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***Becoming a “Decent Man” - Learning Through Boxing***  
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**Introduction – Possibilities for Becoming in Boxing**

During the ten or so years that I’ve been involved in boxing I’ve seen countless people change their bodies, behaviours and performances of self. For many, this has been neatly understood as a simple process of becoming a boxer. In large part, such ‘becoming’ involves moving from pugilistic newcomer, towards a relatively comfortable embodiment of the physical and emotional grammars that are commonplace within boxing subcultures. While this is perhaps most clear within the relative disparities between the physical literacy of novices in comparison to advanced boxers, it can also be understood and explored by considering the manner in which people come to ‘naturally’ perform other cultural hallmarks associated with boxing.

In Matthews (2018), I detail my own experience of (not) becoming a boxer and how that process links to immersive research methodologies. This personal journey has plotted a fantastically challenging and sometimes damaging pathway through various gyms and types of engagement. I have encountered a series of experiences from which I have changed and developed in a number of significant ways, not always positively. This process has given me a relatively unique insight into the place the sport can occupy in the lives of those who learn the ‘art’ of pugilism and the ways in which they develop as both athletes and people.

Throughout the multiple projects I have worked on, I have been fortunate to interview over 250 people including athletes of all levels, coaches, parents, retired competitors, medical officials and those working within the governance of the sport. These formal opportunities to collect data, and the multitude of less formal chats, observations and relationships I have formed, have provided a variety of insights into boxing (Matthews, 2014; 2015; 2016; 2018) and the academic study of sport more broadly (Channon & Matthews, 2015a; 2015b; 2018; Matthews & Channon 2016a; 2016b; forthcoming). A relatively stable narrative that I have heard across all these research sites has focused on the possibilities that are embedded in boxing to enable young people to develop in various positive ways. Such an understanding of what young people might become through their engagement in boxing is often a strong influence that draws parents to accept and encourage their children’s involvement with the sport.

One of the most consistent stories repeated to me has been the passionate belief from cultural ‘insiders’ that participation in boxing stands apart from most sports in its ability to help transform the lives of young people; especially boys from lower socio-economic groups. While such discourses pervade a variety of sports to some degree (see Matthews & Channon, 2016a) for a partial example from ice hockey), there is often an

overtly uncritical acceptance of such simplistic ideas within boxing gyms.<sup>1</sup> I have always been suspicious of claims about the transformative potential of boxing, especially due to the pervasive confirmation bias that usually clouds athletes and coaches' understandings of their sport. As a result, at various times, whether as researcher, fighter, coach or volunteer, I have found myself encouraging people to reflect upon the realities of pain, injury, embarrassment, brain damage, self and social sacrifice, abuse, exploitation, failure and burnout, that often lie, thinly veiled, beneath ideas about boxing's power to positively affect lives.

Building on this, much of my more impactful academic work has explored such experiences as they relate to the unequal landscapes of gendered power that are still very much a feature of boxing (Matthews, 2014; 2016). However, during this time, I have also collected a wealth of data, which evidences some of the positive transformations and transitions that people have experienced, in part, through their involvement with the sport. It is towards this side of my data that I focus within this chapter. Specifically, I use extracts from two different interviews, the first conducted in 2010, the second in 2017, with Nick,<sup>2</sup> a 30-year-old former boxer who, alongside running his own joinery business, currently works as a part-time boxing coach.

I have known Nick since my first forays into the field of boxing during my PhD research. We have shared many chats and training sessions, so while I draw on two discreet data sets, these interviews are built on a number of years of getting to know each other as friends<sup>3</sup>. In what follows, I explore in detail the manner in which Nick understands boxing as a part of his personal development. My attention is focused on his experience of 'becoming' *through* the sport. Specifically, in his words, becoming a 'decent man'. In so doing, I highlight the utility of cultural understandings of learning as a means to frame this process.

