his protégé to demonstrate a performative aptitude of craftwork as opposed to a preference of scientific exactitude displayed by international amateur boxers primed to win Olympic medals. The ‘pro’ boxer (in contrast to being ‘amateur’) is schooled to deliver powerful punches at his opponent with the onus ‘*on making them count*’, the substance of measurement being a qualitative assessment of dominance by imposing ‘*hurt*’ on the opposition as opposed to a measure of superiority quantifiable by the number of ‘correct’ point scoring punches landed. The professional fighter thus seeks to physically, but more importantly psychologically, dominate his opponent over the longer duration of the contest. He will out-strategy and out-work and, if need be, maul bully and over-power his adversary, taking as little a possible thrown at him with an unflinching stoicism until ownership of the ring is claimed, ideally by grinding his opponent into unconscious submission. It is possible to gain a sense of the business-like yet “...orgasmically invested” (Wacquant 2004 p. 70) identities constructed by

⁴⁶ The caestus was used by Roman gladiators and consisted of leather strapping fastened almost shoulder length that was reinforced at the striking end with lumps of jagged metal or sharp spikes. As Poliakoff (1987) remarks, “Needless to say, the very appearance of these deadly gloves removes any scepticism about another detail Vergil gives – that they were stained with blood and spattered brains” (p. 79).

‘pro’ boxers from the words of rising professional lightweight contender Lee, as he focused on likely rivals while seated ringside at the York Hall:

[Q] – “How’s the career going then mate?”

“It’s going good thank you...all being well...[grins] I’m sitting here and all I want to do is have some contact...a bit of bang, bang, bang [moving shoulders in quick rhythm]...you know I keep looking at the boys going in (the ring) and I can’t take my eye off them [excited laugh]...its just there... you know...hmm...get rid of that innermost instinct [playfully swiping an uppercut through the air]. Nah, nah [serious tone] it’s a bit frustrating watching this cause I feel I’ve got to the point where I should only have real fights you know?”

[Q] – “I saw you up against [name of boxer]. I always thought he would be a nightmare, he looks bulldog strong”

“[Grinning] Yeah, yeah he was a strong man definitely... nice guy by the way...we had a good chat afterwards. [Thoughtfully]... you know people said that he bullied me on the ropes and I got too involved and all that...that is before I got to him...but truthfully when he went to the body I just blocked...[demonstrating] blocked, parried and rolled underneath his hooks to the point I just kept him off balance by turning him and tapping him and just frustrating him...I defeated him just there cause...I mean...I could see it in his eyes that it just wasn’t working for him, I was totally out thinking him”

[Q] – “I hope you don’t mind me saying this...but both of you looked pretty marked up after”

“I guess we did [grinning]...I mean...yeah...I probably took a few too many...more than I need have done and Mick (his coach) was screaming blue murder at me to keep it long. But I just sensed that it just wasn’t there for him...listen.....[animated]...its all part of the game (being hit) and I enjoy it...[emphasising the point by tapping forefinger to temple]...it’s a mind game in there and I was able to use his strength and turn him on his head...you know what I mean? [considered pause]...That’s what happened, that’s how it finished [demonstrating]..pop, pop [blocking motion] kept him busy, he’s guessing, getting up himself cause he kept missing and getting wilder...Basically, I sucked the life out of him then in the seventh boooooommm...I brought him onto a left hook...bam...and the right comes over and he kind of naturally came on to it...that’s it...he was gone [shrugs shoulders]”.

There should be no mistake about the propensity for execution here i.e. the honing of one’s athletic capabilities to be as destructive as possible. Invariably the drive to do so is simultaneously joyous, eccentrically energised yet brutally effective. In order to comprehend Lee’s studied vernacular through which he articulates the energy, purpose and excitement of his actions, the sensuous effervescence the weeks prior a ‘date’ (an upcoming contest) when

any number of boxers strive towards developing peak fitness, has to be taken into account. The gymnasium ambience at such times exuded a potent sense of energy and purpose whereby the intent of boxers and their mentors (coaches, family members, managers) focused on immediate goals requiring an all-or-nothing commitment⁴⁷.

From the professional boxer's vantage, therefore, identity becomes fabricated through a proud sense of autonomy, intrinsic self-development and emotional, symbolic and sensuous attachment to the cultural mores and significant others equally embedded within the 'pro' life-worlds studied. Equally so, their 'pro' identities signify disengagement from the institutional control exerted through the organisational aegis of the ABAE and, by proxy, the all-pervasive bureaucratic mechanisms exerting control over their everyday lives. That said, it remains that acceptance into this guild of individualists has to be earned. The following chapter seeks to communicate a 'lived' snapshot of the corporeal, symbolic and emotional nuances through which boxers, as sentient human beings and reflective social-actors, collectively submit to the 'pro' illusion (Bourdieu 1984).

I wanna be a contender

The fieldwork snap-shot below describes a pivotal insider practice of the professional boxing universe; 'serious sparring'. The task at hand was for me to negotiate six rounds of boxing for the first time (elite amateur boxing contests are of four rounds duration) against Rossi, a seasoned 'journeyman' of more than forty fights experience due to fight on the under-card of a major World Title fight held at London's Wembley Conference centre. This meet had been arranged exclusively by Coach who had made contact with a number of his contacts on the 'pro side' and had intuitively judged my ability to hold my own. Oblivious to the social machinations of the 'pro' universe of boxing I was making headway towards, I was happy to submit control of my destiny (in terms of athletic development and well-being) entirely in his hands:

Learning the game

It is a cold Tuesday night. I am sitting in the back seat of Paddy's brand new four wheel drive happy in the comfort of my own solitude. Coach is sitting in the front passenger seat next to Paddy chatting about work and generally musing over the many issues stemming from running the Gym. Evaluations are made on the performances of boxers in recent tournaments, their level of commitment displayed, their resolve shown during training and

⁴⁷ The sheer verve and intensity of professional boxers actions during 'serious training' can be adequately expressed through Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) concept of 'flow', or a state of being through which individuals experience disembodied consciousness, ecstasy and euphoria, increased energy and psychological power and a sense of environmental unity (see Giulianotti 2005 p. 115).

their likely standing of the Gym thereafter - always the overriding concern for Coach. I focus my attention on the landscape by passed as we make headway along the motorway heading south towards London. I make note of the austere looking tower blocks providing living space in uniform boxed apartments, the faceless industrial warehouses and the glowing facades of consumer outlets illuminating this damp winter's night. A sense of anonymity, manifesting itself into hostility, pervades my thoughts and I keep quiet in a conscious effort to steel my resolve. The conversation between Coach and Paddy is low key consisting mainly of gripes. Finally we drive off the motorway and speed through an affluent residential neighbourhood before arriving at a local authority park. By-passing rugby and football pitches, horse stables, a Boy Scouts hut and a scattering of other buildings we pull into the car park of a two-storey building bathed in darkness. As we come to a stop I can feel my heartbeat increase and a palpable mix of excitement and foreboding animates my senses as adrenaline surges through my body. As we make our way to the front entrance I take a sideways glance at the only two other parked vehicles outside this building. Both are unremarkable family saloons although I immediately make note of the decorative pair of boxing gloves dangling from both rear-view mirrors.. Before leaving the security of the car I make a cursory check that all the essential 'tools' are in my sports bag: mouth-guard, hand-wraps, head-guard, groin protector and a set of 16oz Lonsdale boxing gloves⁴⁸. Coach knocks on the door. Another surge of adrenaline induced nervous energy pumps through my veins. Fully aware that there's serious business at hand I steal my resolve and remind myself that it's a time to get focused.

A beaming Coach-Lenny greets us, shakes our hands and enquires if we had trouble finding 'my place'. He escorts us into a freezing cold room decorated with dozens of fight posters, a dozen or so punch bags and speed balls hanging from steel beams and bundles skipping ropes and tatty looking boxing gloves hanging on hooks or strewn on the floor. The centrepiece of this space is a boxing ring with a mirror the length of the room reflecting our scrutiny back at us. I immediately turn my focus on the only other man in the room. Rossi is shadowboxing in front of a full-length mirror, rhythmically grunting as he executes various combinations of punches. Intuitively I make my appraisal; he looks stocky at a sturdy 5ft 7 inches tall, in his early to mid-thirties with noticeably long hair braided into a ponytail. A 'journeyman' boxer with over forty fights to his name Rossi has acquired the credentials of, in Coach's words, "*a tough guy...nothing flash just a strong man who is steady. He's been around for a long time though...been in there with some quality boys ...so he must have something*". Coach-Lenny interrupts Rossi and quick introductions are made. We both smile at each other and proceed in a ritualistic '*all right mate*' handshake. By this stage Coach and Coach-Lenny are conversing out of earshot so I make my way to the opposite end of the room accompanied by Paddy clutching a video camera. Submerged in deep concentration I carefully '*wrap*' my hands with bandages and measured strips of elastic tape so as to encase my fists in what amounts to a protective shell against the impact of force they will soon be subjected to. Aware that my hands are twitching slightly from the adrenaline induced energy pumping through my body, I focus my attention upon my reflection in the mirror and proceed to lightly shadowbox, mentally attuning my mind to feel '*sharp*' while purposefully seeking to relax my muscles in a bid to inject the necessary fluidity into my actions. A few minutes into my self-absorbed ritual I sense Coach's presence by my side. Looking serious he helps me don head-guard and boxing gloves

⁴⁸ This set of boxing gloves was gifted to me by Coach upon my decision to '*go pro*'.

before applying Vaseline to my face. In a hushed voice he offers the following advice, *“stay out of the way of this guy cause he’s strong. We’re looking for six rounds of good work so keep on the move...be your usual sharp self and keep him of balance. If you stand in front of him [urgent] he will tag you...remember he’s got a fight date coming up so don’t let him take liberties...right...stay sharp, stay focused...on step ahead of him...nice and sharp, nice and relaxed”*.

I step through the ropes and proceed with my ritual of wiping the soles of my training shoes on the canvas, leaning my full weight against the ropes to test the ‘give’ of this particular ring and walk around its perimeter feeling the spongy texture of the surface. By this stage the room is filled with the rhythm of dance music. I allow myself to focus on the bouncy tune and bounce from one foot to the other in time with the rhythmical beats, throwing a flurry of loose-armed punches as I catch my reflection in the mirror. Making note that the ring floor feels spongy by the neutral corner I turn to face Rossi who is in the opposite corner staring intently at me while bouncing from one foot to the other sucking in big gulps of air. Coach-Lenny sensing that we are ready to commence proceedings glances at the four-minute clock hanging on the wall above his head and asks, *“six-three’s Coach? [Coach confirms]...ok fellas on the zero...TIME!”* This is it...my foray into the ‘pro’ way of boxing has begun and I move toward my ‘problem’ for the next six rounds (eighteen minutes). As I adopt a serious focus my mind flashes a host of unanswered questions: *‘How good is this guy likely to be? Are we going to have a war? Am I fit enough to cope with six rounds?’* Eschewing such ‘negative’ sentiments I remind myself to *‘stay focused and keep sharp...’* The action proceeds and we meet centre ring to ritualistically touch gloves in a ‘friendly’ gesture before exchanging punches with measured intent. I feel his strength and gauge his movement, while looking into his eyes to register his reactions to my leads and counters. He reciprocates...

I quickly become accustomed to my opponent and find a rhythm that allows me to counter on the back-foot while he lets ‘heavy’ and mostly single punches ‘go’ with full force. When we clinch I feel Rossi is physically strong although his punches are not devastatingly powerful (as in concussive). My superior hand speed and movement allows me to counter-punch him and from time to time *‘bring him on’* to a few well-timed counters. Somewhere to the periphery of my focus locked upon Rossi I hear Coach-Lenny issuing a stream of instructions, *“...get low Rossi...lower and punch upwards in two’s and three’s...good shot Alex...[I connect with a ‘crisp’ right hand punch forcing Rossi’s head to rock back on his shoulders]...you’ve got to get busier Rossi...that’s better...good shot much better! Stay busy you’ve gone to sleep...last ten...that’s TIME!”* The end of the round signals an instant end to our antagonism and we ‘politely’ touch gloves before heading back to our respective corners.

Sucking in deep gulps of oxygen in order to physically and mentally compose my energies toward the upcoming round I become aware of the rhythmical beat of the music once again before fully focusing on the advice dispensed by my ‘second pair of eyes’. Coach feeds me a gulp of water of which I spit out on the carpeted floor beneath the ring apron soon to follow with the contents of each nostril. He applies Vaseline along my eyebrows and the extremities of my head-guard and calmly enquires, *“How you feeling?”* I feel more comfortable having my first round as a ‘pro’ and am satisfied with the fluidity of my punches, their accuracy and my ability to hit and not be hit back (too much) in return. In

fact I'm enjoying myself and tell him so. He smiles faintly and comments, "*keep moving and countering...he's struggling with your movement. When you get the chance let them go in bursts...let him have it with the right hand and put some good body shots in...use your full range...Now he is likely to raise the tempo in the next few rounds so keep him guessing...and don't get careless*".

