

Boxing is arguably one of the most exciting, important, controversial and memorable sports on the Olympic roll-call. It occupied a position as one of the most revered and prestigious sports in the Ancient Games, making heroes and legends of men. Such a practice seems to have been continued in the present day, with the BBC Sportsman of the Century, Muhammad Ali, having first achieved notable fame as an Olympic athlete and champion.

Often surrounded by controversy, the sport has continued to reflect cultural and social values to the present day, with schisms emerging within the Amateur Boxing Association of England and Head Coach Terry Edwards during the Beijing 2008 Games, and with women's boxing being announced as the newest sport to gain Olympic recognition in the 2012 London Games. Women have been fighting, both literally and metaphorically, for the right to box, so these Games will be historic for all female athletes, and the coaches, boxing federations and training team that support them.

This case study introduces the reader to notable occasions in the history of Olympic boxing, and encourages a consideration of a wide range of sociological, cultural, legal and other issues that such a discussion presents.

WOMEN'S BOXING INCLUDED FOR THE FIRST TIME IN OLYMPIC HISTORY

Since the inception of the Games, women have never been allowed to participate in Olympic boxing. The historic decision of the IOC to introduce women's boxing into the Olympic Summer Games schedule for 2012 is, no doubt, a positive move towards furthering gender equality in sport. Such a move is

arguably reflective of improvements in gender equality in the sporting community as a whole.



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Women's Olympic Boxing Events

The Executive Board of the International Olympic Committee agreed to the introduction of three women's events in the 2012 Olympic Games. The current 11 men's boxing events will be replaced by 10 men's and three women's events, representing an additional two boxing events on the programme. The total number of boxers remains unchanged. The decision was based on recognition that women's boxing has made substantial progress in universality and technical quality of athletes since the Executive Board of the IOC last met to consider the discipline in 2005.

In the 2012 Games, there will be space for a total of 36 female boxers to compete (compared to a total number of 250 male boxers). This figure, though yet to be officially confirmed, would ensure that the host nation is represented in nearly half of the 13 Olympic categories – 10 for men and three for women.

In Beijing, boxing was the only sport on the Olympic programme that women were not allowed to compete in.

Last year, eight British boxers qualified for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, winning one gold medal and two bronzes, the best performance at the Games by GB boxers in 52 years. In addition, many more British boxers might fight their way into the Olympic tournament by performing well in qualifying competitions. The earmarking of six automatic places for the hosts should ensure that at least one and more likely two of those places will be allocated to female boxers. In fact, with

nearly three years to go before the London games, British medal prospects look particularly bright in what will undoubtedly be a landmark women's boxing competition. For example, bantamweight Nicola Adams recently won a silver medal at the World Championships in China, and light welterweight Natasha Jonas also sits high in the world rankings.

Creating Boxing Stars

Robert McCracken, British Boxing's new Performance Director has commented that in terms of the British Olympic squad: "*The ability is there, no doubt about it.*" He went on to comment of the glory of Olympic competition being a significant draw to young fighters: "*For any young fighter, that has got to be an amazing reward if they work hard enough at boxing...Also, as we have seen in the past, Olympics can turn fighters into stars almost overnight.*"

From illegal to Olympic, in only 20 years: A History of Women's Boxing.

Jane Couch is not only one of our most formidable and successful multiple-World champion boxers; she can be credited, quite possibly, for changing the face of women's boxing forever. Bristol-based Couch fought a long legal battle with the British Boxing Board of Control (BBBC), nearly 20 years ago, to become the first woman in this country to obtain a license to fight professionally in Britain. At the time, she was not allowed to fight in her own country, simply because of her gender. Couch was supported in her legal battle by the Equal Opportunities Commission.

British promoter Frank Maloney, trainer to Lennox Lewis, exhibited significant disdain and discriminatory feelings with regard to women's rights to box, commenting to the BBC that: "*The only reason for women to be in the ring is as ring card girls.*" Such comments reflected a common view that women shouldn't fight – a stark difference from today's conceptualisation, where the search for female boxing talent is now a key feature of British Boxing's strategy for the acquisition of Gold medals at the 2012 Games.

Jane Couch is now a five times World Title champion and also a licensed promoter, and is actively involved in helping to develop the women's side of the sport.

A General History of Boxing in the Ancient and Modern Games

According to ancient mythology, Apollo was the inventor of boxing. The sport first featured in the Ancient Games in 688 BC, rendering it one of the oldest sports in Olympic history. Classical scholars will note that the sport of boxing featured notably in Homeric poems.

The sport was far more violent in its' ancient guise, when compared to the modern day version. In Ancient times, *himantes*, or straps of soft ox-hide, were used in place of gloves; the purpose of this was to strengthen the wrist and steady the fingers. The *himantes* were wrapped around the first knuckles of the fingers, leaving the thumb uncovered. In later Games, straps of hard leather were added around the knuckles of the fingers to enhance the strength and impact of punches.

We can observe a transition towards the glove that we recognise today from the 4th Century BC, when a form of glove replaced the *himantes*, principally to avoid the time-consuming nature of application of the *himantes*. The "*oxeis himantes*" (sharp thongs) were formed of hard leather straps and an inner layer of wool was included to protect the hand. The later Roman invention of the *caestus* further transformed the sport, which consisted of a boxing glove which was reinforced with iron and lead.



