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## ARTICLE COMMENTARY

### Reflections of professional boxing consultancy: A response to Schinke (2004)

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#### ABSTRACT

The present paper describes work conducted in Professional boxing over a 2 year period and was written in response to a paper on boxing by Schinke (2004). The article describes how credibility was developed in boxing, and how this built a platform for psychological support. Support was highly individualised. Videotaped sparring sessions to be develop imagery sessions and self-talk. Music was utilised to regulate psychological states according to the desired state. Warm-up routines that followed music were used to promote appropriate activation patterns. Self-talk and positive imagery formed part of the warm-up, and these were integrated and practiced in the weeks leading to competition. It is hoped that this paper might assist practitioners in providing effective support for boxers.

#### Introduction

The present paper describes work conducted in professional boxing over a 2 year period, which included preparation for several World Championship fights. The aim of the paper is to build upon [Schinke's \(2004\) work](#) that also described consultancy experiences in professional boxing. The present paper focuses on only a relatively small part of the overall applied sport psychology work conducted in professional boxing. To facilitate direct comparison with Schinke (2004), the present article is structured under similar headings. Schinke (2004) emphasized the need to minimize the constraints of consultancy in order to increase the likelihood of a successful outcome, a sentiment consistent with the findings of the present article.

## **Setting the Stage**

Whilst I was working as a sport psychology lecturer at Brunel University, I was approached by a professional boxing coach with a request to work with some of his professional boxers. At this time, the coach was completing a sport science degree at the University. The coach remembered me as an amateur boxer. Fifteen years previously, the coach was a corner man of an opponent I competed against. In the interim period, I have published scientific work on boxing and other combat sports including boxing (Lane, 2002; Lane & Terry, 1996), Tae Kwon-do (Chapman, Lane, Terry, & Brierley, 1997); kick-boxing (Lane, Terry, Karageorghis, & Lawson, 1999), and judo (Farrant & Lane, 2002). As Schinke (2004) emphasized, gaining credibility in boxing is difficult, and most members of a boxing support team (amateur and professional) are previous boxers. Having boxed for 10 years as an amateur, coached boxing for 5 years, it is argued that my previous experience in boxing and knowledge of sport science was an attractive package to the coach.

## **Initial Meetings**

As Schinke (2004) outlines, working in boxing requires a substantial time commitment. Restrictions on my time, as a researcher, lecturer and consultant were considerable. I suggested working with the coach on an almost daily basis predominantly via telephone and e-mail. We agreed that I focus my work on the specific requirements of one boxer. I would work with the boxer individual 3 or 4 times a week, with this rising to 5 or 6 as contests drew closer.

The main client was a professional boxer, aged 29, whom had previously fought and lost a World Title fight. He was self-managed, meaning he has greater control over a number of factors. The boxer received a purse for each contest out of which the boxer pays a percentage to the trainer and in this case the sport psychologist. Discussions were held with the boxer to demystify the role of sport psychology. The content of these discussions varied and were usually lengthy. As we discussed aspects of performance over his career a multitude of factors emerged, including weight management, psychological and physiological states during training and competition, relaxation and anxiety, and lifestyle issues. It was decided that in the first instance I would support his preparation for a World Title fight planned to occur 4 months later. It transpired that I would work with the boxer for 2 years, terminating this contract when I took a position in another part of the UK.

## **Achieving Solid Relational Footing**

Schinke (2004) argued that there is a need to develop a solid relational footing when working in boxing. In agreement with Schinke, there is no substitute for investing time. Schinke identified the belief systems that athletes and coaches have, which are well developed and consequently, should not be underestimated. An aspect of my role as a consultant was to identify parts of training that lead to positive psychological states and ensure that these were well managed. It is important for the message I was giving not to

be contradicted by others in the training environment. To be able to do this, it was first necessary to understand the nature of belief systems so that information could be delivered that would be used rather than disregarded. One area of work was attitudes towards weight management.

Weight management issues and beliefs can be based on some scientifically sound information, but can also be based on strange practices (see Hall & Lane, 2001 for examples). My experiences taught me that boxers have sometimes attempted to lose large amounts of weight in short periods of time. Further, that boxer's perceive extreme rapid weight loss to be the appropriate way to lose weight, and develops mental strength and desire on the night of the fight. Awareness that boxers will be subjected to such information and that the information will come from a credible source is important. My credibility will be less than the boxer's coach, parents, or other boxers in the early stages of consultancy. It is important to remember that credibility relates to the credibility of the persuader rather than the quality of the information provided (Bandura, 1997). Over time, my credibility developed as the information I provided and strategies implemented were associated with benefits. However, in the initial stages of consultancy, it was important to carefully consider the dissemination of information.

As part of the strategy for promoting appropriate weight control techniques, a scientific study was conducted at the boxing gym involving elite coaches and elite boxers residing in London (see Hall & Lane, 2001). Boxers and coaches participated in the study voluntarily, and therefore had first hand exposure to scientific procedures and consequently, evidence. Results were personalized and explained to each boxer and coach.