Coach-Lenny glances in our direction and instructs, "*TIME! ROUND TWO!*" The next fifteen minutes (5 rounds) take a similar pattern with the tempo of our exchanges steadily increasing although staying within the boundaries of reasonableness. By the time the sixth and final round nears its end we are both delivering bunches of punches at each other, breathlessly exhaling grunts of air in a bid to push our physical capacities to the utmost...*TIME!* I let Coach untie the laces of my gloves while resting on the ring apron. Happy at transgressing the six-round distance, a gymnasium rite of passage, I search out Paddy's opinion. He beams, "*yeah nice Alex...nice and sharp...it's all on tape mate...you'll be chuffed I reckon*". Coach-Lenny and Rossi approach us and they both thank me for "*a nice move around...good work*". I shake Rossi's hand and we discuss his upcoming fight against a 'prospect' and Luton-based boxer⁴⁹. He tells me, "*[in heavily Italian accented English] He is only a boy...I think I can beat him especially as we fight for longer...maybe round five or six*". He asks me what I think having sparred his future opponent many times before. As I harbour doubts about Rossi's chances, thinking he may well get knocked-out, I offer a rather muted response "*You're right Rossi he is young. He is definitely powerful though mate and very aggressive so be tight in the first half of the fight and then get to him... as you said... in the second half*". He and Coach-Lenny thank us again and having completed a light stretch I check my facial features in the mirror. Sporting a black eye we make back for Luton...

Field-notes [amended] and video footage (October 2000)

As a postscript to the above, Coach and I were issued guest passes for Rossi's upcoming contest by Coach-Lenny as a gesture of good-will for '*helping us out...much appreciated*'. Sat ringside we witnessed the rather scripted contest between the old warhorse journeyman in the Blue corner against the talented young prospect in the Red corner aligned to the promoter staging this competition; the '*house fighter*'. From the outset Red corner slammed in powerful punches to Rossi's head and his supporters' cheered while the neutrals in the audience '*oohhhed*' and '*aahhhed*' when the audible thuds echoed around the arena. Nonetheless, despite absorbing that much 'punishment' Rossi stoically stuck to his task and on occasion managed to score with punch or two of his own. Having made it to the end of the contest on his feet the MC announced, "*The referee scores the contest fifty-nine points to fifty-five for the red corner*⁵⁰ [name of 'Prospect']!" As the victor proudly acknowledged his cheering fans and

⁴⁹ The '*prospect*' was an ex-club mate who went on to become a British and Commonwealth champion at the time of writing.

⁵⁰ Red corner was awarded five rounds with one round (the last) deemed even

proceeded to strike a pose for a group of press photographers, Rossi slipped through the ropes all but unnoticed by the main bulk of spectators.

Waiting for Rossi in the changing rooms (he was talking to acquaintances sat at ringside) I was privy to a hushed conversation between Rossi's previous coach and another 'face' well known among the fight fraternity in England, "*I told him years ago that he should pack it in. What's the point of taking so many shots...he is a tough so and so, always has been...but that's no good...not good at all...*" Rossi appeared at that instance and the two men abruptly end their conversation to pat him on the back declaring, "*Great fight Rossi...you gave him a good go son, well done*" before dispersing to the main arena. Sporting bruised features and a cut over his eyebrow yet obviously 'up' from his exertions a still animated Rossi tells me, "*I'm sure I can beat him. [Did he hurt you at all?] Not once...he shook me a little once...but nothing no problem, I am still rusty but a few more fights I can win against that man...he is not a man, he is still a boy. When I look into his eyes he was scared...really he was scared*"⁵¹.

Rossi continued boxing for the next eighteen months and fought another sixteen fights mostly against 'quality' opposition only to record one victory. The immediate explanation that he must have suffered the indignity of bruising and bloody defeat many times over as the designated Blue corner 'opponent' due to the lure of financial gain are put in context when, on a subsequent spar-night, he offered:

"This is not for the money...if I am not boxing I have more money...I have my own business that is good...I am a mechanic I have my own garage and I make good money. No, I do this 'cause I love boxing, I watch the fights on video, I read about boxing. The money I make keeps me boxing...I will not be doing this for long but I want to fight for a belt before I finish".

To posit Rossi with the identity of a social 'dope', a 'needy-rough', a 'socially disadvantaged immigrant' or whatever other rather economic deterministic explanation when seeking to evaluate the reasons why one chooses, or is pushed into, such an obviously brutal sporting athletic practice, and a losing one to boot, clearly undermines sport's 'normative component' (Giulianotti 2005). If a false consciousness resides in Rossi's words it is better understood as meaningful expression shaped through an allegorical narrative through which the identities of 'winners' and 'losers' are self-managed and collectively justified. It is here that the brutality inherent in professional boxing praxis becomes accepted and even *sought-out* as a marker of valorous (hyper)masculinity. As Coach-Lenny expands when referring to his charges losses:

⁵¹ Some months on *the 'prospect'* expressed to me his disappointment at not '*getting rid*' of a fighter of Rossi's calibre, intimating that due to a time of inactivity he too was '*a bit rusty*' on the night.

“Listen, he’s enjoying himself...doing his own thing and getting well paid. I get him fights and he can take them or leave them. When he was with [name of coach] he was basically a gymnasium fighter and served as a punch bag for [‘champion’ boxer]. Now he is actually getting some enjoyment out of his boxing and making good money without getting hurt. Listen Rossi’s got loads of ‘heart’; he loves all this so I’m happy to support him in whatever way I can”.

The logic of ‘heart’

Heart is the quality I most admire in a fighter. If he hasn’t got it you can’t teach it. Greatness is made from the inside, from the spirit – the flame inside...plus you’ve got to be a little bit crazy to be a fighter...

Emanuel Steward 2001



The folksy idiom of ‘heart’ (see caption) prominently decorating the entrance of ‘*Uppercut Inc*’ gymnasium is made by Emanuel Steward one of the most renowned and revered coaches in world boxing today. Throughout this ethnography, the formative gatekeeper monitoring the cultural production of the gymnasium life-worlds studied was the Coach. This conversation with Coach-Terry exemplifies the candid demeanour through which I was welcomed into the life-world fold of

professional boxing:

“I don’t know what the other trainers you’ve had said to you. But this is a bloody hard game, nothing glamorous. Many kids come to me and don’t realise this but you are literally fighting for a living...I mean [in a matter of fact tone of voice] it is a world of damaged hands, broken teeth, a cut face, lots of bumps and bruises...it’s a hard, gritty business. You have to have that will to overcome and that means you must be very serious in doing everything the right way...[looking intently at me]...your approach to training, your diligence in your diet, your health, your ability to listen and learn. I’ve had some good men over the years and right now [surname of boxer] is in training for the world title. I hope he wins, I’ve been training him since he turned over and I think he has a good chance...it’s his only chance because he’s had too many hard one’s. He’s getting weary and I will not have anything to do with him if he decides to go on...if he loses that’s it. If he wants to carry on I’ll advise him how I see fit and make it clear that he will basically ruin himself and there will be no way that I can let myself have anything to do with him...It’s a hard, hard business and you don’t want to be dribbling into your pint glass in fifteen years’ time...”

Coach-Terry's admission of the realities of professional boxing was communicated by his demeanour as much as his carefully chosen vocabulary⁵². His performative candour was also asserted in a way that clearly situated his stature as 'The Governor' of this gymnasium life-world. As such, his advice was not merely an instance of *'boxing talk'*. Rather, it was a measured inquisition to gage that innate quality deemed necessary to develop the qualities of a *'decent pro'*; desire or, in boxing parlance, implicit faith in the individualist and hyper-masculine credo through which boxing-practitioners defined the revered notion of 'heart'. Dominant academic discourse thus far has defined the boxer's 'heart' as a metaphor for the display of machismo when absorbing punishment in the ring; the manifestation of a 'hard life' endured as a consequence of material impoverishment endemic in the poorer sectors of Western capitalist societies (most notably the US). The findings of this study, however, illustrate how the social processes through which boxers define the much revered quality of 'heart' can be more fully understood when considering the complex and dynamic 'lived' emotional, symbolic and sensuous nuances through which professional boxers embody performative identities and construct life sustaining modes of behaviour. Moreover, it is imperative to acknowledge that their 'pro' identities have been cultivated as a consequence of their socialisation in and through the institutionalised code of amateur boxing. As actors whose cultural praxis retain the residual values inherited from a pre-industrialised way of life, therefore, professional boxers embody notions of masculine valour in place to mask the sheer hardship of a pre-modern era when human life was all too often a perishable commodity. By contrast, the institutional domain of the post-industrial world imposes constraining and controlling logico-rational measures, most often through everyday power enactments of a non-physical and bureaucratic-legal means. These two contrasting epochs overlap to accentuate the polarity between spontaneity and constraint in modern social life (see Lyng 1990). From this standpoint, as is discussed below, the 'hidden' web of history, power and culture defining the 'spirit' through which professional boxers construct valorous (hyper)masculine identities predisposed to a risk orientation in return of economic gain are made more explicit.

The 'spirit' of the hungry fighter

It has been made clear that if the cultural idiom of *'living the life'* is a coded logic through which professional boxers define their agency as a skilled self-actualisation of autonomy. The story a professional boxer tells about himself in other words, affords him a symbolic reality through which he *'rises above the crowd'* by submitting to speech and performative idioms

⁵² My immediate reaction was uncertainty as to whether he was warning me off or ascertaining my intentions.

signifying self-worth, social status and heroic sacrifice. In the following conversation Mickey, in a serene, near meditative yet very serious, mood after his final workout a week before an Area title fight (ten rounds) due to take place at the York Hall, deliberated upon the challenge of ‘*pro*’ boxing and through it the identity he bestowed upon himself:

“My way of looking at being pro is...hmm...basically I’m going to make it on my own...simple. It gives me happiness to go out and do my own thing, my own challenge and if things are hard at times and good at other times...no matter what...it’s down to me...nothing to do with anyone else, you know what I’m saying. Simple that’s it. [Emphatically] Listen I don’t have to box...Business wise I’m well on the way to being set. It just makes me happy...the challenge makes me happy... I really admire people who have got the discipline and guts to get in a ring, in front of a load of people and...take it on you know?”

[Q] – How do you mean ‘take it on’ mate?

“Well...just have that something a bit extra...inject a bit of sparkle to life. I wouldn’t fancy a normal existence...a nine to five humdrum existence is not my thing...no way.”

[Q] - “Never? You’ve never been there?”

“No, not really...I mean even as a kid I rebelled a bit...as a kid school was not for me, I had the intelligence I just didn’t like unnecessary rules, someone else’s rules telling me what I could and couldn’t do. I’ve been brought up like it anyway ‘cause the old fella is the same...got a few business interests going. [Mobile phone rings and he promises the caller that he will save a dozen tickets for his scheduled fight next week] Sorry...hmm...I just like to be moving ahead always...looking out for what’s out there, to keep on developing. Listen, I love boxing...everyone...Coach-Terry is like a second father to me... journeymen, champions...all the boys in the gym. Whatever a kid’s abilities it’s worth something because I respect and appreciate what it takes to get in there and compete. [Intently and very serious] It takes determination you know...to keep doing this. I think everyone that gets through the ropes is a winner, no matter what the result. Don’t get me wrong...it’s hard...all the training, dieting, sometimes you feel you’re on another wavelength to everyone and everything. You have to have that mind-set...everything has to be focused. There’s no going back. No [exaggerated] ‘I might have, could’ve’. You aim to do it right and that’s it, no excuses...hmm...you know all the risks...but that’s it. It’s that directness and if your all there...[touching forehead] I mean proper...fitness is done right, weight has been done right, your mind is on it, then you know your mark...there’s no excuses”

Mickey (29 years old; professional 8 years)

As Mickey articulates, his pre-fight preparation is a quest to ‘*get on it*’; ‘it’ being the physical but more importantly psychological focus to apply ‘hard’ non-compromising aggression toward his opponent for the duration of their ten round contest for the Southern Are Title. The

days and hours before *'fight night'* he will draw comfort from having conditioned his mind in the solitude of 5 a.m. runs while the rest of the world sleeps; the twice-daily workouts as he moulds his body into something resembling a precision weapon; his *'battle with the scales'* where he sacrifices the cultural pleasures available to his peers. His most prominent battle however, is the slow re-alignment of psychic energy oscillating from the denial of insecurities in a bid to induce the arrogance of indestructibility that, he assures himself, will see him through the pending challenge-come-ordeal of *'the fight'*.

As *'fight-night'* becomes immanent the performativity enacted by professional boxers can be better understood by Lyng's (1990) concept of 'edgework'. Lyng defines a range of voluntary risk taking pursuits as edgework activities when they commonly involve "...a clearly observable threat to one's physical or mental well-being or one's sense of ordered existence" (p. 857)⁵³. Similarly to other edgeworkers, as Mickey readies his body and mind to face his opponent in the physically and mentally *'hard'* ordeal of a fight to be witnessed by thousands of people he has, by his own admission, voluntarily undertaken a risky activity that will certainly involve physical hurt, with the potential of damage always on the agenda. Like other edgeworkers he eulogises the craftwork component of boxing which constitutes "...the most valuable aspect of the experience" (p. 859). As Lyng (p. 859) argues, edgeworkers preoccupations with skill development and application signify:

"...the ability to maintain control over a situation that verges on complete chaos, a situation most people would regard as entirely uncontrollable. The more specific aptitudes required for this type of competence involve the ability to avoid being paralysed by fear and the capacity to focus one's attention and actions on what is most crucial for survival"

Moreover, the sacrifice required to prepare mind and body to succeed when undertaking the *'real thing'* fabricates a value orientation that, in common with other edgeworkers in Lyng's study, regards a "survival capacity" (p. 859) as a quality imbued with courage and moral resonance; in fighting parlance the unflinching display of *'heart'* during ring combat. By fight night the commercially inspired dramatization of this athletic challenge⁵⁴ induces a sense of "hyperreality", an experience sensed and felt as "...being much more real than the circumstances of day-to-day existence" (ibid p. 861). As a socialised agent through the fight game in England, during the ring walk he is aware that he embodies an eternal right-of-

⁵³ Lyng draws from his own empirical analysis of sky diving as well as secondary studies of aircraft test piloting, mountain climbing, combat soldiering, prostitution, gambling, drug use, gambling, scuba diving, rock climbing, ice climbing, endurance sports, downhill skiing and criminal activity.