Such an adaptation radically transformed an already violent sport into a brutal and deadly exchange, and might tell us a great deal about the sociologies of both cultures with respect to sport and its role.

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Modern Games

Olympic boxing is one of the oldest and most popular Summer Olympic sports, first appearing in the modern Games in 1904 in St. Louis. It courted controversy almost immediately, with Australia's Reginald "Snowy" Baker lodging a complaint at the 1908 London Games, complaining that the referee for his fight (which he lost) was not impartial. It was quite possible that he was right - his opponent's father was the referee! Fighting controversies were to continue at the next quadrennial event, with the sport being banned from the 1912 Stockholm Games (the sport was banned in Sweden at that time). The sport returned successfully in 1920, and has never looked back. Today it retains an image as one of the most exciting and controversial sports on the world stage.



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The Structure of the Sport

An Olympic Boxing bout consists of four two-minute rounds. The winner of each weight class wins an Olympic gold medal. Some notable and historic boxing champions first took the stage at the Olympics:

Rome, 1960: The world was introduced to one of the greatest sportsmen in history: Muhammad Ali, then known as Cassius Clay. At only 18 years of age, a young Ali won the light-heavyweight Gold medal. He was later to symbolically throw his Olympic medal into a river, disillusioned at the racial discrimination present in his country. He went on to become a world champion, join the Nation of Islam, engage in legal battle with the US Government over his conscientious objection to fighting in the Vietnam War, have his World

Title taken from him by the authorities, win the BBC Sports Personality of the Year, return to the Olympic family as a torch bearer, undertake extensive charity work across the globe and inspire countless young people to be better people in sport and in life.

Mexico City, 1968: The world first met George Foreman, future World Champion (and mastermind of the popular George Foreman Grill!) A patriotic 19-year-old Foreman won the heavyweight Gold medal and then paraded around the ring with a tiny American flag, forever winning the hearts of the American public as he did so.

Montreal, 1976: Sugar Ray Leonard, one of the greatest fighters in modern day history made his debut, fighting with photos of his girlfriend and young son pinned to his socks. He became the light welterweight Gold medal champion and then began an extremely successful and memorable pro career.

Athens 2004

Of course, no British boxing fan could forget the great Silver medal-winning performance of Amir Khan. Despite losing in the Olympic final to Cuban Mario Kindelan, Khan avenged his loss in 2005 by beating the 34 year old Kindelan in his last amateur fight. Khan went on to pursue a successful pro career.

Beijing 2008

The most recent Summer Games identified serious schisms within the British boxing camp. When James de Gale brought home a Gold medal for his country, he took the post-victory interview as an opportunity to praise his coach Terry Edwards, and to criticise the governing body for the sport for what he viewed as disrespectful treatment of a coach who he personally greatly respected.

MEDICAL BAN

Some members of the medical fraternity have sought to implement a ban on boxing, viewing it as too violent. Whilst the injury rates of boxing fall far short of many other sports, the British Medical Association argue that the long-term brain injury of boxers goes largely

unrecorded, so still poses a significant danger. Such an argument could form the basis of an interesting 'philosophy of science' debate: if one cannot empirically test such a claim, should it ever be used to form the rationale for banning a sport? How could we know whether such a claim could be true? Is it even possible to measure such a concept? It is certain that such a debate could rumble on for the foreseeable future.

SOCIAL INCLUSION INITIATIVES

Amateur boxing forms the basis of some successful and well-regarded social inclusion programmes. A good example is the inclusion of boxing in recent government initiatives such as Positive Futures. The Fight for Peace use of boxing in its' sport and education model is another highly successful example of the use of sport as a social inclusion initiative. Founder of Fight for Peace, Luke Dowdney, won a MBE and a Laureus Sport for Good Award for his work in this field, and now counts former and current boxing superstars such as Barry McGuigan and Vladimir Klitschko as trustees of the organisation.

It must be noted that key proponents of the sport and social inclusion model favour the dual use of sport and education, as opposed to the singular use of sport, as the most efficient means of engaging young at-risk individuals (as opposed to the use of the sport alone).

BOXING: THE FUTURE?

The medical debate surrounding the safety of the sport continues to rage on, whilst new forms of the sport have begun to emerge.

White collar boxing is a relatively new but growing side of the sport, where corporate executives trained by ABAE coaches sign up to fight each other at white collar sponsored events (often raising money for charity in the process). This possibly reflects the corporate myth that sport has something to teach business in terms of the development of character (mental toughness, self-leadership, courage, discipline, etc). Chessboxing is the newest incarnation of the sport, which tests

both the mental and physical acuity of the athlete. This is an interesting move forward for a sport that could in fact be conceptualised as a very violent game of Chess, due to its significant reliance on both tactical strategising and physical acuity!

The sport may have many detractors as well as fans, but one thing cannot be denied: boxing could never be boring. It remains to be seen which direction such a fundamentally historic, controversial and exciting sport will take us next!

FIND OUT MORE

Fight for Peace

<http://www.fightforpeace.net/home.php>

British Boxing Board of Control

www.bbbofc.com/

Amateur Boxing Association of England

www.abae.co.uk

CREDITS

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