This gave support staff within the boxing environment supportive information that would support and not undermine our work. The key point is that the consultant needs to be aware of belief systems currently held within the sport. Consultants should work sensitively and respectfully to educate athletes and support staff, acknowledging that it takes time to gain credibility.

### **Preparing Athletes for Crucial Bouts**

The nature of my work for each contest was multifaceted. It involved the use of traditional psychological skills such as goal setting, self-talk, imagery training, and relaxation training. Consistent with sentiments suggested by Schinke (2004), psychological skills training was highly individualized and sought to extend and improve each boxer's psychological strengths and weaknesses. Mood management strategies ([see Stevens & Lane, 2001](#)) were developed through exploration of self-regulating strategies. Relaxation was achieved by listening to carefully selected music (see Hewston, Lane, Karargeorghis, & Nevill, 2003) rather than following a relaxation tape.

Possibly the most effective strategy for enhancing psychological states such as self-efficacy and psychological skills such as imagery, was through analysis of videotaped sparring sessions. Sparring sessions are extremely important sessions in professional

boxing. Elite boxers need good sparring partners to provide realistic training. In the case of the boxer I worked with, this often involved traveling to the gymnasium of another boxer for quality sparring.

Videotaping and analyzing sparring and training sessions proved to be a very effective way of developing psychological skills. The boxer, coach and sport psychologist viewed videotaped sessions on a three-foot square screen in a lecture theatre at my university, something that was to be repeated throughout the program. Video analysis of the sparring session led to detailed discussion on the strengths and limitations of the performance. These discussions became an extremely valuable way of reducing conflict between boxer and coach. Coaches give information in between rounds; they expect the boxer to act upon this information. However, the boxer needs to be ready to receive this information, something that is difficult in the 1 min between rounds. Professional boxers have well-developed knowledge of the demands of their sport and their own performance. Therefore, at the end of each round, the boxer is immediately making an analysis of performance. The goal for the coach and boxer is to consider the same issues and provide a common strategy for the next round. Discussion that occurred during video analysis provided the boxer and coach with insight into their thought processes and gave greater understanding of how and why conflicts arose. My work with the coach examined reinforcement schedules and how best to use the 1 min between each round. Similarly, work with the boxer on concentration between rounds was completed so that both coach and boxer followed the same protocol in which the first 15 s focused on physiological recovery (the coach gave no technical advice and the boxer focused on breathing control), the next 30 s were focused on technical information, with the final 15 s being focused on motivational information and encouragement.

Videotape analysis was used to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of his opponent. For each opponent we would have details of the number of punches thrown for each 30 s of each round; ratio of head, body, the number of counter-punches that were thrown, jabs etc. We found that regardless of opponent, boxers tended to show consistent habits. For example, we observed that one boxer moved predominantly to one side and threw fewer punches in the first half of a round. This information would be used as the basis for goal setting for technical sessions and imagery scenarios. Training was focused around exploiting the opponent's weaknesses.

### **The Day of the Contest**

The final stage of preparation for World Championship contests involves careful management of the boxer's psychological state. The strategy was to consider as many potential factors that could influence performance and develop strategies to counter these. One factor that could be important is the time of the fight and the preparation routine that precedes it. With World Championship contests that are televised, the boxer will know the exact time of the fight. Boxers tend to train at various times of the day, and often use gymnasiums in the middle of the day when they are relatively quiet. Knowing that contests would be a certain time of the day, strategies were implemented to ensure that the boxer's psychological state was at its optimum at this time. Daily mood variations

were monitored and possible interventions were considered to counter negative mood states at the time of competition. A simple strategy was to start quality training sessions at the time of the contest. If the contest was planned to start at 10.00 pm, then quality training sessions would start at that time and diet, sleep, rest, and mental preparation strategies that underpin such sessions would be altered accordingly.

An important part of preparing for the contest was developing carefully planned warm up routines. The use of this time would be planned with the boxer several weeks before the contest. We would visit the arena, plan the warm-up routine area, and consider who could visit the boxer before the contest and when this could occur. Controlling the number of television interviews, promoters and the multitude of people wishing to provide support, who also inadvertently detract attention from the contest is important. Warm-up routines that followed music were used to promote appropriate activation patterns. Self-talk and positive imagery formed part of the warm-up, and these were integrated and practiced in the weeks leading to competition. It should be emphasized that although the above represents a relatively minor part of the work conducted, it demonstrates the attention to detail that was made.

## **Conclusions**

Schinke's (2004) article provided insight into working in professional boxing that the present article has sought to extend. Typically, academic work has sought publication by identifying the weaknesses of previous work and recommending an alternative solution. The present study does no such thing. It highlights a large amount of similarity in the work, with differences being reflected in personal consultancy style, something that should be expected. Boxing is a unique sport; you cannot 'play' boxing and if you are involved in boxing it draws on all of your personal resources. It is hoped that this paper might assist practitioners in providing effective support for boxers, it is also hoped that the focus on boxing, forms part of a general call for applied research in such combat sports.

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