### **Learning Cultures and Boxing**

As Natalie neatly outlines in Chapter 4, learning cultures shape and frame the behaviours of the people who inhabit them. Such spaces are "constituted by the actions, dispositions and interpretations of participants" (Hodkinson, Biesta, & James, 2008, p. 34), and, as Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 35) have it, "learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world". Learning can then be understood as a process whereby individuals are more or less successfully socialised into pre-existing notions about the social world and, in this way, become the means by which that world is recreated, renewed, recast and reinvented. It is part of the daily, part of all interactions and is, as such, part of the reification and potential subversion of taken for granted cultural expectations, standards and assumptions about what constitutes 'normal' social life.

Learning cultures enable, but also frame, inhibit and limit, that which might readily be learned. Within this process, individuals develop dispositions to learning; ways of considering what is appropriate, important and essential to learn, as well, as an

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<sup>1</sup> In Channon and Matthews (2018) Alex and I discuss this as it relation to the manner in which we developed the philosophical underpinnings to the Love Fighting hate Violence campaign. This is a useful case study, which can help illuminate these ideas further.

<sup>2</sup> A pseudonym is used here and throughout the paper

<sup>3</sup> Space does not permit to detail the specifics of my methodological reflections upon this work. Such considerations are important and I encourage colleagues with particular interested in this side of my work to see Matthews (2015, 2018) for further details

understanding of how, and in what ways, one could, should and should not learn. It is here that an individual 'horizon of learning' – the potential learning pathways and destinations that one might consider are broadly achievable – is developed. Such conceptual maps act to shape and limit the 'horizons for action' that an individual can see as possible, permissible and probable (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000; Hodkinson, Sparkes, & Hodkinson, 1996).

It is important, then, to avoid considering learning cultures as inherently, or even predominantly, 'good' in that they enable 'learners to learn'. Such a simplistic understanding strips away an essential focus directed towards the dynamics of social power that underpin cultural theories of learning. For as Foucault (1980; 1984) describes, individuals and groups can gain and maintain significant influence and power if they have the ability to shape what is considered normal, natural and moral. Clearly, learning and education are central strands within such a process.

'Common sense' understandings of what one might find within particular learning cultures "exist as ways of doing and ways of being that are considered to be normal. This means that learning cultures are governed by values and ideals, by normative expectations about good learning, good teaching, good leadership, and so forth" (Hodkinson, Biesta, & James, 2008, 34). For Hodkinson, Biesta and James (2008) learning cultures have an enduring history and while social change is possible and probable such shifts often occur slowly. The relative stability of such knowledge becomes engrained and embodied in the thoughts, movements and actions of those who are drawn to enter and stay within learning cultures.

When taken together, these points help us to appreciate the manner in which learning cultures shape and frame social life. This is the same in boxing gyms as it is in other spaces. Here, culturally learned dispositions shape the ways of doing, seeing, feeling, and succeeding, which are considered 'normal' by boxers, coaches and others associated with the sport. For example, in Matthews (2016), I explore how myths and legends about boxing intertwine with routine performance within the gym to become a largely unquestioned means by which men come to understand their time inside and around the ring. Kath Woodward (2006) details similar findings by weaving together discussions about boxers' identities with heroic, valorised and (in)famous spectacles of the sport.

In both these cases, the cultural heritage of boxing as a 'hard man's sport' precedes, and acts to cast a conceptual shadow, over the nuanced and often paradoxical realities of life inside most gyms (Matthews, 2014; 2016; Woodward, 2006). And in this regard, those that do 'step up' by stepping through the doorway into a boxing gym for the first time often have a well-developed, if mythologised, idea about what to expect in such spaces. They are then primed to expect a certain patterning of culture and with it a certain form of learning. It is here, that stories of boxing's transformative potential draw people into pugilistic spaces and *can* become reified through the lives of gym denizens (Matthews, 2016; Woodward, 2006).