⁵⁴ Media speculation, the atmospheric and near claustrophobic fight-venue crammed with an animated audience anticipating *'two good boys on top of the bill tonight'*, his entrance on to the ring stage accompanied by blaring music and screaming or jeering fans.

passage, one trodden by all past folk legends before him that he seeks to emulate. He struts into the ring peering out of his hooded gown, bobs and weaves in a timeless display of masculine bravado. Supported or jeered, he is at liberty to construct, "...a heightened sense of self and a feeling of omnipotence...or self-actualisation" (p. 863). For the 'pro' boxer henceforth, the athletic challenge of the professional boxing ring signifies an idealisation of reality whereby "...the ego is called forth in a dramatic way" (p. 860).

Victory justifies his sacrifice and simultaneously reinforces the quest to accept the next challenge pencilled in for another day with another foe in a renewed bid to overcome personal challenges and lay claim to public accolades. In this way, from the boxer's point of view, engagement in professional boxing competition constitutes the living embodiment of one's destiny that by definition proffers an, albeit precarious and often short lived, 'glorified' sense of being (see Adler and Adler 1989). Perhaps also, victory briefly suspends a more mundane 'normative existence' lacking the, albeit brutal, pizzazz of boxing as a way of life. Thus, through undertaken this challenge the boxer engineers the liberty to transcend, if only fleetingly, the normative components defining everyday life in contemporary England. From this analytical vantage it is possible to more fully comprehend the personification of the 'hungry' fighter in 21st century England. Mickey provides further insight into his constructed sense of valorous hyper-masculinity and the 'heart' he will need to display if he is going to claim his just rewards for '*living the life*' immediately prior his title fight:

"I'm really up for this one [twitching neck] everything...I mean eeeeevveeverything has been catered for. Its just time to get in there and do the business...whichever way it goes...knock out, points, cuts I'm walking out of there the Governor, and there's no way that man is going to stop me"

[Q] – "Did I hear you've sparred with him some time back?"

"Yeah...I know him quite well actually [rueful grin]...he's been here (gymnasium) sparring (name of boxer) quite a lot over the years...so I know him both as a boxer and as a person...a nice fella"

[Q] – "Is that a difficult one to get round?"

"Not at all! Listen...I don't care how much I hurt him or cut him or...it doesn't worry me if I spark him...this is the game right...this is what's on offer. [Contemplative] I don't really worry about knocking someone too bad...I've got my game plan and that's it...[moving shoulders rhythmically] I concentrate on hitting and not taking too many back...that's all I have to do. As (name of coach) is always telling me I'm always getting dragged into having a bit of a tear-up...but basically my thing...my talent...is to box. [Increasingly animated] Now I know (surname of opponent) is a thinker...he's cute so he'll be doing the same. So game

on you know...he wants to beat me, I want to beat him... when it's over we're mates. I've got nothing but respect for all my opponents...I'm the boy though...you know what I mean? [taps me playfully on shoulder]. When I hit him I don't want to be hit back and if he goes down I don't want him to get up. I'm ready to go. I've done the hard training, my weights bang on...I'm ready to go. This is all I'm thinking about, fighting...and winning..."

It is important also to acknowledge that Mickey's role identity as a 'fighter' has been nurtured over many years of apprenticeship. By undertaking the rights of passage deemed necessary to develop his pugilistic capital - negotiating pre-contest nerves, sacrificing one's social and carnal pleasures to 'make weight', displaying fortitude in absorbing the inevitable punishment meted out during 'fight-time' (whether winning and losing) and in doing so learning another facet of the pugilistic craft - Mickey and all other 'real' boxers are at liberty to garner ownership of the timeless accolade of 'experience'. His career trajectory prior to the Area title match-up has seen him overcome over twenty adversaries in fights scheduled for four rounds of three minutes or six rounds of two minutes duration; then six rounds of three minutes or eight rounds of two minutes; then eight rounds of three minutes; before gaining access to title status, ten rounds of three minutes (Area championship contests) and twelve rounds of three minutes duration (British, European and World championship contests). Contests are thus deemed prestigious due to their potential to accrue symbolic *and* economic capital in accordance to the number of rounds contested.

It need also be understood, however, that the corporeal, symbolic and emotional attachments through which boxers, as sentient human beings and reflective social-actors, wilfully embrace the 'illuso' of professional boxing are powerfully seductive forces for *all* boxers. Thus, the agential consciousness embodied by professional boxers simultaneously fortifies a collective sense of role-identity among professional boxing-practitioners that, nonetheless, serves as a medium of stratification. In this way professional boxers will aspire, or not, to gradate or stagnate along the social order continuum of boxers accredited with the moniker of 'journeyman', 'prospect', contender' and 'champion' in what amounts to a 'business of flesh'. Moreover, as is shown in the section below, the cultural praxis through which professional boxers embody performative identities and life sustaining modes of behaviour signifies the, as will be argued, 'illusory' meritocracy of the boxing ring.

The real thing

The following fieldwork snapshot details my lived experience of sharing the ring as '*the sparring partner*' to the renowned '*champ*' boxer referred to by Coach-Lenny above, while he readied himself for a World title fight:

Moving around with the 'champ'

I arrive at the Chorley Street Community Centre (a pseudonym), an old Victorian building situated in the corner of a residential street only a few minutes from my residence in South Luton, at around 6.30 pm. The previous week I'd more than once walked passed this same building in my attempts to locate this local, yet rather hidden, professional life-world patronised by one of the most accomplished British professional boxers of the present era. When initially entering these premises the sight of under-5s playing with dolls in crèches made me double track assuming I had made a mistake. It was only after making half a dozen enquiries to passers-by on the street outside as to the whereabouts of a boxing gymnasium nearby that I was directed to the same space I had emerged from, by-passing the mum and toddler group to a room at the back end of the building. As I approached the wooden door pointed out to me, I could faintly hear the rhythm of a dance track and the all-familiar buzzer noise. Upon prising the heavy door open the vibrancy of the 'pro' life-world of boxing engulfed my senses...

I enter a cramped space almost entirely filled by a boxing ring and an assortment of punch bags and speed balls. The air is filled with the aroma of liniment oil and a faint odour of stale sweat. The walls are decorated with dozens of fight posters and yellowing newspaper clippings and photographs depicting past ring exploits of boxers who had learned their craft in these premises over the preceding generations. Assortments of boxing gloves, skipping ropes, blood stained bandages and discarded sports kit are strewn on wooden benches along the perimeters. Immediately to my right is a tall 'black' boxer stripped to the waist is assiduously studying his own reflection in a mirror shadowboxing. While letting out loud rhythmical grunts to accompany a stream of punches he looks up as I enter and jubilantly acknowledges my presence, "*all right mate!*" He then shouts over to the only other person in the room, "*I'm starting to get the feel again Terry...I'm really buzzing...L-O-V-I-N-G I-T!*"

Coach-Terry, an amiable looking man in his early seventy's who nonetheless appears remarkably fit and healthy, is at the far corner of the room busily untangling a bundle of skipping ropes. He looks up and peers at me behind a set of thick-rimmed glasses. I walk over to him ask if it's ok to have a '*shake-out*'. He tells me '*not a problem*' acknowledging he knew who I was having read reports of my fights in 'The Boxing News'. He asks, "*you're with Coach aren't you?*" I respond that I am dissatisfied with the level of sparring at the Gym and am looking to try and improve my performance. Nodding in agreement Coach-Terry confirms, "*Yes, you must have decent sparring in the pro game*". He continues, "*as long as I'm not stepping on any toes...no problem*". I tell Coach-Terry that I simply wish to improve my boxing. Empathetically he replies, "*well your welcome. There's Mickey [pointing at the boxer shadowboxing] who's coming back after a bit of a lay-off due to injury. He's unbeaten in twenty and is looking for titles. There's Delroy who's a novice and should be here soon and we have one or two other guys due back so you can mix in with them nicely. They're all a bit heavier but we don't go silly here. We had Tommy [surname] up until his last one last month. That's right, he got knocked-out badly by a guy he shouldn't have...a nasty knock-out [shaking his head in dismay]...and I advised him to call it a day. He's a family man and he doesn't need the money...he's on six figures running the family building firm so what's the point? And there's [surname of 'champion'] who I'm training for a title shot coming up in a couple of months. You won't*

see much of him...he's mostly training during the day. When he's down here I will be concentrating on him so be aware of that...but you're welcome to train here".

I proceeded to have a workout and later on that week stepped into the ring for six rounds of sparring with Mickey and Delroy. The tempo of our sparring was energetic as we swapped punches with measured intent in a bid to fathom each other's styles out. As both men were of weight classifications substantially heavier than my super-featherweight frame, the body-mass to core strength disparity meant that I found our exchanges physically draining. To compensate I concentrated on utilising my speed of punch and fleet footed evasive movement to good effect. During those initial rounds a tacit understanding was established between us. I traded my speed and mobility for Mickey's tactical expertise and silky skills and Del's dogged strength and ruggedness in a quest to mutually benefit from the problems our respective abilities set each other. I left Chorley Street gymnasium feeling physically drained although happy at establishing a learning curve that would not have been possible among my Gym amateur club-mates. I was eager to return the following week...

Entering the gymnasium I lock eye contact with a man I'm familiar with having seen many of his fights on television. Champ is sitting on a chair facing Coach-Terry who is assiduously applying strips of tape and bandage to his protégés fists in the precision formula usually reserved for fight night. I also note three middle-aged men whom I have never seen before standing by the ring apron attentively observing proceedings. Barely looking up from his duties, Coach-Terry mutters "*get ready Alex and jump in the ring*". Noticing that Mickey and Delroy are also meditatively applying their own bandages, a wave of adrenaline surges through me. Instinctively I internalise my focus to steel my resolve...

Having retreated to a corner of the room to get changed into my sports gear I notice that Champ has entered the ring and is pacing its perimeter intently self-engrossed in the rhythms played-out on his personal stereo. As yet another wave of adrenalin surges through me. I '*wrap*' my hands in bandages and strips of elastic tape, apply Vaseline to my face and jump through the ring ropes. Coach-Terry beckons me over to him and he ties the laces of my gloves and fastens my head-guard securely. He does the same for '*champ*'. I pace the ring exhaling deep breaths through my nose while brushing past my partner as he too paces the ring space staring into space and snorting loudly from his nose. I sense the scrutiny of those outside the ropes and simultaneously feel the physical presence of the World-class performer I'm sharing intimate space with. He appears very powerful; a thick-set upper body and strong although slimly tapered legs belly a '*fighting-weight*' of ten stone that appears near impossible for a man of his body frame to attain. Despite wearing a full-face headguard with only space left for his vision, I catch sight of his heavily scamed eyebrows. Of course by this stage I too have acquired my own '*marks*' from the six stitches inserted from my previous contest⁵⁵. Purposively snorting deeply inhaled breaths through my nose I seek to channel my resolve into an energy that will ensure no further additions to that tally. Coach-Terry stands on the ring apron and stopwatch in hand instructs, "*TIME...take it away fellas!*"

⁵⁵ In addition to the cut received during my second professional contest, my winning debut was marred by a broken left hand I sustained when landing repeated '*jabs*' on my shorter opponents forehead.

We both skip to the centre of the ring and forcefully tap each others fists. Seeking to gain my composure and quickly as possible slot into a concentrated rhythm I venture a *'polite'* jab. It is effortlessly dismissed and a fully powered response whistles passed my ear, while a second *'rocket launcher'* slams into my jaw knocking my head back and forcing me to veer into the ring ropes. I hear a voice in the room remarking, *"good shot son!"* I seek to move along the perimeter of the ring but find *'Champ'* cutting me off thus denying me even a split second comfort zone to find the time and space to mount a retaliation. More jabs with *'intent'* are fired at me although I manage to steel myself to their power and counter with a series of scoring punches. Their accuracy does nothing to alleviate the wave of measured aggression coming my way, however, and once again I am forced to stand my ground and swap punches with every ounce of strength at my disposal... *"T-I-M-E!"* We both pace the ring for the one minute rest period. Coach-Terry applies Vaseline to our faces and offers us gulps of water of which we spit into a bucket. He then glances at his stopwatch and instructs the next three minute round of serious sparring.

Steeling my focus once again I turn to face Champ. Again, I'm confronted with a stream of powerful punches. Slotting into a more fluent rhythm I manage to slip his booming jab and bring him on to my countering jab. Utilising *'quick feet'* I move laterally to *'slide'* out of distance. Just as I start to find the all important rhythm and try out this formula once again, my counter is met by *'Champ's'* reciprocated countering-counter and a powerful right hand punch slams into my jaw jolting my body and *'sparking'* my consciousness. The same unrecognisable voice punctuates my concentration with unwelcome (to me) commentary advising, *"great shot, now double up...down stairs then up"...*I retaliate with a series of powerful punches with both fists; *'Champ'* immediately reciprocates and we *'bang'* at each other centre ring propelling Coach-Terry to instruct, *"easy, easy you're having a war both of you! Keep it reasonable...come on lets go!"* We both take a step back to resume proceedings. Another booming jab whistles passed my ear and I offer a counter with as much force as I can muster. *'Champ'* reciprocates and continuous applying a surging will power translated into physical and psychological intensity as the salvo for unremitting aggression make me fight just to stay there, stay on my feet and punch back...TIME!

