

## Nicholas Walters, Boxing, and ‘Quitting’: A Case of the Violence of Interpretation

By **Alex Channon** and **Christopher R. Matthews**

This past Saturday, Ukrainian boxer Vasyl Lomachenko fought, and handily outclassed, his Jamaican opponent, Nicholas Walters, in their WBO junior lightweight title clash. Unlike many pro boxing bouts however, this did not end with a knockout, judges’ decision or referee stoppage; Walters, at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> round, recognised the mismatch he was facing and decided to concede by himself. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this decision was not met with much enthusiasm by the paying crowd, who loudly booed at the announcement, but neither was he received with much grace by many of the sport’s opinion-shapers afterwards.



While many social media users heaped scorn on Walters for his decision, several journalists ran [Nonito Donaire’s condemnation](#) of the ‘shameful’ act in the headlines of their reports. Respected boxing trainer Robert Garcia pointedly suggested that he could have ‘[at least, fucking got knocked out or something](#)’. [Jeff Powell of the Daily Mail](#) characterised Walters’ concession as a ‘quivering surrender’, while [Mike Coppinger of Boxing Junkie](#) chastised him for not fighting ‘to the bitter end’, as is expected of professionals. And, writing in the Guardian, [Kevin Mitchell argued](#) that Walters’ reputation had been ‘seriously damaged’ by committing the sport’s ‘ultimate sin’: quitting.

Most of the negative responses to Walters' actions have been built around two key points: firstly, that Walters should have given more of himself because the fans had paid to see it, and he'd been paid to do so; and secondly, that he'd broken a code of honour by giving up, invalidating his status as a boxer. In this short essay, we argue for a deeper consideration of these points, and want to suggest that boxers and boxing commentators rethink their position on the question of boxers ending fights voluntarily.

## **Violence and consent**

The core principle underlying our [central argument within LFHV](#) is that when fighters in combat sports give their *consent* to participate, then punching, kicking, strangling, etc. are no longer *violent* acts, as they would be otherwise. The risky nature of combat sports then becomes the same, in moral terms, as the risky nature of other sports, like marathon running or stock car racing. But when a fighter does not consent to being hit in certain ways (i.e., low blows); when they do not understand what they are consenting to; when their consent is achieved by some form of coercion; or, importantly for this case, when they withdraw previously given consent, we cannot sustain this moral defence of the sport. Then, it becomes 'violence'.

What's happening to Walters now effectively represents a kind of coercion that is being exerted on all boxers. It is as if many within the boxing world are saying: "if you withdraw your consent to being hit during a match, then we will call you a coward, claim you have defrauded the sport, and offer you no further place within it". In this sense, Walters' detractors are questioning the right of fighters to remain in control of what risks they do and do not take in the ring. In doing so, they are making fighters more likely to choose to act outside of their best interests and against their better judgement. To us, this evident cultural norm involves the violation of any given individual boxers' personal autonomy.

## **Boxers bought and sold**

Perhaps the first problem to consider here is the implied economic obligation facing Walters, a paid professional, from those who've paid him – such as boxing promoters, sponsors, and fans. Given that Walters was not *visibly* injured during the bout (as though the sight of blood

and guts should've made a difference here), his decision to end the fight was interpreted by some as short-changing his paying customers. We accept that Walters entered into a mutually agreed-upon arrangement when signing up for this fight, for which he was presumably well paid. However, such a contract does not mean he signed away his personal sovereignty and human rights in the process.

Indeed, what alarms us here is that, regardless of the fact that boxers are under no contractual obligations to 'go the distance', several commentators have been very quick to suggest that it is wrong for a person to act to protect their health when others have paid to see them do things which risk it. Boxers thereby become the bought-and-sold property of the sport's promotional structure, and cease to hold any control over their own bodily integrity. In this way, they become a commodity to be consumed by paying customers; debased, demeaned and dehumanized. It amazes us that anyone adopting this position can imagine they hold some form of moral high ground when criticising Walters' decision.

### **A 'true' boxer**

The second problem here is to do with defining what counts as a 'real' or 'true' boxer. In the early 1990s, sociologists [Robert Hughes and Jay Coakley](#) argued that athletes in many competitive sports are under pressure to meet a set of ideals they described as 'the sport ethic', in order to earn status as a 'real' athlete. Typically this involves making sacrifices, striving for distinction, accepting risks, playing through pain, and refusing to accept one's limitations. Athletes often come under so much pressure to prove themselves in the eyes of others, notably coaches or promoters, that they *overconform* to these ideals, and end up engaging in all sorts of reckless, self-destructive behaviours – like risking career-ending or life-threatening injury.

The Walters case is therefore particularly dangerous because of the implications it has for wider sports culture. If professional athletes – role models to so many, but particularly young people – are liable to lose status by appearing to *underconform* to 'the sports ethic' to protect their health, what message does this send to youngsters looking up to and hoping to emulate them? If the boxing community interpret Walters' actions as purely a sign of weak character or failed athleticism, this teaches young people that taking risks with one's health is an

integral part of being a true athlete. Such a process, we argue, contributes to a culture that normalises debilitating, chronic and acute injuries seen within boxing and contact sports more broadly<sup>[i]</sup>. Is there really no alternative here?

### **The violence of interpretation**

Perhaps, instead of this destructive, derisive message, a better interpretation might have been to applaud Walters for taking the conscious decision to bow out of a contest he was clearly losing, and which thereby placed him at needless risk of injury. In the same year that former British middleweight champion [Nick Blackwell was put into a coma](#), and the previously undefeated professional [Mike Towell died](#) following a bout, it is perfectly understandable that a professional fighter might make a rational decision to protect themselves against almost inevitable punishment for the sake of an increasingly unlikely victory. If all boxers followed this example, and were not mocked but respected for it, we imagine the sport would be made much safer.

To many of its fans and followers, boxing – as with all full-contact combat sports – can be seen as a ‘test of character’. We would argue that all boxers pass that test the moment they step into the ring. But what happens afterwards is very much open to interpretation, and how we talk about fighters’ actions is likely to impact on how future generations of competitors think – or not – about protecting their health. In this sense, those of us who shape opinion within combat sports have a duty to help younger athletes, empowering them to take control over their own decisions surrounding participation in an essentially risky activity. Diminishing that sense of control by interpreting health-protecting behaviour as illegitimate is almost as much as denying them the right to that protection. Simply put, it becomes its own particular form of violence.

*This essay originally appeared on the [Love Fighting Hate Violence blog](#).*

<sup>[i]</sup> Our [recent research paper](#) exploring how ice hockey supporters ‘neutralised’ the consequences of violence, pain and injury is useful in developing this idea further.

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