A developing body of research does much to detail the cultural landscapes within which boxers might find themselves (Boddy, 2009; Chandler, 1996; de Garis, 2000; Fulton, 2011; Hargreaves, 1997; Heiskanen, 2012; Jennings, 2015; Jump, 2015; Lafferty, and McKay, 2004; McGannon *et al.*, 2018; Matthews, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018; Mennesson, 2000; Paradis, 2012; Sheard, 1997; Sugden, 1999; Wacquant, 2004; Woodward, 2006, 2014; van Ingen, 2011). Rich data, which details learning cultures, is

often a central feature of most accounts from 'inside' boxing subcultures. Indeed, seldom does research on boxing (especially the ethnographic) not describe, and perhaps in some cases fetishize, the gruelling process of 'learning the ropes', which novice boxers must endure to become somewhat accepted as 'pugs'. Yet, seldom does such work situate these findings within critical pedagogical literature. Furthermore, these snapshots, temporary windows into social life, often do little to detail the specifics of how such developmental learning processes might unfold away from the gym or after a boxing career has come to an end. It is on such a process that I am afforded the space to focus in this chapter, specifically through a discussion of Nick's process of learning and becoming through boxing.

### **Becoming a "Decent Man" Through Boxing**

When I first met Nick, he had already become an accomplished boxer. At 23, he had enjoyed a successful apprenticeship in amateur boxing, winning a range of local competitions and competing successfully at a national level, he was now taking significant steps to build a career in the professional code of the sport. We sparred a few times; I always enjoyed the strange feeling of safety that comes when you are in the ring with someone who is so much better than you. Yes, he could K.O. me in a second, but his elite level of ability also came with a confident poise and accuracy that mean he could make me work while not doing any serious damage. During our first interview in September 2010, I asked Nick about this and he told me the following:

I learned that control in the ring. Before I started boxing I was wild, now I'm a sharp shooter and I know it [laughs], it's been drilled into me that the skills I've learned are dangerous, really dangerous, and I've seen it, I've seen what happens when you catch someone just right and it's not pretty. So I've calmed down, I've calmed down because you 'ave to in boxing, but as well 'cause I've seen what can 'appen when you do stupid stuff outside the ring.

These comments came against a backdrop of Nick's chequered history of exclusion from school, street fights and run-ins with local police, teachers and other authority figures. They highlight the process of becoming that this relatively young man had already experienced as he moved from 'unruly youth' into adulthood.

Like many boys, Nick had been drawn to boxing from an early age. Eventually, despite holding fears as to the safety of the sport, he was encouraged by his parents to focus much of his spare time on developing his abilities. I remember speaking with Nick's dad about the change his family saw in him once he started taking boxing seriously. When I asked Nick about this he had the following to say:

Nick: Ha, yeah, I hated school most of the time. All my mates did, we were just classic lads off of the estate you know, none of us was into [school], I was a terror, I've seen some of my teachers since and apologised 'cus they was just doing their jobs and at the time I just saw them like I saw coppers [Pause]. What was I saying?

Christopher: I asked about boxing and school...

Nick: Yeah, basically it started with me dad using boxing as a way of making me behave, I loved it right, so much that when there was any hint of them not letting me go down the [boxing] club 'cus o' muckin' around in school or whatever, I'd actually listen to my dad. That's how it started.

Christopher: Then what?

Nick: Erm, well it wasn't really school but after school. So, I got some OK grades 'cus when I started to get to the last couple of years when exams was coming up I started to think about jobs or college and all that. Up until then boxing just helped like I said [earlier] but when I started thinking about the future, I started thinking about school a bit like I thought about training, and [my coach] always used to ask about school and in the end he helped me with thinking about it like that.

Christopher: What do you mean?

Nick: It's 'ard to explain, but, like, I learned very early in boxing that I had to put the graft in during the week so that I could spar on Saturdays and then I learned that I 'ad to train 'ard and put the time in throughout the year to actually do well at comps. Once my coach got me to see school like that I started to understand that if I wanted to do well [in my exams] then I had to concentrate and work 'ard, 'cus I was just never bothered about school I couldn't see the point in it like, day-to-day, but once I started seeing it like stuff in training that you don't want to do but that's still important to actually do like core work or sprints, then I started to see the point. (September, 2010)

It appears, then, that boxing provided Nick with more than simply a means of rewarding or punishing his engagement with school. It also gave him a powerful means of experiencing success and with it an analogical map that he could use to plot a course in other areas of his life. This disposition towards learning included a 'horizon to action' (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000; Hodkinson, Sparkes, & Hodkinson, 1996) that was a means by which Nick could reconsider how he understood and interacted with more formal educational settings.