I manage to complete two more rounds at much the same tempo. Midway through the fourth round I feel the strength of my punches steadily subsiding. As I become increasingly fatigued all I can offer is the willpower to absorb the *'punishment'* levelled at me by the heavier, stronger and more experienced *'Champ'* without folding altogether. Sensing my resistance has waned Coach-Terry pulls me out at the end of the fourth round and Mickey takes my place for two more rounds of *'work'*. As I depart the ring *'Champ'* quips through his gym-shield, *"How do you like the real thing?"* I smile at him defiantly and exhausted start to skip while watching the remainder of the sparring. With every part of my body twitching from the exertion I remove the bandages from my hands, undertake a few stretching exercises and replenish my body with carbohydrate liquid. Nursing a sore head and neck I inform Coach-Terry I will be back in two days time. Before I manage to finish my sentence, *'Champ'* beckons Coach-Terry over, who responds immediately...

Field-notes [amended] February 2001

The above snap-shot gives an indication of my initiation into the ‘real’ world of professional boxing. If mine was an uncharacteristically idealistic, naïve or perhaps overly critical motive in comparison to other boxers is difficult to discern. Nonetheless, by immersing oneself within this passion lade institution, sustained by way of bravado, and experiencing first-hand the intrinsic application to developing the pugilistic craft and the joy such dedication allows, it can be inferred that all professional boxers, whether ‘*wannabe*’ boxers sharing the same gymnasium space occupied by the ‘*champ*’, enjoy the liberty to literally inscribe freedom into every living and breathing sinew of their bodies. From this standpoint, through submitting to the dictates of boxing tradition, however brutal, professional boxers are able to embody an exalted sense of mastery over their immediate life-circumstances and potential destinies. That said, my thoughts immediately after having experienced the reality of elite level professional boxing reveal a disquietude that I sensed as much as I was able to rationalise by way of ‘cold’ deliberation. Under the heading “Thoughts on Retirement” I noted the following field note extracts:

“Has the time come to let go? I still enjoy the training and I feel I’m getting better...I’ll miss the intensity...in some ways I need boxing...is it time to think long-term however...employment and health? Part of me says its time to walk away.

I’m occupying the role of (cheap) sparring partner...but this is surely not what it’s about...or is it? Have I been consigned to the role of gymnasium ‘sparring partner’, or worse, had I become the ‘punch bag’? Should I just persevere? Is this what *should* be done to improve? Not too much wear and tear (yet). Do I need the scar tissue or brain damage? I feel like an amateur in a professional environment. I have no confidence in the abilities, or intentions, of those around me...why does it feel like I keep banging my head against a brick wall?...the people I need to get better are just not up to the job...or am I just making excuses? Am I bottling it?”

(Reflective Notes, March 2001)

The following chapter seeks to communicate the ‘hidden’ nexus of power relations propelling professional boxers to wilfully endure the uncompromising and often brutal realities of professional boxing competition by symbolically validating the ‘*illutio*’ of autonomy and meritocracy. As shall be argued below, professional boxers embrace of the ethics of libertarianism (Morgan 1993), as valorous (hyper)masculine craftsmen, transmutes into an instrumental consciousness through which they not only place their bodies at risk but also wilfully submit control of their athletic careers and physical and emotional well-being to venerable significant others⁵⁶. More to the point, if the cultural praxis of the professional

⁵⁶ It is striking that a large proportion of the most prominent champions encountered were insulated by the status of knowledgeable elders, usually fathers or other blood relatives, who had ‘*learned a bit*’ a

boxing subculture dances to the tune of market liberalism, then the integrity of an industry by which the buying and selling of boxers craftwork, i.e. the lifetime of human agency encapsulated in perfecting a very particular working instrument – their bodies – (see Beamish and Ritchie 2006 p. 140), is effectively sold to the highest bidder in order to accrue surplus-value needs to be queried (see Ingham 2004; Giullianotti 2005).

The logic of ‘it’: show me the money

Manager Nobby Nobbs of the “Loser Limited” stable of boxers renowned for producing journeymen boxers who fight as often as possible and invariably come off second best, illustrates a sample of his philosophy on life experienced as *‘the opponent’*:

“I always ask if they want to fight somebody, and if they do, that’s OK. Then it’s my job to make sure they don’t get hurt. You have to use the system. We’re like prostitutes. Anybody can fuck us as long as they pay, end of story. It’s a harsh way of looking at it, but that’s it. So if you lose, OK, but in a way you win. All my lads earn money legally. They don’t rob, they don’t knock old ladies on the head...*we use the game*. You know, it’s like with football. You can’t play for Manchester United. Somebody’s got to play for Bolton and Preston. Half a loaf’s better than none ain’t it? Don’t let the system beat you. It’s like life. Don’t let life beat you. If you don’t play you can’t win. At least ours are winning. It might not be on paper, but they’re winning. They’re winning in life, aren’t they?”

(in Melanie Lloyd 2003 p. 161; emphasis added).

From the professional boxing-practitioners point of view boxing represents an idealisation of not only masculine valour but also entrepreneurial acumen. The endeavour to step through the ropes is mutually recognised and the risks inherent acknowledged and accepted. From this standpoint, the boxer perceives an entrepreneurial stake in *‘the game’* whatever his standing in the hierarchy of boxers. From the boxer’s agential point of view, therefore, professional boxing symbolises a “...niche business” (Giulianotti 2005 p. 56) from which to profit from. As super-bantamweight ‘contender’ Paul articulates, an ever pressing issue for professional boxers is the expectation placed on them by promoters to sell a substantial share of tickets for each of their fights. Nonetheless, despite feeling pressured to satisfy this expectation and under no illusion of the consequences if he couldn’t, Paul appeals to the symbolic capital of his ‘pro’ identity as a craftwork vocation with the entrepreneurial possibility for accruing immediate pecuniary gain. He had this to say as I purchased a set of tickets from him a few days pre-contest:

“Cheers mate...I’ll be seeing you at the show [rueful grin].

[Q] – How many tickets have you sold?

generations since. As such the social and symbolic capital of significant others, in addition of ‘natural’ athletic ability and dedication, ensured measures of respect were allotted to the myriad of pivotal decisions, however minute, when negotiating athletic careers of ‘star’ boxers.

“I’ve done all right for this one...I’m not sure how many all told because my old man gets rid of a load for me at his work and the club he goes to. Probably...I’d say...well about two-five to three (thousand pounds) worth...so that’s about one hundred, a hundred and fifty tickets. I’ve still got a few...about twenty with one mate and my girlfriend’s family usually buy ten or so. I also leave tickets in a few of my local pubs and they put up the posters and my brother does a few at the post office where he works...got another mate who puts up posters at his college and a few more mates get rid of some, so that can add up”.

[Q] – All this organising must give you a headache on top of all your preparation.

“Yeah it’s a headache [grins]...I’d rather lock myself in a room until it’s all over...believe it! It’s just something that has to be done. [Frowning] You know that if you don’t sell tickets, if you don’t put arses on seats then you don’t get work, or you’re in fights you shouldn’t be, if you know what I mean. Still all the effort puts a bit extra in the back pocket and that’s worth the hassle I suppose.

[Q] – What’s (name of promoter) giving you?

“I get 5% from the tickets...he’s putting up two grand for this six-rounder...so a payday that’ll hopefully be quick money [grins]”

Equally, on a separate occasion, Paul’s Coach and mentor Al articulates economic-instrumental value-orientations to afford a measure of success gleaned from the blood, sweat and tears sacrificed in the practice of ‘it’ (boxing):

“Here in this gym they’re all after the same prize, they’re all on the same wavelength...they want to make it [as a matter of fact]. I mean they all love it...listen [raising tone] all kinds of personalities walk through this (the gymnasium) door...all races, all types...you name it...big men, small men, some are poor others are doing all right...even if they can’t speak any English its always the kind of man who enjoys that one-on-one thing... it’s a one-on-one job in there so you have to be determined in the first place, have lots of grit and determination and you must want it...you must have the heart for it. Now I always tell anyone who boxes for me... straight...that it’s the hardest sport and it can be lonely...don’t get me wrong, you need good people supporting you, I find a good training base helps immensely also...but at the end of the day it’s about number one...it’s in the ring that things happen and that’s where you make your money. The pro game is at least a five, six year venture and during that time it’s all or nothing...it has to be cause, in my eyes, you invest your prime during those years and you want to make a few quid and get out with your marbles.”

From the above it becomes apparent that as much boxer-coach relationships became cultivated through bonds of professional duty, friendship and mutual obligation and shared sense of self-esteem derived as self-selected members of the ‘pro’ occupational community, their

relationship was nonetheless objectified through contractual bind, with the latter entitled to receive 10% of the boxers earnings for services rendered⁵⁷. From here, it becomes possible to understand how the performative and life sustaining modes of behaviour embodied by professional boxers transmute into economic instrumentalist motives to accrue surplus profit. Thus, much like their pugilistic predecessors, contemporary professional boxers seek to (self)actualise their 'worker autonomy' by commodifying their agency as body-labour of the professional boxing entertainment industry. In order to comprehend the logic through which boxing-practitioners cultural praxis is seamlessly commodified, the vantage of 'The Management/Promoting' impresarios encountered during this ethnography, whose status within the boxing universe exerted almost oligarchic control of the boxing-practitioners labouring in boxing gymnasiums needs to be considered next.

The Boss

A hierarchical social order stratified the professional boxing universe into practitioners (boxers and coaches) and business impresarios (mangers and promoters) in a not dissimilar way when the Aristocracy sponsored the most renowned bare knuckle pugilists of the 18th century. Unlike the clearly defined status and wealth distinctions demarcating the landed Aristocracy from the plebeian social strata from which bareknuckle pugilists spawned from, however, the indices of power stratifying 'boxing practitioners' from 'business impresarios' were experienced through far more subtle and mutually signifying markers of symbolic association. I gained a formative sense of such-like 'hidden' intra-cultural hierarchies when, after finishing a workout at 'the Workhouse' gymnasium, I spotted Manager/Promoter-Bernie appear from his office situated toward the back end of the premises. Grabbing this opportunity⁵⁸ I made an enquiry for purchasing tickets for his upcoming '*fight-card*', making sure I complemented him on the quality of the '*show*' he promoted the previous month. In a buoyant mannerism he proceeded to expound upon the virtuous of '*old school*' boxing in light of the commercial intent underpinning '*my boys*' and, more notably, his own desire to '*make it*':

"Listen I get none of my boys easy fights...ok so I try to get an edge that's what any promoter should do. All my boys sell tickets that's why they fight regular. I make no bones about it [emphasising] it's a business...money speaks at the end of the day. I say to them...I'm honest...I say this is a hard, hard game...well it's not a game it's business pure and simple. If you want fun or [fist waving] simply enjoy having a tear-up (punch-up)...well stay in the bloody amateurs, you know what I mean? [He grabs my arm to emphasise his point]...In this business you've got to be

⁵⁷ In fact, on a number of occasions over the period of data collection it became evident that what had seemed like a tight bond between boxer and coach became permanently and instantaneously fractured, particularly when the boxer suffered a conclusive defeat.

⁵⁸ On the whole 'The Management' resided in an office usually behind closed doors, only occasionally to venture on the gymnasium floor when '*serious*' sparring took place.

prepared to live the life and that means no boozing it up, no loose women, sleeping right, eating right and training right. If you can't do that you're not going to make any kind of career for yourself...simple. I tell all my boys straight...there's no point fighting 'punch bags', building up a flash record and when the opportunity comes along you get found out. You've got to know you can fight and so do I! The only way to learn is to fight good proper fighters. Listen it would be easy for me to build a kid up...put ten or twenty grand into doing so and then he lets me down...we've both lost...My shows are good because they have to be. We don't get TV so we rely on a full house that's going to come back...its simple business sense. So I put on good competitive fights, I have a regular crowd that supports the boys. I have a mailing list of some three-hundred punters who I personally know and like to come to my shows. There's no break in the action waiting for TV commercials and all that...the good thing here is that it avoids punters going to the bar and getting rowdy. We promote a family atmosphere...people come back time and again and that's what makes it successful. I have to be because it is easy for me to drop ten or twelve grand...easy. Do that more than once in one season and that's it...you've dropped you're bollocks!"

Having been called back to his office to answer a query for '*a possibility*' for a light-heavyweight under his management to box in a promotion scheduled for South Africa, he abruptly ends the monologue before, looking at me intently, asks why I was training at '*my place*'. As I rather self-consciously started to expand on my academic interest in boxing, a fleeting quizzical expression mutated into nonplussed disinterest and Bernie interrupted our 'conversation' by letting me know I could purchase tickets for his next 'show' from the office, before hurrying off to attend to his business.

It becomes apparent that 'pro' boxers sensibility towards autonomy served to legitimise the power of Paymasters, such as Bernie, held over them who, in the boxers' eyes, had 'made it' as self-made entrepreneurs. Moreover the deference through which the Paymasters were afforded symbolic capital by the boxers was culturally nurtured and reproduced. Throughout this research I often noted that boxers displayed reverence towards the Business Impresarios encountered through being accorded 'respect' as ex-fighters or at least as social actors clearly defined as approximate to the working-class origins of the boxers themselves. Thus, Paymasters symbolic and cultural capital was harnessed much as an intra-cultural processor of economic exploitation. Moreover, 'pro' boxers felt a sense of obligation to do everything they could to justify the economic opportunities extended towards them while not only knowingly complying to receiving a subordinated share of the profits on offer, but also wilfully exposing their bodies to the rigours of physical hurt and inevitable injury.