With colleagues (Channon, Matthews, & Khumotova, 2018), I have drawn on a similar process to develop 'physical metaphors' when teaching. In class, we have used various physical activities, or as we have it 'moving lessons', to engage students' kinaesthetic sense of themselves and others rather than depending solely on auditory and visual teaching methods. This uses students' own bodies as metaphorical or literal examples for illustrating conceptual ideas, thereby grounding and personalising abstract academic material in physical experiences. Echoing Nick's comments, we have found them to be important pedagogical tools that can enable young people to think more reflexively about their social worlds.

So while Nick was relatively disinterested in formal school based learning cultures, he was able to develop a positive disposition to learning via boxing. Nick largely articulated this as helping develop and shape his ability to 'work hard'. When I asked him about the most important thing he thought he had learned in boxing, he told me the following:

Nick: [After a pause] If you're involved in boxing for long enough you have to learn about two things, one is 'ard work. No one stays in boxing unless eventually they either start to enjoy working 'ard or they realise [working hard] it's part of doing well, I enjoyed working 'ard and seeing the results that came from it. The second is how to lose, no matter how good you are, you lose eventually, and that's EVEN if you work super 'ard. Those two things are the most important, because if you don't understand how they fit together, you might get the 'ard work bit, but what happens if you put all that time and effort in and then lose? Well, you quit,

or realise [losing is] part of the game and get back to work. THAT'S what's been the most important.

Christopher: That sounds like a line from Rocky, ya'know, the "it ain't how hard you hit, it's how many times you can get hit and keep moving forward."

Nick: Yeah it is, that's it, those sort o'lines are daft in the movies, but actually, that one works quite well for most people in boxing. (September, 2017)

Clearly, according to Nick, this often-mythologised idea regarding boxing's ability to instil a grinding and persistent work ethic was locked down in the realities of the lives of boxers. Here, narratives around boxing's historic and continuing connection to working class men takes centre stage. As both Woodward (2006) and I (Matthews, 2016) have shown, such stories are experienced, engrained and become 'real' within the routine performances that are commonplace inside and around the ring. And while it is challenging to prise apart the manner in which such narratives are learned and then embodied within the performances of boxers, or are already present to some degree in those who are drawn to the sport, Nick's case demonstrates how such ideas can be usefully employed by boxers in life away from the ring.

It is clear from the previous quote that Nick developed a mature relationship with losing, yet this rather philosophical understanding did little to help him negotiate the harsh economic realities of attempting to develop a career in professional boxing:

Christopher: Earlier you said something about learning to lose, what was it like when that first happened?

Nick: I lost in amateur boxing early and I was a kid so I cried and whatever, but it was pretty easy 'cus in amateurs you're often back out [fighting] again in a few weeks. That's one of the big things, you train 'ard, you compete, if you win it's great, but you get back to training, if you lose you learn from it and then [pauses for effect], you get back to training [laughs]. Know what I mean? I don't know where else you learn that as a kid. But it was different when I lost as a pro, fucking hell, that was a nightmare 'cus that means money. No one wants to lose, especially in front of their mates and family, but as an adult, that's OK, you know, you're over stuff like that, really, and I'd learned to handle that, but in pro-boxing if you start losing regularly you ain't gonna be successful and I was in it to make bank [money] and enough to get me set up. So that was 'ard 'cus as a kid you lose and it's just your pride at the time, but as a pro it was about my future (September, 2017).

So while Nick had experienced his early losses in this positive light as providing a mature and productive acceptance of setbacks, the relatively unforgiving nature of professional boxing resulted in a different set of outcomes which accompanied losing.

While all competitive boxing has some risk attached to it, the magnification of damaging consequences that are associated with an extended career in the ring is something experienced and elite boxers are often forced to consider in a more prescient manner. When I asked Nick about what finally got him to 'throw in the towel', he told me the following:

Nick: I just lost a few times, and eventually got hurt pretty bad.

Christopher: So what made you stop, the losses or the injury?

Nick: Both, together, but I just realised I probably wasn't gonna make it any further without really risking my health long-term. Thing is, you look at these lads that nail it in the amateurs and then get managed at the start of their pro-careers. The risk is worth taking for them 'cus it's managed and the rewards can be massive, but unless you're up there [at the elite level], you 'ave to take bigger risks to get smaller rewards, I started getting some paydays, but I just had to accept in the end that it wasn't gonna happen.

Christopher: Then what?

Nick: It got a bit dark for a bit [Pause]. I didn't know this at the time, but I was a bit broken. I think my heart was broken or something. I was depressed, boxing was my life an' that for so long and it was gonna be my future as well. Coming to terms with that was the 'ardest thing I've ever had to do. I still miss it na, that's why I still come down, just to get a bit out me system. But the problem is I'm still in shape and I feel strong, so every now and then I think about getting back in [the ring] again, it's not even like I have any control over it, the thought just pops in me head even though I know I can't (September, 2017).

The infamous nature of boxing as a dangerous and potentially disabling sport means that such 'turning points' (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997) are usually foreseen to some degree by most boxers and, as such, *can* be prepared for. However, they also might have a 'forced' component, which can result in a more challenging and potentially traumatising set of outcomes (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2014; Barker-Ruchti et al., 2015).

For Nick, this process was a mixture of the two; while he had given some thought to what he might do post-boxing, his career, which was supposed to provide him with a financial basis for life after the sport, was drawn somewhat short. He experienced (and still experiences) some emotional pain associated with not reaching his goals in the sport, and he didn't have a clear plan in place as to the next stage of his life, yet, he had developed an orientation to learning that he knew could be deployed in other areas. Such dramatic shifts in the way that one's life is organised provide many opportunities and potential pitfalls. For Nick, it was the lessons that he had experienced via boxing that helped him through this time. He continued:

Yeah, you know what, I eventually picked myself up and got on with it. I didn't know this at the time but I applied those lessons I'd learned in boxing to my life. I'd had a setback but there's only one way forward and that's to start working towards another goal with the same focus as I'd put into boxing. You know, embracing the graft as a necessary part of achieving what I wanted to do, like I did in the end with school. I had some money [to live off] so I went back to college. The difference was that now I wanted to do it, and I knew I wanted to be successful in whatever it was that was gonna replace boxing, so even though I felt thick as fuck at times, I just worked like a dog, thing is, though, it was boxing that learned me that work ethic, so even though I wasn't boxing properly anymore it was all still down to boxing. (September, 2017)

Nick interpreted his success as a direct outcome of the lessons he had learned though boxing. He had developed a horizon of learning and a connected horizon for action (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000; Hodkinson, Sparkes, & Hodkinson 1996) that prioritised application, effort and work ethic, which appeared to stand him in good stead despite his career in boxing not providing the success or financial rewards he had strived for. Or as

Archer (2007) would consider it, Nick drew on these ideas to help him make his 'way through the world'.

What is more, Nick also believed that his engagement with the sport had helped him in a broad existential way to become a better person. He largely understood this as part of the process of growing up and developing a positive appreciation for 'respect':

When I think back and look at myself na, the main thing is, I grew up in boxing, it made me grow up, the sport does that to lads like me 'cus you 'ave to take it seriously, so for the first time in my life I had to take something seriously, and it made me start to grow up. It's nothing overnight or whatever, just the start of a process and in the end I don't know how much it was boxing or it would 'ave been something else and I would have grown up anyway, but whatever, boxing's made me a better person, it's made me respectful, and it's made me get respect from other people, not 'cus they think I'm 'ard, that means nothing in the end, but boxing taught me that in order to get respect you've got to be respectful. In the end, I look at when I started boxing and I was a terror, I was a kid like other kids, but lots of my mates didn't learn them lessons and they're still the same, they didn't grow up, I grew up, could be 'cus of losing, could be 'aving positive role models, but in the end, I think boxing taught me to be a decent man, not perfect, no-one's perfect, but there's plenty o'lads that I came up with that ain't decent. (September, 2017)