As I contemplated Bernie's strikingly honest expose of the fight business and the implicit expectations fostered on his team of boxers to 'perform' in the ring in a way that would be beneficial to all (including the audience), I resumed observing the comings and goings of this

particular gymnasium life-world space. With only one other boxer working out in the gymnasium during this time, my attention was once again drawn to the series of posters advertising past and upcoming fight promotions and the latest range of nutritional supplements designed to push ever scientific standards of power orientated athletic performance. At that instance I more clearly understood how the liberating potential of professional boxers' agency was, in complex ways, moulded through capitalism's logic for accruing surplus value from the production of 'spectacular' (Shipley 1989) athletic feats aimed at satisfying consumer appetite for popular cultural entertainment.

Survival of the 'entertaining'

The viability of 'big time' professional boxing resides in its appeal as a television sport attracting mass audiences. Clearly, therefore, for professional boxing to flourish as popular entertainment it needs to satisfy the expectations of a home-based audience. Accordingly, for those interested in profiting commercially from their investment in boxing (either as entrepreneurial practitioners and/or business impresarios), there is a requirement to generate 'spectacular' athletic feats that will enthral public demand. Thus, professional boxers are well aware that *there is a demand implicit to their agency to 'excite' the paying public*. As the former World Boxing Organisation (WBO) featherweight champion Colin McMillan in his autobiography *Fight The Power* (2000) recalls, his ascendancy through the rank and file British 'opponent' impeding his way to claiming championship status⁵⁹.

"He was typical of the vast majority of British fighters – good and fit, but not possessing that extra sparkle to set them apart from the rest of the pack. Unlike America where the pure depth and number of fighters meant that one's record could be quite easily padded, the British route with its honest professionals could be infinitely harder. This path, or 'The Jungle' as I called it, could often be the hardest stage of a fighter's life. Every time you stepped into the ring, you did so with the knowledge that all your opponents had the same dream as you. They were fit, they were strong and they realised, as you did, that a few good wins could pave the way to untold riches"

McMillan (2000 p. 85)

The symbolic resonance afforded to expressions such as 'the pack', 'sparkle', 'honesty', 'the dream' and 'untold riches' betray the complex interplay of agential and structural dimensions

⁵⁹ The professional boxing universe in England accommodates a hierarchical structure of boxers: the lowest strata consists of boxers with little by way of ability and are as such allocated rather demeaning monikers such as 'bodies', 'punch bags', 'knock-over jobs'. Following them are 'honest pro's' or 'journeymen' boxers who by and large are tough individuals who possess the capability to be competitive against all but the very elite. Ascending the ranks of the (mostly part-time) 'ordinary' are boxers deemed 'prospects' who aspire to claim any one of a plethora of titles up to national level. A select cadre achieve the status of 'contenders' and aspire to topple the resident 'champs' at the top of the European and ultimately World pecking orders.

through which the commercial logic of 'pro' boxing takes on meaning for practitioners. In addition, this inner-meaning needs to exude the stylistic performative folk appeal that will captivate a local fan base eager to fill local small hall arenas and potentially entice a mass televised audience in their hundreds of thousands and sometimes millions. A 'prospect' therefore needs to demonstrate prerequisites of 'spectacular' entertainment value in its most recognisable form; the ability to render an opponent unconscious either via one punch knockout power, all-out aggression and/or perhaps more subtly through an exhibition of 'flamboyant' athletic virtuosity.

Moreover, *if* the maxim that television 'loves a winner and abhors a loser' (Shipley 1989) defines the commercial logic of boxing as an entertainment spectacle, then the underlying script of any boxing-drama maintains that a leading role is cast for 'the winner', most readily recognisable through an unblemished string of victories.. For that reason, therefore, the commercial logic of professional boxing ensures that there is not only a paramount significance placed on winning there is also status, and a price, afforded to 'the loser'. Professional boxers' destinies are therefore inevitable manipulated by the Promoter who acts as 'The Conductor' of any scheduled contest between two protagonists. In turn, Promoters employ Matchmakers who are immensely knowledgeable actors within the professional boxing universe in England (and beyond). As has been stated, the commercial viability of boxing promotions depends on a blend of product branding, customer satisfaction and surplus value i.e. fashioning a folk hero with a spectacular winning propensity for future maximisation of economic gain. The match-making process is thus a fine art and needs to satisfy consumer demand by way of 'Puppeteering' action packed athletic contests between approximate, although not quite equally skilled and or physically matched protagonists, for an expectant audience wishing to be witness to what amounts to a 'spectacular' form of quasi-civilised entertainment (see Wacquant 1998b).

The drama conducted in the ring, however, is far from a mere dramatization of reality. Rather, it is a scripted flesh and blood reality by which the oft-quoted analogy applied to the culture of professional boxing is informative - '*boxing is theatre...but theatre with blood*'. As much as professional boxing contests are represented to the public in a frame of reference symbolising a fair contest between two equals⁶⁰, it is usual for 'Red corner' boxer to have been in serious training for months in a bid to '*peak at your full potential at just the right time*', whereas the 'Blue corner' boxer will have had weeks, days or even hours preparatory notice before a

⁶⁰ The symbolic resonance of parity and thus fair play in boxing (perhaps above all sports) resides in the nakedness of two boxers contesting the most elemental of sports. Strict regulation of weight classification is thus a necessary and clearly evident measure ensuring fair play.

'phone call' offering the opportunity of a *'pay day on the right hand side of the bill'* as *'The Opponent'*. The fight fraternity maxim that *'styles make fights'* privileges *'Red corner'* with learning fights by which their *'Blue corner'* opponents have the ability to present *'a few problems'* yet do not possess the tools of ambition, style, physicality or talent to up the tempo and *'steal'* a win. *'Red corner'* is invariably bigger, stronger and more powerful while *'Blue corner'* does not have the time, inclination, knowledge and/or capability to condition his body into something comparable to a high powered precision weapon.

As *'Prospects'* accumulate experience and ascend the performance gradient they face opponents who will also step into the opposite corner having laid claim to a fighting heart likewise defined through many years of sacrifice, ego and hurt. The boxer standing in the opposite corner of a championship contest is no *'journeyman'* fighter whose ambition has been blunted by *'survivalist'* economic instrumentalism. He will equally seek to claim the prizes on offer and in doing so keep body, dignity and future dreams and desires intact. He too will have mortgaged his health and the economic well-being of his family's future on those precious thirty minutes waiting to be rightfully claimed by his innate capacities to secure a win, to keep moving ahead. He too will step into the ring voluntarily and place his *'heart'* on the line in an unflinching commitment to overcome the challenge of his opponent for that night. For those motivated by the prospect of *'making it'* in professional boxing, therefore, aspiration is inevitably structured through with the promise of free market enterprise; namely the sport-entertainment industry's unyielding requirements for attaining surplus value through satisfying consumer appetite for witnessing *'spectacular'* and thus inevitably brutal and risky boxing contests fought over the longer duration of eight, ten and twelve rounds.

As the boxer acclimatises to the rigours of his profession, inevitably by registering an ascending degree of physical and psychological *'wear and tear'* due to the physical *'hurt'* and emotional anxiety accumulated by punches received and given on a week by week basis over many years, the aspiration toward economic gain is given ultimate credence; *'getting something for it'*. Thus as the main protagonists shaping the drama boxers develop an instrumentalist frame of consciousness to, *'get the job done, stay in one piece and get paid'*, win or lose. In the final analysis, however, whether as a *'Prospect'* manoeuvred into a winning position or as a *'Journeyman'* offered *'a pay day'* to take on the guise of *'the loser'* or aspirant underdog granted the opportunity to turn the tables on a much hyped and overwhelmingly favoured opponent, the professional boxer willingly colludes to the submission of forces outside of his control By submerging my embodied agential self at the centre of the *'lived'* power manifestations through which professional boxing practitioners interpret and embody performative and life sustaining modes of behaviour, it is possible to

discern how inevitably, sooner or later, ‘pro’ boxers identities, aspirations and destinies are moulded by and through capitalism’s logic for surplus profit and labour exploitation.

The making of a journeyman



Following on from ex-world Featherweight champion Colin McMillan’s metaphorical use of ‘The Jungle’ to portray something of domestic level British professional boxing, my own autobiographical experiences as a researcher-come-professional boxer were qualitatively comparable. The following fieldwork account seeks to, metaphorically and literally, ‘flesh-out’ the at once emotional, sensorial, symbolic and socially

constructed lived experience of ‘pro’ boxing.

An apt assessment of my adversary on this night, Nigel Senior, is further offered by McMillan when he labels a select band of journeymen British boxers who box as often as they can as, “...the backbone of British boxing” (p. 86). Nigel was acknowledged as a ‘*solid pro*’ and a ‘*hard man*’ who unlike other journeymen making a living by relying on refined spoiling tactics to survive with the least discomfort possible, tended to ‘*have a right go*’ and whenever possible win, preferably by knock-out. He customarily accepted the challenge of ex-amateur starlets and now professional ‘prospects’ with a solid brace of wins behind them, or perhaps served as a ‘*solid test*’ for championship ‘contenders’. His role as a blue corner opponent presented a problem that came with the caveat of, ‘*the old man is a good test because he has a go and he bangs so he can be a nuisance. If you can’t get passed this stage hang-up the gloves cause you aint going nowhere...unless you want to join him*’.

Before becoming personally acquainted with Nigel I knew nothing of him beyond scanning his weight, height and his wins and losses recorded in the BBBC yearbook⁶¹. In my final gym workout before the contest I was advised by Manager-Jim to, “*Keep out of his way because he bangs. If you trade punches he’ll have you in trouble. If you box him and use your speed you win. It’s a good little scrap*”. He also instructed me to weigh “*round about 9st 11bs*” on the

⁶¹ The BBBC publishes an annual yearbook listing all licensed boxers personal details and fight records. In effect this text is the bible for coaches, managers, matchmakers and the boxers themselves.

night⁶², the ‘*eight-two’s*’ (eight rounds of two minutes) duration of the fight and my pre-arranged (by him) ‘*purse*’ of £800. If this was Jim’s way, and the information he meted out was on an ‘all you need to know basis...nothing more nothing less’, or a sign that he had more urgent things to worry about, I wasn’t sure. Up to this juncture our relationship had been anything but close. Having been instigated on my behalf through Coach’s recommendation, I had only met and talked to him in person on several occasions. Our first meeting was to sign a one-year professional boxing contract that entitled him to arrange my contests in return of twenty-five per cent of my earnings. The other occasions were all in competitive scenarios; as my corner-man in my professional debut and contrastingly when he advised his protégé boxer-Jim against me in heated ‘*closed-door*’ gymnasium sparring sessions⁶³. Having made these rather unsettling estimations of Manger-Jims’ seeming disinterest of my athletic development and by definition welfare I sought to steel my resolve and focus on the upcoming challenge of boxing over eight rounds the ‘pro’ way. The following describe the time leading up to and the time experienced during the contest:



The ‘jungle’ (or the ‘meat-market’?)

During the slow traffic jam impeding my journey toward the West Midlands, I am customarily pre-fight nervous, a feeling I’m well used to as an amateur. Nonetheless, I feel uneasy about this particular journey as I am aware that the boxing territory negotiated tonight is likely to reveal the unknown. For one, despite Coach as usual

in accompaniment our relationship seems unfamiliar, strained even. There has been a significant shift in role identities between us as I am technically employing him as he is due 10% from my share of the prize-money on offer tonight. Nonetheless, I feel perturbed that Coach seems wholly unconcerned at the prospect of me negotiating eight rounds of boxing for the first time, substantially more than required of a top-level amateur contest lasting four-two minute rounds. I feel uneasy about what I interpret as a rather lackadaisical approach from my mentors, as I’m fully aware that it is usual for ‘*connected*’ fledgling professionals to have had up to three years and anywhere up to a dozen contests experience before been asked to negotiate the physical and more importantly psychological test required at this level of boxing. By contrast, this is only my second fight and I have been

⁶²This was done despite the BBBC ruling stipulating that boxers are required to weigh in at least twenty-four hours beforehand as a health measure safeguarding against dehydration.

⁶³ The intensity of our sparring steadily became more pronounced as the fight date neared. Having swapped black-eyes and the like, in one of the latter sparring sessions I knocked Jim unconscious with a right hand cross to the jaw. This was the first ‘*clean*’ knock-out I ever managed despite twelve years of boxing, on the most part successfully, as an amateur.

'pro' for only six months...To cap off my concerns, my preparations for tonight's contest have been no different from my amateur days. Still, as I focus my concentration on the upcoming challenge to be I desperately seek to block out such 'negativity' from my thoughts.

Steadily zoning into my own world I find comfort in the fact that I have done this journey many times before and although tonight is a venture into the unknown, it is not remarkably dissimilar to my experiences competing all over England as an amateur boxer. I visualise past victories and select moments of what I refer to as 'gym-flow' when physicality seems to merge with psychic energy producing a seamless technical virtuosity to overcome my opponent via a domineering application of skilful execution. At these select moments the potential mayhem and discomfort induced by a skilled, physically powerful and determined adversary trying to impose his will-power - translated into fist-power - upon me within the confined, yet very public, space of the boxing ring is overcome through a focused clarity allowing for the mastery of hitting but not being hit. This is a big part of what drives me through punishing yet joyful gym workouts and early morning runs. It is also what steels my resolve during, as I'm experiencing now, the immense psychic discomfort when anticipating the potentially concussive challenge of *'the fight'* to take place in an anonymous venue, in a strange town, in front of a likely hostile crowd, in the next few hours time...

We arrive at the hotel-venue at approximately four pm and are ushered to a top floor conference facility that for tonight will double as the changing room for boxers designated for the 'Blue corner'. I strip off, weigh-in and undergo a very brief medical check to the satisfaction of the officials in attendance. In order to make-weight tonight I have conditioned my body to adjust a frame that without excess fat fills out at close to sixty-seven kilos during the off-season summer months to 'make' fifty-seven kilos. The weighing-in ritual over, I proceed to cram liquids down my throat after having 'dried-out' for the last twenty-four hours. As I gulp down a litre of mineral water I am informed that my opponent had scaled close to sixty-one kilos, a full two weight divisions heavier, at the official weigh-in twenty-four hours earlier! This means that by the time of the fight scheduled around eleven pm, Nigel will have had ample time to replenish much needed energy to his body enabling the weight differential between the two of us to escalate considerably, perhaps by as much as *three* divisions. Pondering whether this is usual I sense a tension arising between Coach and Manager...This is the here-and-now, however, and all I can do is negotiate my nerves in order to prepare myself for what by this stage is becoming an increasingly 'inward' challenge. After five or so hours of meditation, in which time I've sought to control waves of psychic energy, oscillating between nervous negativity and arrogant indestructibility, Coach sits opposite me and meditatively proceeds to 'wrap' my hands in bandages. I then don groin protector, boxing shorts and boots in anticipation of gloving-up. Coach administers the ritual of smearing Vaseline around my eyebrows and cheekbones and finally ties the laces of my gloves. As he issues words of advice I mentally drift to *'that place'* and inwardly attune my mind to do *'the business'*. We finally proceed toward the ring. Tonight however, for whatever reason, I struggle to assert control of the inward psychological battle that arises prior to each and every contest and feel myself sinking into a *'get it over and done with'* defeatism.

Ducking through the ropes I circle the circumference of the ring. As I'm doing so there is a commotion in the crowd as a dozen or so men stand up and chant '*Come on Nigel, let's have it son!*' To the periphery of my vision I glimpse my opponent duck under the ropes and raise both arms in salute of his supporters. They reciprocate with a loud chorus of '*Here we go, here we go, here we go!*' After a short introduction to a less than animated audience, bar the small contingent cheering for Nigel, the fight begins. I soon discover I am facing a powerful and wild swinging opponent who throws '*bombs*' (hard punches) in clusters. Luckily, accuracy is not his forte and managing to absorb most of the punches aimed my way on the gloves or by quickly utilising evasive movement to '*slide*' out of range, I pepper him with quicker and more accurate although less damaging punches. Our exchanges are fairly sporadic and the pace of this round to my surprise appears almost thoughtful although I'm left in no doubt about the power of Nigel's punches

Toward the end of the second round, upon missing a 'wild' swing, Nigel follows through with his head. This '*pro trick*' is one I have been warned about often and virtually unrecognisable from amateur boxing, whose stipulation of headgear and the near certain disqualification for such an offence on the whole prevents like contact. The warm sensation trickling down the side of my face alerts me that my right eyebrow is cut. With six more rounds of the fight still to be contested I become instantly aware that if this is the 'real' thing I have been well and truly baptised! Seated in the corner awaiting the third round to begin, adrenaline solution is smudged into the cut in an effort to congeal the flow of blood thus preventing it running into my eye and rendering me sightless. I receive instructions from Manager-Jim to, "*keep moving to your left and right and keep popping the jab... [animated urgency] pop...pop...pop in and out but you must keep out of his way son!*"

The third round begins and we trade more punches before further disaster strikes...Nigel throws a looping left-hook that glances off my forehead (an audible thud is heard on the video as the punch connects) forcing me to lose control of my legs. Somehow, instinctively rather than by design, I manoeuvre my way out of the oncoming onslaught of my opponent, who is literally running toward me so as to take full advantage of my '*wobble*', furiously punching me in a bid to end matters. As I lurch against the ropes confused at my inability to coordinate '*gone*' legs yet alert enough to retaliate with an attempted although missed '*big right*' of my own, by the true definition of the saying I am '*saved by the bell*'. With five rounds to go, which is one round longer than I have boxed as an amateur, a survivalist instinct kicks-in and I steel my resolve to do whatever I can to stay on my feet and when possible out-punch my opponent. With nimble footwork and respectable fluidity I manage to frustrate my stronger and more aggressive opponent while scoring with singular '*pot-shots*'. At the final bell the referee raises Nigel's arm and whispers to me that it was all-evens up until the final round. I don't care. I am still in one piece (relatively) and ready to go back home. The MC declares the winner to the audience and before finishing his '*set*' announces "*a round of applause for a very gallant and sporting loser, ladies and gentlemen in the blue corner a fine boxer, Luton's Alex Stewart...*" of which follows a smattering of applause...

Field-notes [amended] and video footage (December 2000)



Post-fight the gloom of defeat hanged in the changing room air. Breaking the silence Boxer-Jim offered, *“You should have had that...you deserved a draw at least. He never got near you apart from the early rounds. He had a wallop though mate...”* Peering at the stitches Manager-Jim quipped, *“Perhaps if you had not done the spaghetti dance the judges would have given you the nod! Never mind I will be able to match you with less bother for the next one. He were a good lad you know, threw bombs and did his bit with the head, lots of experience. Now let’s get paid...”* As I sat counting my money passed on to me by Manager-Jim, I tried with inexplicable confusion to place past-amateur, present-professional and future academic analysis in coherent frames of reference. The immediacy of boxing ‘reality’ prioritised my thoughts however and I became effortlessly absorbed by the conversation at hand, *“I found the eight rounder fairly easy especially after I got into a rhythm. Honestly, as a boxer, he wasn’t that good. Most of the boys I fought in the ABA Championships were far sharper. He was a tough cookie though, strong as an ox and he threw bombs...”*

It was the early hours of the morning before arriving back home in Luton. I dropped Coach off at his house so he could get at least a couple hours sleep before getting on the motorway again to do a day’s work *‘laying bricks on a posh estate just North of London’*. In a subdued mood he bade me farewell and scarred eyebrows frowning ruminated, *“another day another dollar I guess son, eh? I’ll see you back at the Gym...”* Customarily I found it impossible to sleep post-contest so I stayed up all night replaying the video recording of *‘the fight’* with the commentary on and off, thinking and analysing. Next morning I opted for different scenery and drove to nearby St Albans. Strolling through the centre of this affluent city I tried to ignore the inquisitive (or were they horrified?) stares directed at the *‘marks of battle’* stitched into my bruised features, before settling for a quiet spot in the grounds of the Cathedral. With academic scrutiny in mind I wrote down my thoughts of how my past and recent experiences in amateur and professional boxing contributed to shedding light on my understanding of the developmental capacities of active engagement in the sport that I had been socialised through.

Chapter 5 - Conclusions

5.1 The Making of a Fighter

It is the last week of May in the year 2006. I sat in the lounge bar of the Union Jack Club in central London relaxing after just having attended the launch of the re-branded version of the Amateur Boxing Association of England¹. Joining me were a select group of amateur boxing stalwarts: head-coaches of prominent inner-city based amateur boxing clubs, ABAE administrators, distinguished ex-boxers, police commissioners, armed service personnel and social workers. All had voluntarily dedicated many years in the practice and facilitation of amateur boxing at all levels. The agenda set for the day was to address the function of amateur boxing in serving the ‘twin track’ rationale for the future of sport in Britain as set out in Government’s lead document - *Game Plan* (see DCMS 2002).

The mood in the air was one of buoyant optimism. This was a new era in the provision of sport in Britain at all levels and one in which the amateur boxing community could secure its destiny by addressing the dwindling levels of participant numbers². Finally the time had come to overcome the political wrangling besetting the amateur boxing universe into broad denominations of ‘practitioners’ and ‘administrators’ variously and unevenly subscribing to generational and regional affiliations. The crux of the optimism aired by the select group of ‘wise-old heads’ much versed in the economic, political and social realities of sustaining amateur boxing’s presence in society, and the younger idealists with a passion for the character reforming qualities of their chosen sport, was directed at securing a share of the pot of National Lottery money on offer to all Governing Bodies of sport.

While this influential group of pragmatists enthusiastically discussed the opportunities for amateur boxing to satisfy the social inclusion agenda as ‘*no other sport is capable of reaching*’, a television screen relayed the latest contest of the most identifiable son of British boxing. Registering a quick knock-out victory over a hopelessly over-matched ‘opponent’ Amir Khan, still the fresh faced Olympic hero and now boy-wonder of the professional boxing entertainment industry, informed millions sat at home glued to their television sets of his plans to conquer the world of professional boxing, earning a fortune and making Britain proud at the same time. It was this seemingly innocuous leisurely instance that exemplifies the hidden processes ‘synthesising’ (Donnelly 2003) the phenomenological, social and symbolic dimensions through which boxers, consciously and unconsciously, experience the

athletic practice of amateur and professional boxing and construct athletic identities as a consequence.

In the first instance, the historically embedded traditions of athletic production and the symbolic power exerted via the all-pervasive mediums of popular cultural representation, serving to 'farm' (see Sugden 1996) amateur boxers into punching for pay, are clearly at work. Nonetheless, the ethnographic findings of this study clearly illustrate how the historical specificity of amateur and professional boxing in England serves to define distinctive socio-structural parameters through which amateur and professional boxers produce and exchange unique meanings and experiences, and therefore construct athletic identities on their own terms. From this standpoint of examination, the athletic practice of boxing in England is demarcated by two segregated and distinctive 'cultural fields' (Bourdieu 1984) - the 'institutionalised' model espousing amateurism in the practice of boxing and the 'commercialised sub-cultural' model espousing professionalism in the practice of boxing.

In recognising that boxing-practitioners are active agents in the construction of their social worlds in as much as they possess the ability to create meaning and act according to that meaning (Beal 2002), the findings of this study have recognised the central issue of power and the way it regulates conduct and the construction of one's social identity. In turn, social identity as a source of empowerment defines the way the athletic realities of amateur and professional boxing are represented, practiced and thought about. From this standpoint, amateurism and professionalism in the athletic practice of boxing can be thought of as 'signifying cultural practices' (see Hall 1999 pp. 5-6) through which boxing-practitioners seek to claim fulfilment, value and a sense of destiny through their actions. By doing so however, boxing-practitioners also "...accept or contest specific sets of power relations" (Beal 2002 p. 361) in order to make sense of, and negotiate a pathway through, their everyday lives. From a cultural standpoint therefore, it becomes clear that as much as the social-structural dimensions of amateurism and professionalism in the athletic practice of boxing serve to segregate and differentiate the two sports-cultural fields of boxing, through symbolic association the multiple 'traditionalist' ideologies and mediated representations of boxing synthesise to transform boxers interpretative frameworks and actions.

By emphasising the importance of amateurism and professionalism in the practice of boxing as two socially constructed models of athletic development distinctive on their own terms, that nonetheless are inexplicably enmeshed, this study contributes important and original understanding of the reasons why the complex web of action, power and history serves to

shape and define, consciously and unconsciously, the reproduction of and transformation in the practices and relations enacted by amateur and professional boxers. To this extent it is hoped the findings presented are consciousness raising in that they offer a grounded, pragmatic and original evaluation of amateur and professional boxing as understood (or not) from the 'athlete's point of view'. Accordingly, the limits and possibilities of amateur and professional boxers interpretative frameworks and consequent actions are defined by the following 'synthesised' (Donnelly 2003) phenomenological, social and symbolic dimensions through which boxers realities are made and unmade: (1) boxing and the experiential logic of athletic development; (2) cultural (re)production (3) social identity and resistance. The contributions of each of these three social dimensions in shaping and defining amateur and professional boxers athletic development are discussed below.

Boxing and the experiential logic of athletic development

From the outset it is imperative to reiterate that my ingrained bias as an ex-boxer, self-confessed aficionado of the 'art of boxing' and an all-round enthusiast of sport more generally, has permeated throughout the knowledge claims produced. That said, the findings gleaned from this study readily endorse Cashmore's (1982) standpoint when he argues capacities such as initiative, purposefulness, expressivity, persistence and self-control are characteristics cultivated through the practice of sport/boxing. In turn, by developing such characteristics boxers have the potential to develop and/or self-actualise their physical, psychological and emotional capabilities more fully. To this extent it is worth repeating Kidd's (1996 p. 84) argument for the potential benefits of sport when seeking to evaluate the properties of both amateur and professional boxing:

"It cannot be said that sports alone provide such moments, but those of us who have experienced them would agree the formative potential is there: Much of our important knowledge about ourselves and others was gained through the challenges and reflection sports encourage"

The findings of this study reveal that the athletic practice of boxing is an exemplary manifestation of sporting individualism that nonetheless is almost wholly contingent on clearly defined structural arrangements engineering conformity towards discipline, respectful behaviour and emotional self-control. Furthermore, throughout the sustained period of data collection the boys, youths, men and on occasion women engaging in the athletic practice of boxing wilfully adopted remarkably egalitarian codes of conduct. The 'structure of feeling' (Williams 1963) enabling boxers to cultivate wilfully individualist yet remarkably disciplined, 'respectful' and thus civilised qualities, is captured concisely by Cashmore's (1982 p. 8) phenomenological understanding of sports:

“I see sport as a supremely creative enterprise in which the competitor exerts a mastery and control over himself and his environment. Blending discipline with spontaneity, rigidity with flexibility, the sportsman develops and refines skills, forming objectives, sometimes meeting them, often falling short, but always extracting meaning and gratification. My conception of sport elevates it to the realms of art, where the producer finds room to express himself...”