Boxing provided Nick with a way of understanding the process of becoming a 'decent man'. It gave him a series of lessons that underpinned how he could conceptualise a future self whereby he would be respected and respectful. This can be understood as a horizon for action (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000; Hodkinson, Sparkes, & Hodkinson 1996) largely framed by narratives of adulthood that prioritised maturity, empathy and responsibly. And while he astutely points out that it wasn't necessarily his engagement in boxing that determined this process, his story highlights a possible manner in which his process of 'becoming' could have been positively influence by the sport.

It is important that these claims are considered and understood in relation to the strengths and weaknesses of such data. Nick's reflections on the process of 'becoming' and growing up through his involvement in boxing are shaped by his relatively positive disposition to the sport. While he is certainly not a pugilistic zealot believing that boxing could cure all of life's ills, he had enjoyed a largely positive career inside the ring that undoubtedly shaped his reading of the sport. As such, we must consider this as he reflects back upon his process of 'becoming':

Christopher: When did you realise that you'd got that way of working from boxing?

Nick: It's only when I've thought back you know, 'cus I've never been much for thinking about stuff like that. I just mainly fell into things, I never really decided I'd try to make it in boxing, it just happened and I guess I just knew that I 'ad to work 'ard to get better, it was the same wi' college, I never sat there and starting thinkin' "right you've got to work 'ard na", that was just the way I was 'cus it 'ad been driven into me while I was down the [boxing] club. I just needed to get a new goal after boxing was done, once I decided I had to go back to college that was that, I just got my grind on 'cus I was focused and that's just what I do (September, 2017).



In this extract, Nick reconfirms his statements about boxing instilling a productive work ethic, but not before telling me that it is largely with hindsight that he now understands this. As such, we must acknowledge that these pervasive narratives about boxing might be shaping the manner in which he now reflects on about his experiences.

Furthermore, embedded in Nick's answer here is an acknowledgment that what he now reads as important personal development through boxing was largely an unthinking and unconscious process. This certainly does not fundamentally undermine the data as ideologically shaped contemporary bias, rather it highlights the manner in which such lessons and processes of becoming might be embedded into the unreflexive actions of young people. And, furthermore, highlights how discursive interpretations of the sport not only shape the ways people consciously consider boxing, but also the routine actions, behaviours and performance of boxers inside and away from boxing gyms (Matthews, 2016; Woodward, 2006).

### **Concluding Remarks**

Embedded within Nick's story of becoming a 'decent man' is a detailed case study of how participation in boxing *can* lead some people to experience important life lessons and develop a positive disposition toward learning. In many ways, these examples represent the sort of transformations that many in boxing take for granted as an inherent outcome of participation in the sport. They are certainly not presented here as such; rather, they are offered to provide *one* empirical grounding for narratives about boxing and personal development. It is then important that readers appreciate, without essentialising the possibilities that are embedded in such participation. In so doing, it is possible to remain cognisant of the countless untold stories where boxing, and other sports, have played a damaging, and deleterious role in people's development. With such a balanced view of boxing (and other sports), scholars and practitioners alike are able to reconsider the manner in which we engage with the sport to enhance potential positive outcomes while also partially managing the associated negative effects.

It is within an understanding and appreciation of the importance that learning cultures and personal processes of becoming that occur within them that we can usefully explore such phenomena. Rather than a fetishised and uncritical reading of sports' transformative potential, the work presented in this chapter, and the across this book, highlights what *can* transpire within sport if young people are given a supportive and encouraging environment. And it is the important contribution that a critical understanding of social power, which lies at the foundation of the theoretical framework of this book, that in large part enables this process. Here, scholars critical reading of sport's developmental potential and nuanced accounts of positive process of 'becoming' in and through sport, the potential damaging, destructive and divisive outcomes of social relationships of power can still be foregrounded.

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