By virtual unanimity the boxers observed and interviewed in this study interpreted the ‘art of boxing’ as a highly skilled, meaningful and gratifying activity. In fact, the athletic practice of boxing demands the application of all round bio-mechanical dexterity, a high degree of physical fitness and mental concentration, tactical acumen and creative thought. In turn, the skill component of boxing can best be self-actualised through the development and continuous refinement of one’s psycho-somatic awareness by way of emotional control during the competitive element of the sport. From this standpoint, by submitting to the rules of conduct serving to ‘sportinise’ (Sugden 1996) the combative nature of boxing competition, under the careful and strict supervision of knowledgeable and respected elders, boxers constructed a moral veracity towards their own athletic development while, albeit implicitly, acknowledging and respecting the endeavours of fellow boxers.

Nonetheless, as Kidd (1996) is correct to point out, however much any sporting code has the potential to be developmental in a positive capacity it can also be, and often is, pathological. The competitive nature of boxing in particular requires careful justification of its potential to be beneficial as opposed to being emotionally oppressive, physically harmful and psychologically damaging. It is important therefore to consider the ‘hidden’ macro-social forces at play through which boxers develop quintessentially individualistic, self-absorbed and potentially destructive athletic performativities. By disentangling the ramifying webs of action, power and history of which the social and cultural fabric of everyday existence in England is made and unmade, the social forces shaping amateur and professional boxers conscious and unconscious interpretative capacities, relations, athletic identities and actions can be made clearer.

Cultural (re)production and boxing

As has been made clear throughout this study, amateur and professional boxing as a participant sport in England belongs to the working-classes. As such, the centrality of the remarkably enduring cultural fabric spawned as a consequence of an urban way of life under the shadow of industrial production for much of the 20th century and beyond, has to be acknowledged as pivotal in shaping and defining the socio-cultural parameters through which boxing signifies meaning and value to boxing-practitioners and others.

The remarkably enduring industrialised ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu 1984) in England reproduced ‘solid’ (Bauman 1998) cultural repertoires through which the working-classes constructed relatively homogeneous identities and beliefs that although shot through with tension and injustice were stable, comprehensible and thus relative secure (Winlow and Hall 2006). In turn, individual biographies became clearly defined, implicitly understood and to the greater degree accepted. Accordingly, recognisable and as such tacit norms of interaction lubricated ‘respectful’ codes of behaviour among culturally conversant peers. Likewise, when inevitably the invisible boundaries of respect were transgressed, “...traditional techniques of judicious repression and sublimation” (Winlow and Hall 2006 p. 182) could be enforced through public consensus. Thus, informal surveillance mechanisms were at work effectively disciplining those whose actions were deemed as ‘out of order’.

The intervening decades however, have seen epochal transformations to the economic and social infrastructure sustaining the parameters through which contemporary social-actors construct identities, belief systems, value orientations and relations. Whereas the industrialised habitus framed definitive “...class-specific forms of social engagement and social being” (Winlow and Hall 2006 p. 19), that of course included participation in and aspiration through amateur and professional boxing, the present era demands that social enactments primarily conform to role performances subsumed in the meanings inherent of consumption not production. As Bauman (1998 p. 24) argues:

“In the present late-modern, second-modern or postmodern stage, society engages its members – again *primarily* – in their capacity as consumers. The way present-day society shapes up its members is dictated first and foremost by the need to play the role of the consumer, and the norm of our society holds up to its members is that of the ability and willingness to play it”

This broad shift to ‘consumerism as a way of life’ (Miles 1998) in British society as a whole, and the working-classes in particular, has happened over a relatively short period of time. The 1960s and 1970s was characterised by a firmly established welfare state, secure employment, trade unionism and an industrial workforce enjoying relative affluence for the first time (Goldthorpe et al 1969). By the 1980s and 1990s the neo-liberal politics of the Thatcher government propelled the logic of the market as the answer to ensuring choice, prosperity and self-determination for all in society. At the same time and over a relatively condensed time span, large swathes of home-based industrial manufacturing had been rendered economically redundant as more cost effective emerging economies dominated the global market place (Winlow and Hall 2006).

As Britain approaches the first decade of the 21st century - an era variously thought of as late-capitalist, post-industrial, postmodern or liquid (Bauman 1998; Miles 2001; Blackshaw and Crabbe 2004; Giulianotti 2005) - numerous economic, social and cultural transformations are apparent. Just some of these include: the predominance of service, health and education sector employment; the dislocation of workplace from place of residence and subsequent erosion of relatively homogeneous communities and associational networks of sociability; Post-Taylorist short-term and/or performance related work tenures; global flows of migration, communication and trade; an extended property boom generating unprecedented levels of home-ownership and/or 'landlordship' juxtaposing a substantial underclass of council and private tenant occupiers; ever expansive modes of consumption and reciprocally unprecedented levels of personal debt accumulation (see Giddens 1990; Ritzer 1996; Bauman 1998; Miles 1998; Blackshaw and Crabbe 2004; Jarvie 2006).

The relative prosperity of the contemporary era can be seen to propel the fruits of consumerist 'choice' as a given right whereby social-actors, by way of consumptive performativity, are at liberty to construct highly personalised, if rather transient and/or mythological, 'liquid' identities (Bauman 1998). Thus, contemporary social-actors enjoy the liberty to invent and re-invent role identities by simply visiting the high street for both daytime and night-time modes of consumption, by taking exotic holidays around the globe, engaging with and through 'virtual' computerised realities and a myriad of other modes of consumption.

The socio-cultural processes through which social-actors construct identities are thus increasingly and overwhelmingly individualist, readily available, rather transient and often pertain towards the 'fun', the 'glamorous' and/or the 'spectacular'. The contrast to being tied to the apron strings or overalls of one's parentage and succumbing to the expectations of 'making do' from authoritative voices of elders, who are afforded respect due to having 'been there and done that' a generation or two since, is striking. As Blackshaw and Crabbe (2004 p. 159) argue, the structural parameters defining individuals sense of being are increasingly shaped through 'liquid' realities:

"In the resultant chaos of contemporary capitalism, driven by the twin aesthetics of celebrity and consumerism, 'rules' do not carry the same burden of restraint. There are no fixed roles or type-casting, whilst the labels that we carry are imposed upon ourselves, both metaphorically and physically in the shape of designer brands, in pursuit of new identities and new life styles. We live by the laws of consumer culture, which hide behind the myths of meritocracy and are reflected in the ways in which...identity is characterised by the wearing of 'light cloaks' rather than the imprisonment of 'iron cages'"

The argument above when related to this study of amateur and professional boxers athletic development, suggests that in liquid modernity social arrangements engineering informal rules ensuring respectful 'interaction rituals' (Goffmann 1967) are increasingly difficult to define. This is because the everyday cultural fabric through which contemporary social-actors construct interpretative frameworks translating into forms of clearly identifiable, communicable and mutually empowering processes leading towards symbolic capital are becoming increasingly blurred and uncertain. The findings of this study suggest that the omnipresence of 'consumerism as a way of life' (Miles 1998) and the rhetoric of 'liberal individualism' (Jarvie 2003) it encourages, increasingly subsumes the interpretative capacities and moral compass of amateur and professional boxers, and just as importantly, significant/generalised others (Coaches, Dads, Managers and fans) exercising influence over their enacted athletic performativities.

If the contemporary climate of neo-liberalism serves to spur an ambitious sense of individualism motivating boxers to aspire 'upwards' by continually striving to surpass the constraints of their immediate life-circumstances, this is by definition a laudable sentiment. The social processes transforming the cultural fabric defining everyday life in late-capitalist England however, have happened gradually and unevenly among and between groups across macro-structural parameters of place, space and identity. It is at this juncture that amateur and professional boxing-practitioners, in accordance with the social, cultural, political and economic capital at their disposal, seek out empowerment either via negotiating their best interests within the parameters of opportunities available to them or, as is all too often the case, in one way or another adopting resistant yet nonetheless rather powerless and thus deterministic actions.

Accordingly, the generational norms of cultural reproduction through which boxing-practitioners construct athletic identities do not seamlessly 'liquefy' from their previous 'solidity'. Rather, they are reproduced under the veneer of liberal individualism and the rhetoric of opportunity and meritocracy that in turn serve to lubricate aspirant-individualist motives and aspirations. From this standpoint, the means through which amateurism and professionalism in the practice of boxing synthesise and accordingly shape, define and transform the interpretative frameworks and actions of amateur and professional boxers in England are made explicit. The phenomenological, social and symbolic processes differentiating yet simultaneously and symbiotically shaping, defining and transforming the limits and possibilities realised by boxers in and through the cultural fields of amateur and professional boxing in England are discussed next.

Amateur boxing, cultural identity and resistance

Inevitably the grass roots universe of hundreds of amateur boxing clubs in England is reliant upon the institutionalised aegis of the ABAE whose administration of rules and regulations shapes the framework of ‘hierarchical performance’ (Morgan 1994) amateur boxing competition. As has been demonstrated in the findings of this study, the infrastructure of ‘grass-roots’ and more importantly ‘Championships’ tournaments affords boxers the opportunity to challenge themselves and in doing so perhaps arrive at a point of unsurpassed self-awareness (Kidd 1996). If active participation in amateur boxing serves to spur an ambitious sense of individualism motivating boxers to better themselves by continually striving to surpass the hierarchical challenges set by amateur boxing competition, and in the process develop their physical, psychological and emotional capacities more fully, this is by definition of value as an end in itself. As has been clearly articulated in the findings of this study however, the social arena of amateur boxing competition conjures up a lived social dynamic through which amateur boxing-practitioners develop competitive instincts enabling them to negotiate their best interests in and among the grass-roots tier of social reproduction shaping and defining their cultural identities. From this vantage point of realisation, it becomes apparent that the deeply ingrained power-relations serving to stratify British society of generations gone by endure in a way that symbolically validate amateur boxers constructed athletic identities.

The findings of this study indicate that the cultural praxis of amateur boxing sustains and cultivates social meanings, value orientations, belief systems, relationships and actions through which the working-classes in Britain have historically constructed a strong sense of ‘working’ identity. Much as Hoggart (1957) first chronicled the typical resentment working-class spectators held of the referee at rugby league fixtures due to their associating his regulative authority as symbolic of class relations in the workplace (see Hughson et al 2005), throughout the period of this study contemporary amateur boxing-practitioners displayed equal antipathy, at times hostility, toward the administrative capacity of ABAE Gentlemen officials.

Adopting a Marxist inspired understanding of the social organisation of sport (see Rigauer 1969; Brohm 1978; Hargreaves 1986), the smartly attired ABAE officials demeanour when administering ‘the rule book’, albeit in a bid to ensure equitable competition through fair-play, was implicitly perceived by many amateur boxing-practitioners as replicating the normative authoritarian regime defining the workplace and other aspects of their social identities. Nonetheless, despite rather edgy ‘face-work’ engagements (Goffman 1967)

between ‘informal’ boxing-practitioners and ‘formal’ Gentlemen-administrators, the authoritative voice of officialdom was accepted with an air of resignation that could only be righted by *‘making sure we win the next time’*. From this standpoint, albeit claiming a sense of dignity through ensuring boundary maintenance between ‘us’ and ‘them’, by wilfully submitting to the normative sport-ethic of sacrifice, discipline and deferred gratification, ‘real’ amateur boxers literally embody, in Foucault’s (1979) terminology, the all-seeing regulatory gaze of institutionalised surveillance (see Hargreaves 1986).

From this vantage of examination, ‘hidden’ properties define amateur boxing-practitioners performativities. More specifically, amateur boxers construct athletic identities in a way analogous with the rationalisation principles demanded for ensuring labour productivity, i.e. the cultivation of a strong athletic body and a disciplined mindset primarily envisaged as functional for the labour process (see Watson 1995; Rothman 1998; Ingham 2004). The naturalisation of this process becomes all the more apparent when considering the normalised practice of drastic and potentially hazardous fluid reduction immediately before a contest, serving to amplify the intense ‘hardy’ competitive spirit wilfully demonstrated by physically and symbolically ‘hungry’ boxers during competition. Far from being imposed upon boxers, the Spartan like regimen is effectively the end product of a ‘nurturing rationale’ administered by *well-meaning* Uncle-like coaches intent on cultivating skill acquisition and character development. In turn, the coaches themselves earn the right to ‘officially’ inspire the competitive spirit necessary for developing ‘quality’ amateur boxers by becoming suitably qualified through, albeit by necessity, the ABAE coaching award schemes³.

A more overt example of social subjugation is made transparent when considering the ambience at ‘dinner shows’ staged in plush hotels where bourgeois Gentlemen howl their delight as two duelling amateur boxers engage in a preferably bloody encounter. While observing many dozens of ‘dinner show’ boxing tournaments in and around the Home Counties, the words of encouragement and appreciation extended towards boxers best efforts were drowned out by the feasting joviality of the cigar smoking patrons. At best, the athletic criteria of boxing was a worthy sideshow for the food and alcohol on offer and the more immediate concern of business fraternisation, the opportunity to display a level of largesse via a flutter or two and a rather parochial appreciation *‘of a good night’s boxing from hardy, fit young lads...does them a world of good’*. At the same time, the family and friends of boxers in the midst of competition stand bunched together at the back of the hall shouting encouragement with appeals to, “WORK HARDER... MORE WORK... DON’T STOP...COME FORWARD ...BE FIRST...” The obvious sentiment is to earn respect by

asserting a semblance of dignity through 'out-working' the opposition via a display of, perhaps unconsciously resistant, macho physicality as opposed to aspiring to master the skilful virtuosity and quick witted expression of 'hitting without being hit'.

Equally apparent during the period of data collection was that for a substantial element of the audience, particularly during Championships tournaments, it was the norm to vent vitriolic antipathy at 'the opposition' and, as always, the authoritative demeanour and organisational input from ABAE officials. At times the animated support extended by large contingents of fans looked like disturbing the balance between rule-bound athletic competition and outright hostile aggression in and out of the ring. As they animatedly chanted, 'GET INTO HIM...GO ON KNOCK 'IM OUT!' one would wonder at the likely consequences if notions of formality to the proceedings were removed. On one occasion, during the prelim stages of a Schools Championships competition, they were when a disgruntled referee infuriated by the abuse he received by a group of fans following the disqualification of '*our boy*' simply left the building. The absence of a recognisable authority figure to regulate the contest however, left a strangely muted crowd staring at the empty ring while wondering how to occupy their time and the boxing fraternity busy scrutinising, blaming and shaking their heads in disbelief, yet '*all gloved up and nowhere to go*' as one wag in the audience quipped.

The findings of this study suggest that fuelling this rather aggressive ambience during dozens of Championships tournaments attended during the period of data collection, the rhetoric of 'liberal individualism' (Jarvie 2003) increasingly subsumes the interpretative capacities and moral compass of amateur boxers and significant/generalised others (coaches, Dads and more abstractly fans) exercising influence over their enacted athletic performativities. More to the point, normative social behaviours among amateur boxing-practitioners are increasingly premised on the immediate and self-centred gratification promised by the act of consumption (Miles 1998); or an 'imaginary reality' whereby identification with boxing signifies a readily accessible source of mythologized heroism, hyper-masculinity and ultra-individualism (see Boyle and Haynes 2000). Accordingly, along with the de-industrialization of society, the signifying content of amateur boxing is gleaned from 'spectacular' (Shipley 1989) mass mediated portrayals of mytho-popular representation as much, or more so, than cultural attachments grounded in and through the industrial workplace, the sharing of communal networks of sociability and stocks of knowledge subsequently mediating respectful codes of behaviour among culturally conversant peers. As never before therefore, the contemporary moment of late-capitalism accentuates aspirant 'mytho-individualist' value and belief systems

to spur the ambitions and corresponding actions of amateur boxers and significant/generalised others.

Nonetheless, as has been documented in the findings of this study, the grass-roots infrastructure of amateur boxing competition and the tiers of ascending 'hierarchical performance' (Morgan 1994) Championships tournaments amount to a 'filtering-mechanism' demarcating, experientially but more importantly symbolically, the performances of 'quality' boxers from 'the rest'. Accordingly, the institutionalised aegis of the ABAE facilitates a newly branded yet equally elitist, and as such illusory, ideology of 'modern' amateurism serving to lubricate the values and beliefs of amateur boxing-practitioners. As much as the ABAE currently facilitates the most comprehensive program of elite athlete development in its history, it does so to nurture the performance levels necessary for medal successes prior to the immanent Beijing 2008 Olympic Games and more significantly the London 2012 Olympic Games, in direct response to Government rationale for the delivery of sport in society (see DMCS: *Game Plan* 2002). It should also be understood therefore, that an instrumental regard underpins the funded opportunities for the amateur boxing 'elite' to win medals at prestigious international tournaments. More so, it became apparent throughout the period of data collection that a core of inner-city amateur boxing clubs steeped in boxing tradition had unequal ownership of the social, cultural, economic and political capital resources to negotiate the necessary advantages leading towards a healthy success ratio for their boxers. Accordingly, the rhetoric of opportunity for all and the symbolic power of international sporting success served to not only inspire the aspirations of the select band of elite performers catered for, it simultaneously limited the possibilities of 'the rest', whether amateur boxers deemed 'quality' or else.

For amateur boxers who have cultivated an 'aspirant individualist' consciousness therefore, a decision point is made to extract themselves from the institutionalised 'surveillance' of the ABAE. More importantly, 'quality' (or not) amateur boxers willingly leave behind them the grass-roots tier of social reproduction through which their athletic development was tacitly, and thus largely unconsciously, made meaningful by way of adherence to the (albeit declining) moral veracity of boxing serving purpose as a social and thus personal good. The process of '*crossing over*' from amateurism to professionalism in the practice of boxing is therefore conceived as a hierarchical rite of passage sanctioning the logic of market libertarianism as an opportunity to, symbolically as well as economically, earn freedom.

Professional boxing, cultural identity and survival

The findings of this study reveal the social practice of professional boxing is in many ways differentiated from its institutionalised cousin. Professional boxing in England can more precisely be understood as a commercialised sporting subculture through which professional boxers adopt cultural repertoires, or ‘structures of feeling’ (Williams 1963), originating from the same social lineage as their 18th and 19th century pugilistic forefathers. By contrast to their amateur cousins therefore, professional boxers athletic performativity is ascribed with cultural metaphors signifying autonomy, craftsmanship, entrepreneurship and a distinctive brand of hyper-valorousness. From this standpoint, professionalism in the athletic practice of boxing is perceived as hierarchical in relation to amateur boxing due to the promise of social, material and symbolic transcendence engineered through market libertarianism. The agency inscribed in the athletic performativity enacted by professional boxers is nonetheless reliant on the power-relations through which boxing is ‘spectacularised’ (see Shipley 1989) as a component of the popular culture entertainment industry. Accordingly, the agential dimensions inscribed in professional boxers performativity paradoxically reinforce constraint in a way that, however negotiated, subjugation to the whims of those controlling the purse strings demands a high price - economic exploitation, a deep sense of betrayal, disillusionment, physical deterioration and on occasion death.

The findings of this study have shown how professional boxers embrace the brutal realities of their profession by defining boxing competition as ‘edgework’ (Lyng 1990). As Lyng (1990 p. 878) argues, the conditions for realising an edgework experience materialise when space, time and action allow the residual self to be expressed as “...the anarchic self in which ego is manifest by the personal...[and] ...the institutional self is completely suppressed”. The intense combative ethos generated through boxing competition clearly lends itself towards a manifestation of (controlled, skilled and willed) anarchy and egotism. At the same moment in time and space however, the professional boxers edgework experience is a sight of quick-fix and inherently vicarious, often to the point of triviality, consumptive performativity for the audience sat ringside or at home.

From the audiences’ existential standpoint, ‘the spectacular’ of professional boxing competition can be understood as taking on significance as a site of transgression. As Giullianotti (2005) expands “Transgression involves boundary crossing, particularly breaching moral parameters or hierarchical codes” (p. 56). For the audience therefore, satisfaction from the act of consuming a professional boxing ‘fight’ is gleaned by way of vicarious complicity in witnessing a spectacle of quasi-deviant violence that, if only

momentarily, subverts the self-censoring, constraining and inevitably hierarchical norms demanded of civilised social mores. For the audience therefore, perhaps subconsciously, boxing is only satisfactory as long as it is exciting in a spectacularly brutal and bloody way. From this synthesised social dynamic it is possible to gage how the unique intensity of professional boxing as a form of athletic competition seamlessly conflates the boxers' edgeworker egotism, skill, desire and passion with the rugged pageantry of the audience's expectation to witness, be enthralled by and vicariously realise the brutal elementalism of boxing competition.

The commercial dynamic underpinning the performativity enacted by professional boxers has in the past and will no doubt in the future take one, or both, combatants as close to 'the edge' as possible and sometimes over. For 'the pack' of professional boxers residing at intervals beneath the few connected 'contenders' and even fewer well-paid and mythologized 'champs', survival necessitates an instrumentalist regard⁴ aimed at '*getting something from it*' (the athletic practice of boxing) in exchange for the least amount of, albeit inevitable, '*hurt*'. As much as the professional boxer 'glorifies' himself or herself and actions (see Adler and Adler 1991), his/her commodity status within the boxing entertainment industry inevitably dictates that alienation, exploitation and physical deterioration is a natural component of their daily reality. Journalist Patrick Kehoe (2003) is well aware of the way the symbolic essence shaping and defining the spirit of professional boxing competition (from the participants and audiences standpoints) steadily chips away at the professional boxer's youthful egotism to the extent that, sooner or later, s/he constructs a survivalist instinct to ensure longevity in what amounts to the 'hurt business':

"From the moment a professional fighter partakes in the cut and thrust of punching for pay, he or she realizes that looming beyond the bravado of ambition, the zeal for dominance, is the reality that they are braving injury and even death each time they settle into the punishing cadences of their profession. To perform so near to the threshold of death is the ultimate risk-reward gamble any athlete can make and that gamble with ones health and sentience pervades the implicit heroism a boxer manifest. The longer the professional career of a fighter, the more acute becomes the internal acknowledgement of this gamble"

For *all* boxers, 'the gamble' enacted daily takes its toll and steadily erodes not only the exuberance of youthful bravado enchanting their highly autonomous brand of valour but also the physical excellence it is premised on. Sooner or later, the 'end-game' of professional boxing enforces an abrupt retreat from the public domain and the parameters of mytho-popular valorisation defining a sense of self-worth that, if not checked, is in danger of eroding to the extent it can only be recognised as a broken dream of what it once was, or could have been. In time, renewed vigour for '*the fight*' amidst the life-world the spark was first ignited

and a measure of social prestige still holds sway may be rekindled. Commonly, '*ex-pro*'s' are taken back into the fold, most often as amateur and professional coaches but also as managers, small-time promoters, sports equipment merchandisers, gym owners, journalists, television fight pundits, publicans, film extras, after dinner speakers, youth and crime workers. If verve for '*the fight*' is once again rekindled, by definition, the squared ring is circled with an onus to '*get something for it*' re-directed through the endeavours of a new generation of boxers following the same footsteps as their predecessors. In the contemporary era however, their hard earned identity as 'the boxer' signifies something quite different.

5.2 The final analysis – boxing, society and athletic development

The findings of this study reveal the athletic properties and social relations cultivated through both amateur and professional boxing can, and often do, enable boxing-practitioners to experience intensely gratifying instances of empowerment, fellowship, physical expressivity and more. In the final analysis however, the social structures through which amateur and professional boxers seek to self-actualise the agential dimensions defining their athletic identities inevitably, and paradoxically, serve to render them, in one way or another, powerless. Accordingly, although those responsible for the facilitation of grass-roots boxing (whether amateur or professional) passionately, and in most cases wholeheartedly, believe in the power of boxing to transform and enhance boxers lives for the better, the function of boxing for serving purpose as a character building mechanism of an 'empowering-developmental' capacity as opposed to a 'limiting-deterministic' capacity, is in dispute.

More so, in the contemporary era cultural reproduction in and through the athletic practice of boxing is becoming increasingly shaped and defined through a neo-libertarian social dynamic of a "...rapidly privatised, individualised and globalised world...dominated by market-mediated consumer choice and the power of individualism" (Jarvie 2006 p. 327). Augmented by the Governmental 'winners take all' credo for the future of sport in Britain and the market inspired mytho-popular system of symbolic exchange, this study reveals that boxing-practitioners social interactions overwhelmingly appeal to an atomized, intra-competitive and instrumentalist currency. Accordingly, throughout the period of this research, the contemporary social dynamic engineered social interactions among boxing-participants that, although often conducive to collective fellowship and good-will, were undercut by an ever-present sense of dubiety, cynicism and distrust. With the diminishment of clearly defined cultural parameters and symbolic touchstones to define collaborative and mutually empowering signifying practices, value orientations, belief systems, identity constructions,

relationships and actions therefore, the socio-cultural fabric through which individuals strive for empowerment is, by necessity, rationalised through the essence of atomized competition as much as reciprocity. As long as the commercialised enterprise of professional boxing symbolises possibilities for boxers to achieve hierarchical self-actualisation, then the socio-cultural dynamic serving to inspire boxers towards actualising the edgework enterprise of the '*real thing*', perhaps justifiably, will remain firmly in place.

With Government pursuing Best Value through sport by stipulating criteria for Governing Bodies of sport to satisfy the 'twin track' agenda of social welfare and sporting excellence, inevitably through quantitative 'evidence' to justify the level of National Lottery funding made available, the findings of this study suggest the contested social and cultural parameters through which social-actors are at liberty to construct meanings and values all too often render their sporting participation intrinsically impoverished. Along with market neo-liberalism, aspirant mytho-individualism, social atomization and economic instrumentalism saturating every nook and cranny of the British way of life, the qualitative dimensions that enable sports practices to be valued, and of value, in a social and thus personal developmental capacity, as opposed to being pathological (Kidd 1996), are in atrophy.

¹ In 2006-7 I served as a Development Commissioner for the Amateur Boxing Association of England

² Recent times have seen a marked decline in participant numbers to the extent where in 1958 the National Schoolboy Championships attracted 58,000 entrants, the boxers competing for the 1996 equivalent fell to just 800 (see Saintsbury 2000).

³ The ABAE stipulates that anyone wishing to coach boxers in a formal (competitive) capacity must have obtained at a minimum the 'coaching assistant' qualification.

⁴ Throughout the period of data collection professional boxers commonly expressed their time spent training as 'work time', indicating that they considered their engagement as boxers with the potential to do rather than to be (see Ingham 2004)

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